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A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY ON THE SECONDARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF LGBT INDIVIDUALS DIAGNOSED WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY AND THE RESULTANT QUALITY OF LIFE.

by

Roberta Cassar

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Top-Up B.Ed (Hons) in Facilitating and Adapting Education Needs for Students with Diverse Needs.

Dedication

To the minority groups who feel unheard, who have fought and still fight for their rights and the rights of those coming after them.

"Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better"
Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Declaration of Originality

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this dissertation is my own work. This dissertation, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Top-Up B.Ed in Facilitating and Adapting Education Needs for Students with Diverse Needs, has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of LGBT and learning disability (LD) identities by examining the secondary school experiences of three individuals in Malta and the long-term impacts on their educational journey and well-being. The participants shared their narratives through a semi-structured focus group, which was later analysed using a thematic-narrative methodology. This methodology provided these individuals with a voice to share their experiences to shed light on the impact of secondary school education, the environment and unique and shared needs.

The findings reveal a significant lack of awareness and support for intersecting identities, resulting in adverse experiences such as bullying and discrimination. Although the participants remained committed to their academic and personal development, victimisation, bullying, and the general experience of feeling oppressed academically and in terms of identity, increased the risk of resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as rebellion, eating disorders, and addictions. In contrast, experiences of academic support and identity exploration abroad highlighted the importance of an individualised and inclusive educational environment. Despite evolving policies, the school environment remains slow to change, profoundly affecting these students.

These narratives underscore the necessity for better-trained educators, more robust support systems, and inclusive policies to foster resilience and well-being among secondary school students with diverse identities. While the study's niche focus limits generalisability, it provides deep insights into the complex challenges faced by these students and offers valuable recommendations for enhancing respect for diversity and educational inclusivity. Future research can expand to include other minority identities intersecting with LD and LGBT identities to further enrich understanding and support. This research aims to amplify the voices of LGBT individuals with LD, inspiring educators and policymakers to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments, ensuring these individuals have an equal chance to succeed.

Keywords: LGBT, Learning Disabilities, gender identity, sexual identity, quality of life, support, academic learning, coping mechanisms

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Phrase
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Viruses
LD	Learning Disabilities / Specific Learning Disorder (DSM-V-TR)
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (Including non-binary people)
LSE	Learning Support Educator
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
QoL	Quality of Life
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

While ADHD is not classified as a distinct learning disorder in the DSM-V-TR manual, ADHD is highly comorbid with learning disabilities and frequently encountered in the classroom (Khodeir et al., 2020; Radmanović & Burgić, 2021).

ADHD and Learning Disabilities are both classified as neurodevelopmental disorders in the DSM-V-TR, which are conditions that manifest early in development and have an impact on personal, social, academic, and occupational functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Individuals with ADHD exhibit inattention, hyperactivity-impulsivity, and/or disorganisation, which impairs their ability to focus and listen, among other social, academic, and occupational activities, from childhood to adulthood (APA, 2022). Learning disabilities or specific learning disorders occur when an individual has a particular shortcoming that impairs their capacity to process or receive information accurately and effectively, affecting academic performance from an early age with potential lifetime deficits (APA, 2022).

Therefore, although ADHD does not affect specific academic skills, for the purpose of this study it was included since it can potentially impair learning due to its impact on the executive function, which affects concentration, knowledge retention, and the ability to learn new skills (Carroll, 2023).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Preamble

Individuals with learning disabilities (LDs) can also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), as in the general population. Despite societal advancements, these minorities continue to strive for safety and equal access in formal and non-formal education. Unfortunately, sexual education often overlooks LGBT individuals with LDs, rendering them invisible (Bates, 2018; Wilson et al., 2016).

Intersectionality, the convergence of multiple social classifications, intensifies marginalisation and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984). As someone embodying the intersection of LGBT and LD identities, I am acutely aware of the pain of invisibility, which exacerbates discrimination, exclusion, and loneliness (Abbott & Burns, 2007; Atewologun, 2018; Stoffelen et al., 2013).

1.2 My interest and position in the research

Upon reflecting on my academic challenges, I often feel insecure and anxious, particularly in conversations about education and intelligence. These reactions are rooted in my secondary school years, during which academic performance was central to my identity. The pressure to meet normative academic standards, coupled with mediocre grades despite diligent efforts, amplified my insecurities.

Additionally, questions about my sexual identity evoke discomfort, as being a footballer in secondary school led to implicit bullying on sexuality. While football helped me connect with a part of my identity I struggled to accept, it resulted in rumours about my sexuality and social exclusion, fostering discomfort and internalised homophobia.

These early experiences have had a lasting impact, underscoring the importance of a supportive network for validation and acceptance, motivating me to advocate for changes in the educational system, to mitigate such challenges for future students. Taboo and silence surrounding painful experiences preserve division, whereas open communication fosters understanding and unity, as highlighted by Pope Francis (2014), "Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity. The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another."

This thesis endeavours to challenge the adversities of my adolescence and initiate dialogue about the intersectionality of LGBT and LD identities—a minority

group often overlooked. By bringing these experiences to light, the aim is to contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

1.3 Research rationale

The intersection of LGBT issues and LDs is often neglected. Although some research has addressed these experiences and influenced legal frameworks, school practices lag significantly (Palkki & Caldwell, 2017; MEDE, 2022; Vassallo et al., 2022). This gap may be due to resistance to change and a lack of teacher training (Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2020). However, through conversation, awareness, and training, the status quo can be challenged (Creswell, 2013; Messiou, 2019). Motivated by my own experiences of missed educational opportunities, I am dedicated to disrupting the perpetuation of an outdated educational system.

1.4 Research questions

This thesis aims to explore secondary school experiences, quality of life (QoL) and wellbeing, and the associated meaning for individuals who have an intersection of the LGBT and LD identities. The objective is to understand the level of awareness and inclusivity in secondary schools for individuals with these intersectional identities. Additionally, this research seeks to gain insight on the understanding of the experience of intersectional identities and how the school environment impacted the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural experiences of LGBT students with LDs during their secondary school years. Through this research, areas of improvement in educational inclusivity and holistic support can be highlighted.

To achieve these objectives, the below questions will be addressed;

1. How does the lack of awareness about LDs and sexual orientation in secondary schools impact the learning experiences of LGBT students with LDs?

2. How does the school environment impact the emotional experiences of these individuals?

3. How do the support structures available in secondary schools influence the coping mechanisms of LGBT individuals with LDs in adulthood?

4. Were the coping mechanisms developed during secondary school adopted in adulthood, and if so, how did they affect the resultant QoL?

1.5 Conceptual framework

Recognizing that intersecting minority identities are often unheard, this study aims to initiate dialogue through focus groups, thereby raising awareness and appreciating individual differences (Dallos & Vetere, 2007).

Throughout this dissertation, I draw on the work of intersectionality theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and bell hooks (1984), whose groundbreaking contributions on oppressed minorities remain relevant today. This perspective is integrated with Luhmann's (1990, 1995, 2012) sociological systems theory, which explains that individuals navigate between systems, balancing inclusion and exclusion through complex interactions. Belonging to one sub-system often means being excluded from another. Additionally, the research incorporates insights from Ainscow and Messiou (2021), who focus on the reciprocal interactions within the school environment between students, peers, and educators.

The findings will be analysed through thematic narrative analysis, a method that allows individual voices and stories to be heard while revealing common themes (Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008). These narratives provide insights into the lived realities, identities, and self-perception of participants, capturing the unique details of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented my reflections and interest in this topic, highlighting how my position influences the study. These reflections led to the research's purpose and guiding questions to address a gap in the literature on the intersectionality of LGBT individuals with LDs. The conceptual framework, connecting theories and beliefs, was outlined, focusing on the complexity of intersectionality and the importance of communication.

The next chapter reviews literature on factors affecting LGBT individuals with LDs during secondary school. Chapter three outlines the study's methodology, followed by a chapter presenting the findings and discussion. The conclusion will summarise key findings, implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Inclusion enhances the sense of community within an institution and strengthens the learning environment of diverse classrooms by minimising stigma and increasing support for educational growth (Ghirxi et al., 2019a; 2019b).

This chapter begins with a reflection on the study's purpose, followed by a review of recent literature on inclusion, particularly concerning LDs and sexual minorities. It then explores the intersectionality of LGBT and LD identities in secondary schools and provides an overview of social policies over time.

The literary search focused on the keywords 'LGBT,' 'learning disabilities,' and 'secondary school,' primarily reviewing works from the past ten years, with older literature included, when recent sources were absent.

2.1.1 Note on labels

Labels have long facilitated communication, from naming children, to providing diagnoses (Joyce & Sills, 2018). They help us understand knowledge and foster group identification (Brooks & Quina, 2009; Simon et al., 2020). However, static labels may not reflect a rapidly changing world and can reduce unique experiences to a single term, potentially invalidating individuality (Joyce & Sills, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to use labels responsibly, as to avoid limiting personal exploration and expression.

A lack of stable labels allows individuals to define their identities, avoiding restrictive categorisation (Lemke, 2015). This freedom promotes self-exploration beyond labels, depending on available cultural and environmental freedom (Horley & Clarke, 2016). However, choosing not to label oneself can lead to marginalisation due to societal confusion or fear (Lugones, 1987). Moreover, the language used in policies and schools can marginalise minorities (Carr, 2021). Conversely, awareness of language use and power of the majority can enhance inclusion.

This thesis focuses on labels related to sexual orientation, gender, and disabilities for clarity, specifically LGBT and LD terms.

2.2 Intention of this study

As an individual who identifies with multiple minority groups: a Roman Catholic lesbian woman diagnosed with dyslexia with ADHD traits; my motivation to explore the relationship between intersecting identities stems from my personal experiences.

Reflecting on my secondary school years, marked by bullying and a sense of inadequacy, I realised the significant impact of these years. While I enjoyed aspects of my secondary school experience, certain sentiments linger.

Upon reviewing the available literature, I found a paucity of research on the long-term impact of stigmatised identities in education, the intersection of LGBT and LDs and the resultant QoL, from the student's perspective. This study aims to address this gap, shedding light on local policies and the educational system's impact on students.

As an educator, I strive to improve students' learning experiences and QoL. The results from this thesis could guide educators in enhancing students' well-being during secondary school, a critical period for identity formation influenced by the school environment's response to their needs, impacting identity and health outcomes (Smith et al., 2020).

2.3 Inclusion

Inclusion is a broad term, leading to various individuals, scholars and theorists providing definitions to try to clarify the parameters around the term. In this thesis, the theoretical frameworks of Niklas Luhmann (1990; 1995; 2012) and Ainscow and Messiou (2021) will be used to shed light on the complex systems and dynamics involved in inclusion.

2.3.1 Research framework

Inclusion in schools is a continuous process that enhances participation, presence, and achievement for all students, tailored to their diverse needs and backgrounds (Manchester, 2012). Inclusion that enhances educational efficiency, involves physical, social and psychological dimensions (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2017).

Luhmann's (1990; 1995; 2012) sociological systems theory explains that individuals navigate between systems, balancing inclusion and exclusion through complex interactions. Therefore, if one forms part of a group, they are excluding alternative identities or groups. Consequently, if one is excluded from society, they are included in a minority sub-system, with their unique identity (Hansen & Qvortrup 2013; Qvortrup, 2012).

A sense of belonging in the educational environment is fostered by respect, support, and diversity acceptance (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). This necessitates policy changes and collaborative efforts from students, families, and educators. Ainscow and

Messiou (2019; 2021) emphasise strengthening inclusive practices and student-teacher relationships, while involving the whole school body, requiring adequate teacher training and student input. Through collaborative and equitable approaches, students are engaged as active participants in their learning experience, stimulating critical thinking, and lowering academic barriers (Ainscow et al., 2012; Ainscow, 2016; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Sandoval & Messiou, 2020).

2.3.2 Complexity of inclusion

Learning bodies provide essential support for students, ensuring individual needs are addressed. However, inclusion becomes challenging when the system fails to support all minorities adequately. In Malta, for example, students with ADHD receive support, but those with dyslexia often lack sufficient accommodations like readers. Even when provisions like coloured overlays, extra time, or spell-checkers are available, they may not adequately address severe dyslexia, which affects higher-order skills such as problem-solving and comprehension (Ghirxi, 2013; Horne et al., 2011; Joint Council for Qualifications, 2020; SpLD Service, 2023; University of Malta, 2018; Woods, 2004).

LDs are all unique and found on different parts of a scale, necessitating a deeper understanding of their characteristics and individual needs to effectively support student potential.

2.4 Learning disabilities

LDs present varied experiences for each student. The academic focus on reading and writing exacerbates challenges, especially for male students (Bano & Yusuf, 2023). Unfortunately, these challenges are intensified by factors like lower socioeconomic status, lack of resources, and inadequate educator training (Lucy et al., 2015).

Teachers' education is crucial for understanding students' diverse needs since insufficient knowledge or skills hinder access to necessary education (Porta & Todd, 2023). Although curriculum modifications can accommodate LD needs, current local training on how to do so is insufficient (Rendoth et al., 2024). The Masters in Teaching and Learning offers limited education on disabilities (Appendix 5). Increasing knowledge and self-efficacy reduces frustration, enhances empathy for students' abilities, and boosts belief in their potential (Woodcock & Faith, 2021). The frustration with inadequate teacher training for supporting students with disabilities is a global

issue, highlighting the need for improved training (Aladsani, 2020; Cramer et al., 2021; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Myderrizi, 2023; Starks, 2020).

It takes a number of factors to create an educational environment that is inspiring, inclusive, supportive and diverse. Effective communication that responds to students' needs, school leadership that increases job satisfaction for educators, and government resources are vital for an inclusive, supportive educational environment (Al-Kahlan & Khasawneh, 2024; Lucy et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, the lack of these factors can negatively impact students' self-perception and future career and educational experiences (Sumbane & Makua, 2023).

2.4.1 Long-term impact

When students with disabilities lack proper support in secondary school, they may develop negative self-perceptions, leading to lowered self-esteem and sometimes aggressive behaviour (Sender et al., 2024). This is exacerbated by the academic demands that highlight the discrepancy between students with LD and their peers (Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023).

Providing counselling and psychoeducational services can help students and their support systems understand and manage these challenges, while becoming aware of the intersectionality of identities although not all counsellors have the necessary skills (Alghazo & Sharadgah, 2023; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023).

2.5 Sexual minorities

This section explores literature on the LGBT community, supportive factors and dynamics. Earlier literature was included to provide a sixteen-year picture of different realities, recommendations and improvements.

2.5.1 Policies and pedagogy

Sixteen years ago, LBGT adolescents faced a lack of safety, frequent bullying, and harassment in schools, despite legal protections (Fisher et al., 2008). Insufficient legal assistance may have affected the social dynamics. This reality was also documented in 2011 by Hazlett et al., who advocated for the implementation of anti-bullying and non-discrimination regulations to promote safety.

Steck and Perry (2017a, 2017b) researched US schools through school leaders' perception, found that the heteronormative culture dominates the school system, perpetuating the marginalisation of LGBT students. Unfortunately, teachers

seem to lack the skills to support these students (McShane & Farren, 2023). Steck and Perry (2017a) recommended policy updates to challenge heteronormativity, create safe spaces, enhance awareness and motivate acceptance of diversity. Furthermore, they advocated raising awareness about the need of including LGBT topics into education and acquiring training to do so (Steck & Perry 2017b).

In Malta, minimal LGBT-focused educator training results in insufficient awareness and tools to support diverse classrooms, requiring teachers to educate themselves. Due to this, a neutral approach is occasionally taken towards the LGBT community, which is not always beneficial, especially if the students are being discriminated against due to attacks on the community (Bartulović et al., 2023).

Nowadays, inclusive policies aim to better support educators in addressing sexual and gender diversity at appropriate ages, reflecting societal changes towards inclusivity (Bartulović & Kušević, 2023; Ullman et al., 2024).

2.5.2 Social environment and the educational environment

Due to ongoing social and political changes and increasingly diverse classrooms, educator training increasingly focuses on diverse classroom needs (Goldstein-Schultz, 2020). Unfortunately, despite improved policies in certain countries, safety and bullying issues persist, exacerbated by social media and reduced control in schools. Since support is not always found, some students avoid school, harming their academic performance (Fields & Wotipka, 2020). Those who attend may face stigma and discrimination, resulting in behavioural issues, fear, mental health struggles, and low self-esteem (Sumbane & Makua, 2023).Secondary school years are crucial for identity formation, with role models influencing physical and mental health (Atif et al., 2022). Through the recent increase in LGBT educators, students are provided with a model of a diverse society (Brett, 2022). Furthermore, counselling can support students and families in coping with daily struggles (Ginestre, 2023). The challenges of minorities in such environments are complex, especially when intersecting with LDs.

2.6 The intersectionality of the LGBT experience and LDs

Students belonging to both LGBT and LD minorities often face harassment and exclusion from peers, educators, and family members (Hazlett et al., 2011). This leads to frustration and anger, especially in relationship-building (Richards, 2017). Policymakers and educators must gain a deeper understanding of these minorities'

lived experience, to better support these students in identity formation and fostering a healthy level of self-worth.

Recognising how intersecting identities shape unique experiences can enhance policies, providing a supportive environment, conducive to learning, that improves resilience and QoL.

2.6.1 Pioneers of intersectionality

The term "intersectionality," coined from the experiences of women of colour, describes how overlapping social categories create compounded disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991). For LGBT individuals with LDs, intersectionality results in unique challenges that affect their opportunities and experiences.

To support the research process and enhance the understanding of intersectionality, it is crucial to establish a solid foundation for this experience. This approach ensures that results are holistic and accurately reflect individual experiences, reducing personal bias.

2.6.1.1 bell hooks[1]. bell hooks (1984) rooted her work in the feminist theory, focusing on women of colour. She dedicated her work towards social transformation and advocated for policy change. hooks asserts that when marginalised social classifications intersect, they reinforce themselves, leading to the experience of an interconnected system of domination, rather than isolated incidents. hooks (1981) also explores how gender and sexual minorities are impacted by their experience of marginalisation.

hooks emphasises the need for individuals to acknowledge their privilege when engaging with marginalised communities, emphasising the significance of intersectional consciousness in addressing privilege-shaped identities and experiences, to reduce social inequality.

2.6.1.2 Kimberlé Crenshaw. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) developed the term 'intersectionality' based on hook's feminist theory. Crenshaw, like hooks, emphasised the importance of acknowledging how different intersecting identities compound to shape an individual's experiences of privilege or oppression.

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[1] bell hooks is a pen name used by the author Gloria Jean Watkins, who chooses to write her name in lowercase to prioritise the substance of her work over her identity.

Crenshaw explores how supporting people who experience intersectionality differs from standard approaches to addressing injustice. Social policies must reflect the complexity of interconnecting oppression, through creating space and fostering a sense of solidarity among the community's diverse members. Through the application of inclusive practices across different domains, such as law enforcement and academia, people may be inspired to practise inclusion.

2.6.2 Social justice in academia

To create an inclusive educational environment, educators must acknowledge their privilege and utilise tools and systems that empower students. Paulo Freire (1970) emphasises the importance of empowering students through problem-posing education and conscientisation.

Problem-posing education engages students actively in learning, diverging from the banking model, where educators deposit information. By fostering discourse, critical thinking, and collaboration, students and teachers share knowledge, shaping practical solutions and enhancing the relevance of learning. This approach enables students to challenge social injustices and the status quo.

Freire (1970) also advocates for conscientisation, which raises awareness of oppression and encourages students to reflect on their experiences, engage in discussions, and grasp societal power dynamics. As students recognise their social positions, they can confront social and institutional injustices. For example, students with disabilities, typically exposed to heteronormative sexual education, can discuss their challenges, fostering collective awareness and a shared capacity for change (Duke, 2011; Freire, 1970). This process empowers students, enabling them to enhance their circumstances and advocate for a fairer society.

Education plays a crucial role in societal improvement, individual development, and civic engagement. By enhancing personal growth, education boosts collective knowledge and achievement, fostering greater inclusivity, justice, and equity (Spiel et al., 2016).

2.6.3 Support

Educators currently lack sufficient training and policy support to effectively assist stigmatised minorities, necessitating more robust support structures within school environments (McShane & Farren, 2023; Ullman et al., 2024).

Stigmatised minority identities are diverse and influenced by linguistic, cultural, and sexual variations, resulting in distinct needs (Duke, 2011). School services and programs must address these unique needs to empower and normalise diverse identities while supporting children in exploring and developing their sense of self (Duke, 2011).

Beyond identity exploration, members of the LGBT and LD communities often express challenges in establishing and maintaining meaningful sexual and romantic relationships (Marie Robinson et al., 2020). Such relationships are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging, and their absence can hinder personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Individuals with LDs may perceive forming connections as impossible, leading to feelings of isolation (Marie Robinson et al., 2020).

Therefore, despite legal protections for these minorities, social care providers, educators, and support workers need enhanced training to address the unique needs and challenges (Marie Robinson et al., 2020). Implementing support programs relevant to the local context that raise awareness and provide guidance, would further benefit these communities.

2.7 The local context

To offer culturally relevant support, understanding local students' perceptions of their societal identity is crucial. LGBT individuals with LDs often face social categorisation, leading to prejudice, exclusion, and dual discrimination within their own communities (Vassallo et al., 2022).

This social categorization manifests across health, education, and employment sectors. LGBT individuals may encounter alienation or discrimination from healthcare providers, which can hinder their recovery (Vassallo et al., 2022). Moreover, these students frequently endure microaggressions when their identity is denied or their disability minimised, resulting in cumulative harm (Balsam et al., 2011; Miller & Smith, 2020). Furthermore, continual justification of access needs to educators can further isolate them, contributing to feelings of anger, frustration, and stigma, alongside their identity exploration (Vassallo et al., 2022).

These experiences profoundly influence individuals' self-perception and complicate their transition to adulthood, where workplace prejudice may lead to resignation (Sumbane & Makua, 2023; Vassallo et al., 2022). Persistent barriers to education, mental health support, wellbeing, and relationships are recurring issues for

those identifying with LGBT and LD identities, perpetuated by socially constructed categories, societal norms and existing policies (Vinney, 2019; Wildman et al., 2024).

2.7.1 Social policy

Social stigma influences the degree of inclusion of students and communities. Social policies play a crucial role in fostering inclusive practices, impacting whether communities become segregated or integrated (Watson et al., 2012).

In 2012, the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) introduced Malta's first national framework to enhance educational inclusion by eliminating streaming. The 2019 framework built on this, incorporating UDL and emphasising the necessity for ongoing staff and parent training, lifelong learning, and the importance of ensuring that socioeconomic status, race, and religion do not hinder education (MEDE 2014a; 2014b; MEDE 2019a; 2019b).

The prevailing framework (MEDE, 2022) expands on sexual and gender diversity, including students with LGBTIQ parents, and calls for schools to re-evaluate their policies to better address diversity and tackle bullying, homophobia, and transphobia. Furthermore, it emphasises training, and resources for students and teachers, and curriculum adaptation to promote gender diversity awareness and respect. The goal is to make the educational environment mentally and emotionally secure for these students to learn and develop in. Finally, the framework highlights the need for support and individual attention for students with LDs to reduce absenteeism and boost academic achievement.

At a European level, the Council of the European Union (2021) stresses inclusion and diversity in academia, particularly sexual diversity. It advocates for schools to promote equity, inclusivity, and lifelong learning, echoing John Dewey (1916), and calls for educator training to improve their motivation and effectiveness. Although not directly targeting individuals with LGBT and LD identities, these policies aim to create a safer, more beneficial educational environment for all students.

Recent policies address the needs of minority students, emphasising awareness and resource provision. The purpose of this study is to understand the implementation of these policies in schools and their long-term implications for students as they transition into adulthood.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter began by discussing the complex impact of labels in society. It then reviewed the complexities of inclusion, LDs, sexual minorities, and the intersectionality of LD and LGBT identities. The long-term impact of these intersecting identities within various systems was also examined, along with the support available. An overview of local and European policies highlighted the need for better inclusive practices to enhance educational experiences and address long-term implications. The next chapter details the methodology used in this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the process used in this research study. The research questions, along with the recruitment criteria, the method and rationale behind the use of data collection and method of analysis, is delineated, followed by a presentation of the ethical considerations, validity and verification methods.

3.2 Research methodology

The research questions focus on exploring the secondary school experiences, QoL, and associated meanings for adults with intersecting LGBT and LD identities. While quantitative research was initially considered for its objectivity and generalisability, the unique and complex nature of intersectionality necessitated a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research allows for face-to-face interactions in natural settings, providing authentic insights into the shared and subjective meanings attributed to experiences (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Crowe et al., 2015). As the primary instrument of data collection, the researcher empowered participants during interviews and took on an inductive and reflexive process to understand the experiences in context and represent their voice (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Such an exploration is subjective to the researcher and brings about biases that were reflected upon to support the research process.

3.2.1 Limitations

Although the researcher was cautious with the approach, limitations were still present. The rarity of intersecting identities, public stigma, and difficulty in finding willing participants, leads to a smaller prospective participant pool, limiting generalisability (Cohen et al., 2018).

Interviewing adults has three major limitations: adult perspectives differ from those of current secondary school students; the educational system has changed over the years, and the data from older generations may be influenced by their recollections.

3.2.2 Biases in qualitative research

Acknowledging and reflecting biases in qualitative research is crucial since biases shape interpretation, offering deeper insights, context and clarity into the lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

As a member of both minority groups being studied, an emic, my experience drives me to amplify their voices and make meaningful recommendations for future generations. While data could emotionally impact the researcher, it is essential to remain reflective on assumptions and prevent biases from influencing the analysis and results, preserving the uniqueness of each participant's experience (Bettinger, 2008).

Additionally, my role as an educator motivates me to create a safer environment where young people can explore their identities without being defined by sexuality, gender, or learning disabilities.

3.3 Participant selection

Snowball sampling was employed, using NGOs and friends. Participants were selected based on ages 18 to 30, sexual orientation, and a LD diagnosis. Requiring an official diagnosis limited potential participants, excluding those without such privilege who needed to cope independently.

Prospective participants (table 1) received the researcher's contact information to opt-in voluntarily. Interested and eligible participants were briefed on the research process and provided with a consent form.

3.3.1 Participants

Table 1

Information about participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual and Gender Identity	Diagnosis	Same-sex School
Kay	24	Non-Binary	ADHD	Government
Ari	23	Gay	ADHD and Dyslexia	Church
Mare	26	Lesbian	ADHD and Dyslexia	Church

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through a focus group, aiming to stimulate different perspectives on one topic, while supporting participants to gain awareness on their experiences (Slovák et al., 2023). This method empowers participants to engage in dialogues, raise awareness, and hold reflective discussions (Dallos & Vetere, 2007). Focus groups provide dual processes; exploratory as participants reflect, identify, and express their thoughts and feelings; and experiential as the researcher observes participant attitudes and behaviour, enabling the researcher to elaborate on ongoing themes and generate deeper dialogue (Dallos & Vetere, 2007).

Focus groups are powerful tools for exploring diversity and group meaning, especially for minorities, as they provide a space to be heard (Morgan, 2019). Given the sensitivity of LGBT and LD topics and the vulnerability of individuals in these minority groups due to past experiences, focus groups were well-suited to support participants in exploring their experiences and obtaining data (Barbour, 2018; Hall et al., 2022).

3.5 Research analysis

The research questions aim to explore unique life stories. By highlighting different narratives, the intersectionality of each person can be better understood. Although participants might share the same diagnosis or label, their experiences and acceptance processes can vary widely, influencing meaning and QoL.

Thematic narrative methodology helps capture complexity, identify themes by analysing content and meaning of participants' stories (Frost, 2011; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008). This approach not only illuminate shared experiences but also elicits the unique experiences shaped by individual intersectionality, supporting readers to appreciate the complexity of identity, beyond labels.

3.5.1 Narrative methodology

Narrative research provides access into how individuals narrate, order, and interpret their subjective experiences, providing insights into their sense of self, attitudes and worldviews, within a context that influences social categories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Murray & Sargeant, 2012; Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Narrative methodology captures speech patterns and emotions, offering deeper insights into intersectionality, meanings, and coping mechanisms (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

During data collection, the researcher asked questions that support participants' narratives, by using a phenomenological approach, where assumptions were bracketed to better understand the idiographic and subjectively true experiences (Missel & Birkelund, 2020). To minimise the researcher's bias, a hermeneutic approach is used, which involves questioning the story's meaning and engaging in reflective analysis to deepen understanding (Missel & Birkelund, 2020; Ricoeur & Thompson, 2016).

3.6 Validity and verification

Validity in narrative research focuses on capturing the participant's subjective truth and intentions, while consistency ensures the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Riessman, 2008). Focus groups allow for data triangulation, enhancing the understanding and interpretation of narratives (Wilson, 2016). Participants were asked detailed questions to enrich their narratives, enabling a more comprehensive interpretation (Murray & Sargeant, 2012).

At the end of the analysis, participants were invited to review the researcher's re-narration, to verify accuracy of the analysis (Klein & McCabe, 2007; Riessman, 2008). This practice minimised bias, while enhancing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To maintain accountability and address co-construction, the researcher documented and discussed their reflective process with their supervisor, to remain aware of personal assumptions that could influence data analysis, and interpretation (Berger, 2015; Connolly, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

3.6.1 Translation

The focus group was primarily conducted in English, though participants occasionally preferred Maltese. The analysis was performed on the original transcript and presented in English, with translated Maltese text included in Appendix 4.

3.7 Ethical considerations

An application was submitted to the MLI Dissertation and Ethics Board to ensure compliance with the Research Code of Practice, international research standards, and GDPR. Upon approval (Appendix 3), information sheets and consent forms (Appendix 2) were sent through Maltese NGOs to prospective participants, ensuring voluntary participation.

A confidential and comfortable room was selected for face-to-face interviews, as preferred by participants. They were invited to ask questions about the consent form, reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and to decline any questions during the interview.

Throughout the research process, confidentiality and respect were prioritised. Questions were carefully worded to avoid stigmatising language and were kept open-ended to reduce pressure. The researcher remained attentive to signs of discomfort and engaged participants transparently and honestly. Moreover, gender-neutral pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed to safeguard confidentiality.

The session was debriefed, and participants were provided with contacts for therapeutic services to seek support if distressed. Efforts were made to maintain impartiality and reflect on the researcher's personal influence throughout the process.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the study's qualitative methodology, indicating its advantages in capturing the depth of participants' narratives. It outlined participant selection and introduced those involved. Data collection was done through focus groups and analysed narratively. The chapter also addressed limitations, validity, verification, and ethical considerations to ensure transparency, reliability, and integrity. The next chapter will present and discuss the research findings, supported by relevant literature.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the participants' narratives, supported by a discussion of relevant literature. Participants were invited to reflect on their secondary school experience to provide insight into the experience of intersectionality of sexual identities and LDs in secondary school, the supportive structures, coping mechanisms used, and how these were adapted to adulthood, in response to the research questions.

To explore the research questions, three courageous individuals shared their stories.

4.2 Navigating identity and bullying

In any context, supporting individuals with intersecting and oppressed identities is complex, especially when complicated by bullying and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Such support should start by gaining insight into the individual's experience to acknowledge the diverse needs. The Maltese academic system prioritises learning, limiting space for identity exploration and understanding of such needs.

Kay, Mare, and Ari felt forced to follow the normative standards of academia, however, due to their LDs, they did not have a space to explore their identity. The participants not only struggled with their LDs but also faced physical and emotional bullying, reflecting research that LDs, especially with psychiatric comorbidities, increase the risk of bullying (Weinreich et al., 2023). Additionally, high rates of social exclusion, sexual assault, and verbal abuse are particularly prevalent among bisexual, trans women, and non-binary individuals with disabilities (Amos et al., 2023). Ari remembers his school years as a period of bullying.

> They used to lock me in the bathrooms and used to hold the the door because they know … I don't have enough energy to pull the pull like, push the door and I used to like, 30 minutes of the break locked in a bathroom.

This bullying led him to internalise the belief that he cannot openly express himself, due to fear of exacerbating the bullying.

Mare's experience of bullying differed since it consisted of subtle comments from peers and teachers.

> The bullying wasn't that obvious at at face value … but when you would go home and reflect on your day and think about what was said, you would start to realise that they were joking in a way that implied that you're not normal from exactly from my peers, from the the teachers.

Mare reflected that normative standards influenced both academics and self-expression. After secondary school, she studied abroad, an experience that modelled on the importance of liberating students from the normative and academically-focused education. The system abroad allowed students to work during school hours, freeing after-school hours for self-exploration. This approach, rooted in liberation and empowerment, enabled students to become conscientious about their education and equipped them to become active citizens (Freire, 1970).

This system also supports individuals with ADHD traits who are possibly anxious of forgetting school material. Sibley et al. (2020) found that training and support can improve motivation, organisation, and memory in students with ADHD. Lacking this support, Kay felt misunderstood and labelled as the *"problem student,"* leading to rebellion. With proper training, Kay could have received the tools needed to succeed academically and avoid feeling the need to rebel or give up on their learning journey.

Due to their ADHD and anger, Kay was singled out by educators and humiliated in front of their peers. They recounted being singled-out during assembly for their short haircut and threatened with expulsion unless they grew it out. This hairstyle was an expression of their identity, and the threat exacerbated their anger. Kay explained, *"I think ADHD … I used to rebel, because I was naughty. If the teacher replied back, I used to reply back twice, I did not care."* With one parent as a staff member, educators felt compelled to enforce strict measures on Kay, *"There is no leeway for me."* Kay responded to this bullying by rebelling further and challenging the system.

When educators and the social system are unaware of students' specific needs, as with Kay and Mare, they are ill-equipped to provide proper support. This lack of understanding can lead to non-normative behaviour being misinterpreted as a disorder or violent behaviour, requiring discipline and control (Foucault, 1979; Odenbring et al., 2017). A diagnosis like ADHD, can shift the perception from seeing the student as a 'problem' to acknowledge their need for psychological services (Giddens, 1990; Odenbring et al., 2017). Psychological services directly help students and their support systems to enhance student potential during adolescence, and support resilience, learning and well-being (Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023).

Stigmatisation caused Kay and Ari significant pain and anger towards society. They discussed how miseducation about LD and sexual identity leads to harmful stigma from peers, colleagues, clients and relatives. Kay shared an incident of a

colleague's reflection on her son's education, *"I prefer to have a woman (as an LSE) or no type of LSE than to have a gay with him."* Ari added how painful and harmful this stigma is for the LGBT community: *"It hurts me as they … just want to throw the stigma, but they are not willing to learn about us, they just want to hate on us."*

This stigma is sustained by the heteronormative focus on sex education in schools, which also hinders self-understanding. Although Mare was aware of being different, heteronormative education posed a barrier to her self-discovery.

> We are educated on straight heterosexual sex, on condom, on penis, on having sex for procreation purposes after marriage. So we don't get the education on sex in parties, sex for pleasure, sex between two women, sex … in a polyamorous relationship.

These experiences made her feel confined where she did not belong, leading to perceived judgement on her stigmatised identity *"because there is no knowledge, there is no awareness, and there is this internalised judgement that we, ourselves, bring about in our lives until we overcome it."* Consequently, she only felt free to explore her sexual identity after leaving secondary school.

4.2.1 Labels

The participants sought labels to identify with, highlighting the need for identity. Erikson (1968) describes adolescence as a critical period for identity exploration. While some students align with the academic system, not everyone does, as inclusion often neglects individuality (Qvortrup, 2012; Hansen & Qvortrup, 2013). In fact, the participants felt excluded and struggled with labels.

While for Kay the label was important to understand themselves, labels can be oppressive. Mare felt confined by labels, needing to comply with their assumptions, acknowledging that the oppression stemmed from the label's implications in the context. In fact, when abroad, the autonomy and support she received catered to her LD needs in an empowering way. Additionally, she explored how learning about different labels in a safe space can empower students to understand themselves, reflect on sexual identity and receive the necessary support for their needs.

> What I needed was someone to explain to me how ADHD and dyslexia were manifesting ... Once I learned that, and this was much later … it opened my my mind into all these possibilities. All of a sudden I could, for the first time in my life, I said to myself, 'oh actually I can learn, I can achieve, I can pass, I can do it actually', that's all I needed.

While exclusion in school is at times unavoidable, communication can create an environment where students feel safe, supported and respected, fostering a sense of belonging (Luhmann, 1990; 1995; 2012; Prince & Hadwin, 2013). Respect requires an understanding of unique needs, without which support is ineffective. In fact, all participants shared that their school did not understand them, and any support was not aligned with their needs, highlighting the importance of stronger student-teacher relationships (Ainscow & Messiou, 2021). As educators become better aware of needs, they can become role models of how to deal with differences in a respectful and non-judgemental way.

4.2.2 Judgement

When sharing their stories, the underlying theme of judgement and the resultant anxiety were unmistakable. Misinformation and lack of education on needs, identities and LDs exacerbated the issue, increasing judgement and barriers to obtaining the necessary education (Porta & Todd, 2023). The feeling of judgement seemed tied to what each individual prioritised during their secondary school years.

4.2.2.1 Sexual orientation. Kay shared that they did not care about their grades but felt judged on how they expressed themselves through clothing, *"always in trousers, never in a skirt"*, even at graduation and anticipating humiliation. *"They brought in my parents and said, 'I think your daughter is, I don't know, either lesbian or something'. They didn't know how to describe me in reality."*

This judgement and lack of understanding towards the LGBT community extended to other issues, including the higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases in the gay party scene. *"How many times we get judged about it because we are animals,"* Kay said. Ari reflected that some of the stigma may stem from the community's behaviour. *"I don't want to sound disrespectful toward the community I love, but let's be honest HIV penetrates our community more 'cos we like the ventures."* They believed holistic and diverse sexual education could reduce risky behaviour and harmful stigma.

Outside the school environment, Ari found a safe way to express his identity through drag. *"Liking men, that is 50% of what is making me happy … my gender, that's another 50% of my happiness"*. While aware that this method of expression is judged, reminding him of bullying experiences, Ari feels that it is worth the risk. *"Every risk you're going to do, and why? They condemned us so much that we live, we try to*

live the future, but always bringing the past with us." With this understanding, he is mindful about where and with whom he expresses this part of his identity.

To reduce judgement in the community, individuals like Kay are motivated to challenge the system by educating others about different identities. Kay shared that adult knowledge levels are low. When lecturing at the university, *"we start from the basics … not even sexuality, gender and sex, what the difference is. For me that is something that I experience daily."* Such education, when provided by the minorities, can bring first-hand insight on intersectionality and the lived experience, to help reduce stigma.

4.2.2.2 Learning disability. Mare and Kay were more focused on their academic struggles, leading to heightened perceived judgement on their LDs. Mare felt particularly judged by peers who did not understand her LD, *"especially when they used to tell us, for example, take out your homework, give it to the person next to you. And now everyone knows that I can't spell 'chair' or I read the question and completely misunderstood it."* She remembered feeling agitated and judged on her writing ability, even for minor mistakes.

Her experience was complicated by feeling marginalised during heteronormative lessons. *"I definitely struggled on an academic level … In combination of my sexual orientation and my dyslexia and ADHD ... I felt very suppressed within myself, with homophobia, internalised homophobic ideologies."* Unfortunately, when marginalised identities intersect, oppression intensifies, creating a complex system of domination rather than isolated incidents (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; hooks, 1984). Mare yearned for understanding and education on diverse identities, without which she felt invalidated and disengaged.

When diversity is ignored, students can feel invalidated, undermining their love for learning. Through understanding students' needs and interests, intrinsic motivation and curiosity enhances engagement in education (Dewey, 1899; 1997). An inclusive and equitable educational environment respects students and encourages critical thinking about their identities, empowering them to adapt to adulthood and become active participants in a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). Reflecting on her experience, Mare notes that the lack of education on LDs and sexual identities is perpetuated across generations of educators due to the prevailing social narrative of normality.

They have to rely on their internal resources and if they've just come out of a school where they have been told that their internal resources don't matter, they should be quiet and comply. Then they come into the teaching profession with very minimal internal resources … and then when they have a pupil that is ADHD and dyslexic and is challenging their way of teaching, they they freak out.

Educators often face frustration due to insufficient training, negatively impacting the learning environment (Aladsani, 2020; Cramer et al., 2021; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Myderrizi, 2023; Starks, 2020; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023). Knowledge and communication about diverse identities and needs can support students' needs while empowering them to develop problem-solving skills, fostering an inclusive and supportive school climate (Al-Kahlan & Khasawneh, 2024).

Regrettably, the negative secondary school profoundly impacted the participants. They shared that their most cherished memory was leaving school, gaining the freedom to explore their true selves, although still impacted by societal reactions. Ari shares how his employer dismisses his labels, echoing his experiences of restricted freedom of expression.

I'm speaking to my clients and I tell them, 'listen I have ADHD', 'Oh my he's gonna start with the codes, codes …'. 'They are not codes … I mean you need to understand that code in order to understand me'.

In such moments when he feels judged and out of control, Ari tries to educate others on the meaning of labels to support those with similar experiences. His stance, shaped by witnessed stigma and internalised judgement, reflects significant effort and strength. This ongoing battle with judgement and stigma continues to affect the participants' well-being.

4.3 School climate and emotional experience

The school climate is multidimensional, shaped by academics, community, institutional policies and safety (Jessiman et al., 2022; Wang & Degol, 2015). Focusing solely on academic marks neglects the strengths of diverse students. Inclusion across all levels of the school system is often lacking (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2017). When students feel that their needs are unmet, they seek ways to represent themselves comfortably (Foucault, 1979).

Kay, for instance, challenged norms by changing their hairstyle and fighting to wear pants at school and graduation. Mare's experience abroad highlighted the strength of empowering self-expression, contrasting with the experienced oppressive

Maltese school environment. An institutional environment that suppresses individual expression fosters ignorance of different identities, allowing peers and educators to judge, stigmatise and bully.

Stigmatisation, oppression and victimisation significantly impact educational outcomes and well-being, often resulting in internalised and externalised emotional responses such as anger (Kosciw et al., 2015). For Mare, academic oppression stifled her exploration of sexuality, while Kay and Ari faced restrictions in understanding and expressing their sexual identities during secondary school. Although Ari received academic support, alternative learning methods were not accommodated. On the other hand Kay's struggles with ADHD were misunderstood and the stigma towards their gender expression led to rebellion against the educational system.

4.3.1 Rebellion

Kay longed for a diagnosis to gain insight into their behaviour, yet their voice was silenced. Educators attributed their actions solely to defiance rather than considering the possibility of ADHD, exacerbating Kay's frustration, as they were often disciplined for misbehaving, resulting in *"always detention, afterschool"*.

> When I went up for the last three years in secondary school, I ended up … all the time fighting. Once I threw a table. No, I was misbehaved. But that is why they used to assume, 'ee because he is going through problems of figuring out that he is trans', and I, 'no, I do not think that that is the problem'. … But they always used to blame it on my queerness.

Kay's response to the system was marked by rebellion, a manifestation of their anger. Paulo Freire (1970) discusses that oppressed individuals often rebel against their circumstances as a form of resistance. In Kay's case, feeling unheard within the educational system, which employed what Freire termed the "deposit method," their rebellion against being labelled as a 'problem' led to acts of defiance and perceived misbehaviour (Freire, 1970; Sender et al., 2024). Freire (1970, p 33) suggests that "The rebellion they express as they emerge in the historical process is motivated by that desire to act effectively".

It was only later, upon receiving a diagnosis, that Kay could better comprehend their reactions and come to terms with their secondary school experiences. For Kay, finding labels that resonated, whether for their LD or sexual identity, was crucial. They explored various identities, lesbian, transgender, queer, before settling on non-binary. Despite this journey of self-discovery, Kay still struggles to explain their label to others

and occasionally opts for the simplicity of identifying as transgender due to the fatigue of constant explanation.

4.3.2 Eating disorders

While Kay expressed their anger through rebellion, Ari and Mare internalised the stigma and frustration towards the education system, manifesting in struggles with their own bodies, an eating disorder. Research indicates that societal pressures and oppression can significantly contribute to the development of eating disorders (Day et al., 2021; Piran, 2017). Mare resisted the imposition of labels and the confinement she felt it imposed.

> I also developed an eating disorder. From so much oppression … I felt I had no control over things, I felt so depressed. I didn't know how to communicate it, so I actively decided not to eat food … I couldn't cope with the feeling of it. And self-sabotaging. Anyone that tried to to speak to me, I would be very angry at them. I would like tell everyone to just leave me alone.

The lack of control felt by Ari led him to unhealthy coping mechanisms for a sense of control, specifically food, which led to significant struggles with his body weight.

> So I didn't used to speak a lot, like I used to try to keep everything to myself … and then I used to … eat a lot ... I gained a lot of weight because of the bullying. I started developing health issues with myself like high blood pressure, diabetes, because of the amount of food that I was taking … because that is my only coping mechanism to remove the anger inside me.

Eventually, due to his weight, he was bullied by peers and strangers. With no guidance on how to gain control over his body weight, pain and anger, Ari developed bulimia.

> Then because I started gaining weight, of course, definitely everybody was shaming me because I'm fat. I remember once I went out to Valletta, there was a guy, I don't know him, never spoke to him, he told me … I still remember, 'if we threw you from the bridge where there is the entrance of Valletta, with the amount of fat you have you, will rebounce back on the bridge' and it started getting locked in my head, … then what happened, bulimia happened because it was so much.

Unfortunately, over time, when the individual cannot escape a toxic environment, the resulting pain can drive them to develop harmful coping mechanisms.

4.3.3 Addictions

Adolescence is a critical time for initiating drug use, although the normative population does not typically develop substance use disorders (Montana & Chung, 2019; Winters & Ingwalson, 2022). Stressful life events often lead to avoidance coping

through substance use (Dariotis & Chen, 2020). LGBTQ individuals, especially gender minorities, face unique stressors related to their identity, contributing to risky behaviours such as substance use disorders and sexually transmitted infections (De Pedro et al., 2017; Gonzales & Henning-Smith, 2017; Kann et al., 2016; NIDA, 2018; Salvatore & Daftary-Kapur, 2020; Wood et al., 2016).

Kay and Ari turned to substances to cope with the lack of support, anger and pain, temporarily escaping reality. *"They make you quickly happy you know, they will fill that which you feel empty inside you."* Kay acknowledged that this is exacerbated by the intersectionality of being queer and having ADHD, *"it's more likely to be addicted to stuff when you have ADHD."* Research suggests that ADHD and substance use disorder share similarities in brain reward system features, compelling individuals to self-medicate ADHD traits (Ivanov et al., 2022; Ottosen et al., 2016; Young & Sedwick, 2015). This cycle involves temporarily alleviating ADHD symptoms through substance use, which escalates addictive behaviours.

ADHD along with sociocultural influences such as substance availability in LGBT social settings, exacerbate drug use and increase the risk of developing substance use disorders (Felner et al., 2020). Ari noted that the queer community tends to be *"more accepting of these things"*, *"that obviously has it's positive side, but I think sometimes there is the problem of alcohol."* Kay reflected on the community's norms, *"the queer community abuses of alcohol a lot and even if you will going to a party, you will see a popper, you will see coke, you will see everything."*

Higher perceptions of victimisation among sexual minorities correlate with increased suicidal tendencies, highlighting the critical role of a supportive school environment (Espelage et al., 2016b). Effecting change necessitates policy and teacher reforms along with active student participation (Ainscow & Messiou, 2021). Students must be equipped to understand minority experiences, recognise stigma and their role in either maintaining or challenging societal norms (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1991). Non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies can empower students to advocate for policies that better address the complex needs of diverse identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Hazlett et al., 2011).

Such coping mechanisms can become addictive comforts that hinder adolescents from functioning well and seeking appropriate support, contributing to persistent issues in adulthood. Substance use during adolescence increases the likelihood of health issues along with adverse impacts on life-functioning, including

financial, educational and legal issues (NIDA, 2018a; Winters & Ingwalson, 2022; Young & Woodhouse, 2020).

These narratives underscore the significance of support and role models, within and external to school, in impacting long-term well-being during adolescence and adulthood.

4.4 Support Systems

Emerging adulthood is a critical period when adolescents transition to adulthood, experimenting with employment, sexual behaviour and substance use (Arnett, 1998; Salvatore, 2018). In LGBT communities, normalised substance use, minority stress, weaker social bonds and negative labelling lead to internalised negativity, affecting life quality and trajectories (Green & Feinstein, 2012; Hirschi, 1969; Meyer, 2003; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012). Maladaptive parent-child relationships contribute to alcohol abuse among sexual minority women, while childhood abuse leads to mental distress in adulthood (Fish et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). This points to the importance of positive role models and supportive relationships, to mitigate victimisation, support the learning process and enhance well-being (Espelage et al., 2016b; Hong, et al., 2016).

Mare emphasised her support system's crucial role in mitigating stress and pain from bullying, especially without LGBT role models. She noted that their support helped her build resilience, preventing long-lasting negative effects.

> Because they failed to to give me the tools that I needed, I had to go on this journey of self-exploration by myself without any guidance. I didn't know any gay people that could help me … any organisations … any celebrities, YouTube, or literature. It was quite limiting for me and I had to explore this all by myself. So long-term, it did affect me academically and if I didn't have my mother to push me, I would have not pursued school. I would have let the teachers convince me that I wasn't able … I would have not questioned my sexuality until later on and potentially that has long-term effects. So no, no university degree, no career that I'm passionate about, affecting my relationship and the person I'm with now, potentially delaying my happiness within myself.

Studies highlight the profound impact of robust support systems on LGBT youth and those with LDs in mitigating bullying, fostering a healthier learning environment, coping strategies and well-being (Dardas et al., 2022; Freeman & National Council on Family Relations, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014; Shine, 2024). When home support is lacking, schools play a crucial role in improving students' QoL. Training teachers and mental health professionals can empathise with students and help them cope with their reality,

improving the learning environment (Alghazo & Sharadgah, 2023; Pozo-Rico et al., 2020; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023; Woodcock & Faith, 2021). Without safe adults to turn to and lack of coping skills, adolescents are more likely to use substances, affecting their brain and behaviour, perpetuating addiction and causing health and social problems in adulthood (Ignaszewski, 2021). The environment is so important that Mare expressed, *"if I had known of these different sexual orientations and I would have begun that self-exploration journey earlier, it would have been difficult."*

Bullying affects well-being, as repeated exposure can impact neurons (Menestrel, 2020). Bullied youth often face long-term issues like anxiety, depression, loneliness, disordered eating and low self-esteem (Lee & Vaillancourt, 2018; Lereya et al., 2015; Gattario et al., 2019; Menestrel, 2020). In fact, Ari's bullying experience had a lasting impact on his life. He still hears echoes of fat shaming when he does drag, leading him to seek validation for his body image, although he is aware that it may be perceived as attention-seeking behaviour. Despite the risk of derogatory comments, he prioritises being himself and finding places where he belongs.

Mental health and social struggles are exacerbated by minority status, social inequalities and drug use (INCB, 2023; Tirado-Muñoz et al., 2017). When an individual has intersecting marginalised identities with low perceived social support, the experience of victimisation accumulates, impacting well-being and increasing risks of self-harm or suicide (Azami & Taremian, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2020).

4.5 Conclusion

During adolescence, students spend most of their time in school, making it a primary influence on identity formation. Schools must therefore support not only 'normative' students but also those with LDs and sexual minorities. These stories highlight the impact of a lack of education, stigma, and judgement. They reveal the struggles adolescents face without support, often leading to unhealthy coping strategies that affect learning and well-being into adulthood.

The above narratives represent the diverse experience of intersecting identities, at a specific time and context. The raw narratives shared by the participants are complex due to unique intersections.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the study's key findings and discusses their implications for educational practice. It also addresses the study's limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

5.2 Summary of salient findings

This study presents the stories of three individuals who have an intersection of the LGBT and LD identities, focusing on their secondary school experiences and the short and long-term impacts on learning and emotional well-being. The findings reveal that, despite evolving policies, the school environment remains slow to change, significantly affecting these students. This highlights the substantial and long-term impact of the school experiences on adolescents as they transition into adulthood. These narratives need to be understood within the socio-political climate of their time, their unique identities, and the systems surrounding them, including peers, educators, and family.

5.2.1 Impact of lack of awareness on the educational journey

This study sheds light on inadequate awareness of the intersection of LGBT and LD identities in schools. Due to their LDs, Ari and Mare suppressed their sexual identity. All participants faced bullying or discrimination, common for those with multiple stigmatised identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Unfortunately, the neglect of their needs in school led to unhealthy coping mechanisms.

This was contrasted with Mare's experience abroad which showed the importance of academic support and identity exploration in fostering resilience and equipping students with essential skills (Freire, 1970; Sibley et al., 2020; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023). This experience highlighted the significance of the contextual implications of labels rather than their mere application (Qvortrup, 2012; Hansen & Qvortrup, 2013). Through understanding their labels, students were empowered to develop their identities and navigate the complexities of inclusion and exclusion (Ainscow & Messiou, 2021; Luhmann, 1990; 1995; 2012).

The impact of lack of awareness on their experience, varied depending on which part of their identity was prioritised. While Kay focused on their gender and sexual identity, experiencing anger, Mare and Ari prioritised their academic struggles, leading to internalised judgement. These adolescent experiences of pain and

misunderstanding not only fostered a longing for freedom from school but had lasting effects as they transitioned into adulthood.

5.2.2 Impact of the school environment on mental health

The school system is shaped not only by academics but also by community, safety, and institutions, all crucial for meeting students' needs and fostering authenticity (Jessiman et al., 2022; Wang & Degol, 2015). Unfortunately, this lack of freedom and respect impacts not only academic achievement, but also overall mental health.

Kay faced a lack of understanding, leading to feelings of anger and rebellious behaviour, often misunderstood as problematic. Upon receiving their ADHD diagnosis, Kay found acceptance and the necessary support (Giddens, 1990; Odenbring et al., 2017). Conversely, Ari and Mare developed eating disorders to control societal pressures, with Ari experiencing more bullying as a result (Day et al., 2021; Piran, 2017). Growing up, both Kay and Ari turned to addiction to cope with stress, ADHD and lack of support. The availability of substances within LGBT culture further exacerbated their addiction.

5.2.3 Long-term impact

Internalising negative attitudes significantly impacts QoL, but a strong support system can mitigate this, as seen in Mare's experience (Espelage et al., 2016a; Hong et al., 2016; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012). Despite lacking educator support, Mare's family's belief in her, reinforced her academic success and nurtured healthy relationships. Furthermore, Mare underscored the crucial role of the school environment in shielding individuals from the enduring effects of bullying and fostering self-acceptance.

The study illuminates that the impact of bullying spans physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. For example, Ari feels self-conscious performing in drag and seeks validation from his support network. Furthermore, the lasting effects of eating disorders and addiction underscore the pivotal role of adolescent support. Through resilience and determination, these participants navigate their challenges, advocate for their voices to be heard and enhance their well-being.

5.3 Implications for educational inclusivity and holistic support

Research emphasises the importance of student-teacher relationships in balancing inclusion and exclusion, understanding individual needs and supporting academic success (Ainscow et al., 2021; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2017). Participants reported that teachers often failed to listen to their needs, providing insufficient support. This lack of awareness and inadequate support underscores the necessity for holistic learning environments that embrace and support diverse identities and LDs.

Educators require adequate training on diverse identities to effectively support each student, reducing frustration and empowering students to develop problem-solving skills (Aladsani, 2020; Al-Kahlan & Khasawneh, 2024; Cramer et al., 2021; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Myderrizi, 2023; Starks, 2020; Vaknin-Nusbaum & Rachevski, 2023). Such training and policy changes can boost intrinsic motivation, educational engagement, and a passion for learning, to create an inclusive and inspiring school climate (Dewey, 1899; 1997). Informed educators and mental health services play a crucial role in helping students develop healthy coping mechanisms to manage the challenges posed by LD and identity differences.

A supportive educational system addresses academics while allowing for self-exploration and self-identity development. Grounded in Freire's (1970) principles of liberation and empowerment, this approach engages students in their education and helps them become conscientious citizens. Additionally, targeted training benefits students with ADHD by addressing challenges such as forgetfulness and organisation (Sibley et al., 2020).

5.4 Limitations and strengths of the study

The niche intersectionality of identities in this study limited the participant pool, compounded by the sensitive topic, made some prospective participants uncomfortable with the focus group format. Being part of these minorities helped me to establish rapport and empathise with participants due to familiarity with contextual issues, enhancing data interpretation (Bettinger, 2008; Hash & Cramer, 2003; LaSala, 2003; Headland et al., 1990). Despite the limited scope for generalisation, the in-depth conversations underscored the uniqueness of each experience, including other intersecting identities that were excluded for the purpose of this study (Cohen et al., 2018).

A positive outcome of the small focus group size was that it helped the participants feel safer and more comfortable deviating from specific questions. This deviation revealed a lack of safe spaces where minorities can share their experiences and feel validated. Facilitating this process required openness and impartiality, which, though challenging, was essential for authentic discourse. By remaining mindful of participants' body language and flexible in the research process, these deviations led to insightful conversations and deeper results.

Furthermore, the study included adult participants, highlighting a temporal gap with the current system. While this gap reduced direct relevance to today's educational context, the reflective capacity provided deeper insights into the long-term implications of educational experiences on their well-being and QoL, offering valuable recommendations for enhancing inclusion policies in education.

Different generations of students captured varied school system experiences in response to societal changes. Since the first inclusion document appeared in 2012 (MEDE, 2012), Mare benefited for only a year, while Kay and Ari benefitted more. Additionally, significant socio-economic shifts, like same-sex marriage legalisation in 2014 and same-sex adoption in 2018, potentially fostered greater awareness of LGBT issues among students, promoting greater openness and understanding.

5.5 Suggestions for future research

Considering the above limitations, further research in this area could enhance generalisability. The findings of this study can inform the development of quantitative surveys aimed at reaching a broader audience. This approach would enable the Maltese educational system to gain deeper insights into the experiences of individuals with intersecting LD and LGBT identities. By doing so, educators and families can better understand and meet the needs of these students, thereby enriching their educational journey and overall well-being.

Furthermore, future studies should expand their focus to include individuals with LD who belong to other minority identities, as each intersection presents unique challenges and needs. This approach will deepen our understanding of these experiences, ultimately leading to improvements in educational and emotional support and enhancing overall QoL.

5.6 Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a voice to LGBT individuals with LDs and shed light on their secondary school experiences. It delves into the daily struggles faced during these formative years and examines the lasting effects carried into adulthood as a result of these experiences. This research underscores the crucial role of fostering strong relationships with every student, providing them with a platform to express their needs and be heard.

I am humbled and grateful for the contributions of the three individuals who had the courage to share their challenging narratives. Their trust and resilience have allowed their narratives to be shared, aiming to support other LGBT individuals with LDs. This study seeks to inspire policymakers, educators and all stakeholder's education to become allies who are sensitive to the needs of students, thereby enhancing their educational journey and long-term well-being.

This thesis has profoundly influenced my own reflections and understanding, reinforcing my commitment to amplifying the voices of underrepresented minorities, especially within educational settings. The following quotes from these participants vividly illustrate the profound impact that school experiences can have on a student's life.

Mare: "*For me, the most cherished memory was actually leaving in in Form 5.*"
Ari: *"I feel you … like you that I'm leaving, I was happy, a lot."*
Kay: *"I remember the prom of the form, literally the final last thing."*

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Questions for focus groups held on the 5th of May 2024

1. Could you recount your overall experience in secondary school?
    - including whether it was fulfilling,
    - whether you received a quality education,
    - your most cherished memory,
    - and the most significant challenges you faced.

2. Do you believe your secondary school experience provided you with sufficient fulfillment, and do you think the school environment supported you in achieving your maximum potential?

3. Did you ever experience a sense of belonging in secondary school, and did you believe that the educational system genuinely cared about your individual identity?

4. Did you ever sense that the combination of your sexual orientation and learning difficulties had a negative impact on your experience at school?

Appendix 2

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

Dear Sir/Madam/Mx,

My name is Roberta Cassar and I am a student at Malta Leadership Institute (MLI), presently reading for a Degree Top-up Bachelor in Education (Hons) (Facilitating and Adapting Education). I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled; 'A retrospective study on the secondary school experience of LGBT individuals diagnosed with a learning disability and the resultant quality of life'. This is being supervised by Mr Andrew Camilleri. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part. If anything is unclear, do not hesitate to contact me for it to be explained.

Purpose of Research

The aim of my study is to gain insight on the lived experience of being part of the LGBT community while having been diagnosed with a learning disability and the impact on the resultant quality of life. Your participation in this study would help to further expand the knowledge on inclusion in secondary school benefiting the students, their parents, educators and any workers who work with adolescents. This research could also provide further areas of research. The Maltese Educational system is constantly changing; therefore the narratives can promote the wellbeing of students who would be/will be going through similar experiences and/or have been through them. This experience can be valuable for students and their families who are still apprehensive of the process of inclusivity, through recommendations from the research that could enhance support, education and awareness. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Type of Research Intervention / Procedure

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to join a focus group of about 5 to 10 people. The focus group can take from 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be held in a confidential room on the date agreed upon by all participants, or through a secure online communication platform. The focus group will be video recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The raw copy will only be accessible to the

researcher. The focus group will contain questions to support your reflection on your story, which will provide you with the opportunity to focus and share what you deem to be appropriate. Once data is analysed, the results will be shared with you to verify what will be shared, and/or make any required changes.

Participant Selection

I have chosen you as a prospective participant as I feel that the lived experience of someone who now identifies as part of the LGBT community and was diagnosed with a learning disability, is vital to help the future generations and the current education system. This will support the awareness of the experience of this intersectionality while also working towards enhancing inclusivity of students who identify with these two minorities.

Voluntary Participation – Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is pseudonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in pseudonymised form.

Duration

This research will require you to participate in a 45 minute to 1 hour long focus group. You will also be invited to review the data and make any changes required to ensure that the information is true to your experience, before submission of the project.

Risks and Benefits

Your participation does not entail any foreseeable risks since the questions will be about your experience and what it means to you. Confidentiality will be ensured through the use of pseudonymised information and there will be time for debriefing at the end of the focus group.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you but will benefit future students, parents and workers who are in contact with LGBT students diagnosed with a learning disability.

Confidentiality

Data collected will be treated confidentially using a pseudonym (a made-up name chosen by yourself) and stored in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer. The encrypted data will be stored in a separate location from the pseudonymised research data. Only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to this information.

Please note also that as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU2016/679), and Data Protection ActChapter 586, to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased following publication of results, in September 2024.

Sharing the Results

You will be provided with a copy of the thesis through email, in order to make sure that I have stayed true to your story and that none of your personal data was breached, before the thesis is submitted. You will also be able to comment if you feel your personal data is recognisable and can be directed to you, before the thesis is submitted. This will be rectified.

Who to Contact

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns on the research or how the information will be processed, please do not hesitate to contact me by email_____; or my supervisor via email
_____

Part II: Declaration of Consent

○ I have been invited to participate in a research titled 'A retrospective study on the secondary school experience of LGBT individuals diagnosed with a learning disability and the resultant quality of life'

○ I confirm that I have read and understood the above information, or it has been read to me, and that I agree to participate in this study.

○ I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

○ I understand that I am free to contact the researcher or the researcher's supervisor to seek further clarification and information.

○ I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without consequence of any kind.

○ I understand that all data is anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided and the data.

○ I understand that there are no known risks or hazards associated with participating in this study.

○ I consent to being video-recorded for the purpose of the research.

○ I consent to my data being transcribed, and that the data from the transcriptions and pseudonymised research data will be kept in separate encrypted files on the researcher's password-protected computer. Only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to this information. All data collected will be erased following publication of results in September 2024.

○ I understand that my identity will remain anonymous in any form of dissemination, written or otherwise.

_____   _____
Name of the Researcher   Signature of the Researcher

_____   _____
Name of the Supervisor   Signature of the Supervisor

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

L-Ewwel Parti: Ittra ta' Tagħrif

Għażiż/a/Għeżież Sinjur/a/i,

Jiena Roberta Cassar, studenta mal- Malta Leadership Institute (MLI), u bħalissa qed insegwi Degree tal-Baċċellerat tal-Edukazzjoni (Hons) (L-iffaċilitar u Adattar tal-Edukazzjoni). Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: 'Studju retrospettiv fuq l-esperjenza skolastika sekondarja ta' individwi LGBT li ġew dijognossi b'diżabilta' fit-tagħlim u l-impatt fuq il-kwalita' tal-ħajja. Is-superviżur tiegħi hu s-Sur Andrew Camilleri. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka. Hawn taħt tista' issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involviment tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tieħu sehem. Jekk xi haga ma tkunx ċara, toqgħodx lura milli tikkuntattjani biex din tiġi spjegata.

L-għan tar-riċerka

        L-għan tar-ricerka hu biex jinkiseb għarfien dwar l-esperjenza ħajja ta' persuna li hi parti mill-komunita' LGBT kif ukoll dijanjoss b'dizabilita' edukattiva, u l-impatt fuq il-kwalita' tal-ħajja. Sehmek jgħin biex tikkontribwixxi f'iktar informazzjoni fuq l-inklussività fl-iskejjel secondarji li tibbenifika l-istudenti, l-ġenituri tagħhom, edukaturi u nies li jaħdmu maż-żgħażagħ. Dir-riċerka tistà anki tipprovdi aktar oqsma għar-riċerka. Is-Sistema Edukattiva Maltija kontinwament tinbidel, għaldaqstant dawn in-narrattivi jistgħu jippromwovu l-benesseri tal-istudenti li jistgħu jkunu għadejjin/ ser jgħaddu minn xi esperjenza simili u/jew għaddew minnha. Din l-esperjenza tista' tkun ta' valur għall-istudenti u l-familja tagħhom li għadhom xettiċi fuq il-proċess tal-inklussività, permezz ta' rakkomandazzjonijiet mir-riċerka li tistà ttejjeb l-appoġġ, l-edukazzjoni u l-għarfien. L-informazzjoni kollha li tinġabar fir-riċerka ser tintuża biss għal fini ta' dan l-istudju.

It-tip tà Intervent tar-Riċerka / Proċedura

        Jekk tagħżel li tipparteċipa, ser tintalab biex tingħaqad f'focus group tà bejn 5 u 10 minn nies. Il-focus group jistà jdum bejn 45 minuta u siegha u se jsiru f'kamra kunfidenzjali f'ġurnata li tiġi miftehema bejn il-parteċipanti kollha, jew minn pjattaforma tal-komunikazzjoni sikura onlajn. Il-focus group ser ikun miġbud b'kamera u traskritt mir-ricerkatur. Il-focus group mhux ipproċessat se jkun aċċessibbli biss għar-riċerkatriċi. Il-focus group se jkun fih mistoqsijiet biex tissapportja r-riflessjoni tiegħek fuq l-istorja tiegħek, li ser tagħtik l-opportunità li

tiffoka u taqsam dak li tqis xieraq. Ladarba d-dejta tiġi analizzata, ir-riżultati jiġu kondiviżi miegħek biex nivverifika x'se jkun kondiviż, u/jew isir kwalunkwe tibdil meħtieġ.

Is-selezzjoni tal-Parteċipant

Għażiltek bħala parteċipant prospettiv peress li nħoss li l-esperjenza ħajja ta' xi ħadd li issa jidentifika bħala parti mill-komunità LGBT u ġie wkoll iddijanjostikat b'diżabilità fit-tagħlim, hija vitali biex tgħin lill-ġenerazzjonijiet futuri u s-sistema edukattiva attwali. Dan jgħin biex insiru aktar konxji tas-sitwazzjoni ta' din l-intersezzjonalità filwaqt li ssir ħidma biex jittejjeb l-inklussività ta' studenti li jidentifikaw ma' dawn iż-żewġ minoranzi.

Parteċipazzjoni Volontarja - Dritt li Tirrifjuta jew Tirtira

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju se jkun għalkollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a/i li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tieħu sehem mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a/i li twaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħżel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ittieħdet fl-intervista miegħek titħassar diment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi pswedonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm it-tħassir tad-dejta ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tinżamm pswedonimizzata.

Tul ta' Żmien

Din ir-riċerka tirrikjedi li tipparteċipa f'focus group li jdum bejn 45 minuta sa siegħa. Int tkun mistieden ukoll tirrevedi d-dejta u tagħmel kwalunkwe tibdil meħtieġ biex tiżgura li l-informazzjoni hija vera għall-esperjenza tiegħek, qabel ma jiġi ssottomess l-proġett.

Riskji u Benefiċċji

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju prevedibbli peress li l-mistoqsijiet se jkunu dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek u xi tfisser għalik. Il-kunfidenzjalità se tkun żgurata permezz tal-użu ta' informazzjoni pswedonimizzata u se jkun hemm ħin għal debriefing fi tmiem il-grupp fokali.

Jekk tagħżel li tipparteċipa, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċji diretti għalik iżda se jibbenefikaw studenti, ġenituri u ħaddiema futuri li jkunu f'kuntatt ma' studenti LGBT dijanjostikati b'diżabilità fit-tagħlim.

Kunfidenzjalità

L-informazzjoni miġbura se jiġi ttrattat b'mod kunfidenzjali bl-użu ta' psewdonimu (isem fittizju magħżul minnek innifsek) u maħżun f'fajl kriptat fuq il-kompjuter protett bil-password tar-riċerkatriċi. Id-dejta kriptata tinħażen f'post separat mid-dejta ta' riċerka psewdonimizzata. Ir-riċerkatrici u s-superviżur akkademiku biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni.

Bħala parteċipant/a/i għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) (EU2016/679), u d-Data Protection Act Kapitlu 586, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak titħassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tinġabar fl-istudju se titħassar wara li joħorġu r-riżultati, f'Settembru tal-2024.

Qsim tar-Riżultati

Ser tiġi pprovdut/a/i b'kopja tat-teżi permezz ta' email, sabiex niżgura li bqajt leali għall-istorja tiegħek u li l-ebda dejta personali tiegħek ma ġiet maħruġa, qabel ma tiġi sottomessa t-teżi. Int tkun tista' tikkummenta wkoll jekk tħoss li d-dejta personali tiegħek hija rikonoxxibbli u tista' tiġi diretta lejk, qabel ma tiġi sottomessa t-teżi. Dan se jiġi rranġat.

Lil min Tikkuntatja

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija fuq ir-riċerka jew kif l-informazzjoni se tkun proċessata, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq l-emejl _____jew lis-superviżur tiegħi elettronikament fuq_____

It-Tieni Part: Dikjarazzjoni tal-Kunsens

⭘ Ġejt mistieden biex nipparteċipa f'riċerka bit-titlu 'Studju retrospettiv fuq l-esperjenza skolastika sekondarja ta' individwi LGBT li ġew dijognossi b'diżabilta' fit-tagħlim u l-impatt fuq il-kwalita'.

⭘ Nikkonferma li qrajt u fhimt l-informazzjoni ta' hawn fuq, jew inqratli, u li naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

⭘ Kelli l-opportunità li nagħmel mistoqsijiet dwar ir-riċerka, u kwalunkwe mistoqsija li staqsejt ġiet imwieġba għas-sodisfazzjon tiegħi.

⭘ Nifhem li jien liberu li nikkuntattja lir-riċerkatur jew lis-superviżur tar-riċerkatur biex infittex aktar kjarifika u informazzjoni.

⭘ Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju hija volontarja u li jien liberu li nirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe ħin, mingħajr ma nagħti raġuni u mingħajr konsegwenza ta' ebda tip.

⭘ Nifhem li d-dejta kollha hija anonima u li ma jkun hemm ebda konnessjoni bejn l-informazzjoni personali pprovduta u d-dejta.

⭘ Nifhem li m'hemm l-ebda riskju jew perikli magħrufa assoċjati mal-parteċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju.

⭘ Jien naqbel li nkun video-rekordjat għall-iskop tar-riċerka.

⭘ Jien naqbel li d-dejta tiegħi tiġi traskritta, u li d-dejta mit-traskrizzjonijiet u d-dejta ta' riċerka psewdonimizzata tinżamm f'fajls kodifikati separati fuq il-kompjuter protett bil-password tar-riċerkatur. Ir-riċerkatur u s-superviżur akkademiku biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Id-dejta kollha miġbura se titħassar wara l-pubblikazzjoni tar-riżultati f'Settembru 2024.

⭘ Nifhem li l-identità tiegħi tibqa' anonima fi kwalunkwe forma ta' tixrid, bil-miktub jew mod ieħor.

_____   _____
Isem tal-Riċerkatriċi   Firma tar-Riċerkatriċi

_____   _____
Isem tas-Superviżur   Firma tas-Superviżur

_____   _____   _____
Isem tal-Parteċipant   Firma tal-Parteċipant   Data

Appendix 3

ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER BY THE MLI DISSERTATION AND ETHICS BOARD

I.   Proposed Title of Dissertation: A retrospective study into the secondary school experience of LGBT community diagnosed with a learning disability and its impact on their subsequent well-being by Roberta Cassar
II. Considered by Dissertation & Ethics Committee on: 12th January 2024
III. Requires Ethical Approval by External Board of Ethics (e.g., from MEYR)?
IV. Decision Reached by the MLI Dissertation & Ethics Board:

No

UNCONDITIONAL APPROVAL

MLI Ethics:

Privacy and Confidentiality:
- Implement robust privacy and confidentiality measures to protect participant identities and personal information during data collection, storage, and dissemination.
- Specify how long data will be retained and when it will be securely destroyed.

Data Security:
- Detail the specific security measures to safeguard research data, including encryption, access control, and backup procedures.
- Ensure that data is accessible only to authorised personnel, such as the researcher and academic supervisor.

Debriefing:
- Establish a debriefing process to allow participants to ask questions or seek clarification after their involvement in the study.
- Include contact information for the researcher and supervisor if participants have further inquiries.

Handling of Sensitive Information:
- Develop protocols for handling sensitive information related to participants' sexual orientation and learning disabilities with sensitivity and confidentiality.

Potential Harms:
- Develop strategies to mitigate and address potential harms, such as offering support or referrals to counselling services.

Documentation:
- Keep detailed records of participant interactions, including any questions or concerns raised.

Wishing you well in your dissertation journey.
           Signature and Stamp:

Appendix 4

<u>Full quote from page 25</u>

Kay

Yeah like me, ħa neqleb naqra bil-Malti. Jien ma kintix hekk l-esperjenza tiegħi għax jien ġejt diagnosed with ADHD meta kelli 20 so jien għamilt mill-primarja sas-sekondarja dejjem imqareb, għandi xi ħaġa żejda, like għandi xi ħaġa li ma għandiex x'taqsam mal-ADHD. Lanqas biss kellhom knowledge li jista' forsi għandi ADHD u dejjem detention, afterschool, għax imqareb, minjaf x'inhu għaddej id-dar. Dejjem iwaħħlu f'dawk l-affarijiet mhux l-affarijiet li actually għax hemm l-ADHD. Imbgħad meta kont tlajt sekondarja u għamilt il-griżma, bqajt immur il-muzew and I wanted to suppress it so much kemm li jien queer u kemm il- il-kemm jien imqareb. Eżempju jekk kont noħroġ bir-rota, ma bqajtx noħroġ bir-rota, waqaft nilbes b'ċertu mod, waqaft, ma ridtx naċċeta bl-ebda mod. **U meta tlajt l-aħħar tliet snin tas-sekondarja, spiċċajt niġġieled fil-break, inkaxxar lin-nies. Xejn ġlied il-ħin kollu. Darba garajt mejda. Le, kont imqareb. Imma għalhekk kienu jwaħħluha, 'ee għax dak għaddej minn problemi ta' figuring out li dak huwa trans', u jien, 'le ma naħsibx li dik il-problema cos I got that'. Imma dejjem kienu jwaddbuha on my queerness**.

Mare

So your your your challenging behaviour was because of your sexual orientation.

<u>Context on quote from page 27</u>

Kay

U l-cost li ha jġiblek meta tkun queer. You know li għax **il-queer community tabbuża ħafna fuq alcohol u anka tmur party, ħa tara popper, ħa tara coke, ħa tara kollox**.

Ari

We do yes, base really on drugs

Kay

Li xi drabi naħseb issiba aktar komuni the acceptance of doing drugs. Issa ovjament jien veru bias fuq id-droga li narha aktar accepting d-droga f'parties queer milli in heteronormative parties

Ari

Yes

Kay

Għax it's common, it's ok, it's gonna be fun, we're experimenting

Researcher

If you had to think of your most cherished memory in secondary school...

Mare

For me, the most cherished memory was actually leaving in in Form 5, and it was so stressful working towards the O' levels. But still that was the most cherished moment, because finally I could take a step away. It was a huge, huge relief and I I didn't realise it at the time that I was feeling relieved. I thought I was feeling relieved to do my O'levels and get them over and done with, but actually I was feeling relieved to get rid of the school and I didn't particularly find that school as an awful experience, but still I was relieved. That was the most cherished experience. And being with my my classmates specifically and working towards concluding things, concluding projects, schools, past papers making plans or life beyond that school.

Ari

I feel you. Jiena kelli tnejn bħal **bħalek li ħa nitlaq, I was happy, a lot**. U li darba fil-Form 2 kienu tawni l-opportunità biex nieħu sehem fit-talent show, kienu tawni part fl-ikbar play li qatt għamlu l-iskola, I was one of the main actors għax raw li they can expose what I really like to do dressing up, doing the makeup, acting, dancing, singing and some, that is something. Which I cherish ehe għax they managed. From all that shit I went through, they still managed to kind of give me something nice. But the rest? …

Kay

I remember the prom of the form, literally the final last thing.

Appendix 5

Week	EDS 5028 Social contexts and inclusive conditions of teaching and learning in **SECONDARY** schools
Venue: LT1	**Mondays 11:00-13:00**
1. 09.10.2023 11:00-12:00 12:00-13:00	Education systems (LC) Families and education (MR)
2. 16.10.2023	Instructional systems (LC) Additional support (LC)
3. 23.10.2023	Gender equity in school (LC)

4. 30.10.2023	Poverty and social disadvantage (MR) Educational equality and inequality (MR)
5. 06.11.2023	Educational equality and inequality (MR) Social class and inequality (MR)
6. 13.11.2023	Racism and cultural racism and Islamophobia (LC)
7. 20.11.2023	LGBTQi Equality (LC)
8. 27.11.2023	Curriculum and powerful knowledge (LC)
9. 04.12.2023	Principles of Inclusion (CC)
10. 11.12.2023	

10. 11.12.2023	Challenges to Inclusion (CC)
11. 18.12.2023	Creating Inclusive Environment in Secondary schools (CC)
25.12.2023	CHRISTMAS RECESS
01.01.2024	
12. 08.01.2024	The multilingual Secondary classroom (PVG)
13. 15.01.2024	Intercultural Education and the Secondary classroom (FM)
22.01.2024	EXAM PERIOD
29.01.2024	
	SEMESTER 2
05.02.2024	

	SEMESTER 2
05.02.2024	NO LECTURES – WEEK PRIOR TEACHING PRACTICE
Weeks 2-6 12.02.2024 – 18.02.2024	TEACHING PRACTICE
25.03.2024	EASTER RECESS
01.04.2024	
14. 08.04.2024	Planning for the diverse classroom: the inclusive learning approach I (CC)
15. 15.04.2024	Planning for the diverse classroom: the inclusive learning approach II (CC)
TBA	The multilingual Secondary classroom (PVG) x 1hr