

Being LGBTQ+ in an Irish Secondary School: A Thematic Analysis of the Lived Experience
and the Supports Required

Kealyn Dunne

18130232

Supervisor: Dr. Amanda Kracen

BA (Honours) Psychology

National College of Ireland

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Name: Kealyn Dunne

Student Number: 18130232

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Impact on LGBTQ+ Community	3
Recent studies	4
Rationale for study	6
Methodology	7
Design	7
Researcher’s position	7
Participants	7
Materials	8
Procedures	9
Data analysis	10
Ethical considerations	10
Results	12
Feelings of Shame	12
Bullying and Isolation	16
Mental health difficulties	18
Discussion	20
Strengths and Limitations	22
Conclusion	23
References	24
Appendices	31

Abstract

The LGBTQ+ community have been under-represented in Irish studies. The researcher addressed this by conducting a qualitative study with members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. The aim of this study was to conduct semi-structured interviews consisting of open ended questions, to gather a more personalised view of the lived experience of this community. In total, seven members of the LGBTQ+ community were interviewed, with ages ranging from 20-64 years ($M = 32$, $SD = 14.49$). All participants identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, and went to an Irish secondary school. All interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams. A thematic analysis was carried out on the data to extract a number of themes. The three themes identified were; feelings of shame, bullying and isolation, and mental health difficulties. The findings in this study complement previous research in this area. The lack of education and support on LGBTQ+ issues in Irish secondary schools have significant implications on queer people as they navigate their sexuality and can negatively impact their lives. The researcher then discusses the findings and makes suggestions on future studies.

Being LGBTQ+ in an Irish Secondary School: A Thematic Analysis of the Lived Experience and the Supports Required

For this study, it is important to give a brief history of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. The community has a storied history in Ireland. Homosexuality was deemed a criminal offence until its decriminalisation in 1993 (Department of Justice, 2018). Senator David Norris became the first openly gay member of Seanad Éireann (the Irish Senate) and fought for this decriminalisation for years (McKittrick, 1988). He was involved in the very first, much smaller scale protest in 1974, consisting of only 10 people (Connolly, 2022). It took a long time to gain traction as there was a fear among people to come out and show support for this criminal activity at the time. For many, this meant hiding or repressing their sexual identity. Those who lived more openly were subject to enormous scrutiny, and in some cases, faced verbal and physical assault from the Irish community. An extreme example of this was the murder of Declan Flynn, a gay man who was attacked and killed in Fairview Park in 1982. The culprits faced little to no repercussions, with the judge handing down lenient sentences to the four men and one teenager involved (Carswell, 2018).

As shocking as this murder was, it was this aftermath which urged the LGBTQ+ community to come together in what was seen as the first official pride march in Ireland. Approximately 900 people marched from Liberty Hall to Fairview Park both in honour of Declan Flynn, and to protest the appalling treatment of the LGBTQ+ community (Connolly, 2022). Fortunately, Ireland has become a marginally more tolerant country over the years. An example of this would be the same-sex marriage referendum in 2015, in which Ireland became the first country to pass legislation by popular vote (Ó Caollaí & Hilliard, 2015). Furthermore, the annual Dublin pride parade has grown immensely in popularity, becoming one of the biggest festivals in Ireland (Dublin LGBTQ Pride, 2022). Over recent years, pride parades have been occurring in other counties throughout Ireland also. Now seen as a

celebration of the LGBTQ+ community, it is important to acknowledge the historical and political context of the initial parade.

Impact on LGBTQ+ Community

The increased visibility of pride has led to deeper discussions around LGBTQ+ issues, particularly in schools. Multiple news reports highlight the importance of implementing education surrounding the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland (Dillon, 2019; Pizmony-Levy, 2022; Ryan, 2018). This delay in sufficient education around these issues has led to a lack of knowledge around practicing safe sex, as well as discussions around gender identity. Unfortunately, the sex education provided in Ireland's schools has been subpar since its introduction in the 1990s (O'Beirne, 2020). This is not an issue specific to the LGBTQ+ community, as historically, the catholic church had a massive sway over a lot of Ireland's policies and in particular, the school curriculum (Griffin, 2019). As the country moves away from the influence of the catholic church, the implicit attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues are still prevalent and harmful. According to multiple studies, this has led to a negative impact specifically among the LGBTQ+ community (Higgins et al., 2016; Kerrigan, 2022; Reygan & Moane, 2014). Higgins et al. (2016) is a good example of a study with a wide and diverse sample of participants. Using a quantitative method, the study collated information from 2264 members of the LGBTQ+ community. The My World Survey (Dooley et al., 2019) is a detailed, comprehensive example of a study which investigates the mental health of young people in Ireland. In relation to this study, they found that only 32% of the LGBTQ+ community felt comfortable in their sexuality. To compare, 78% of people who identified as heterosexual felt very comfortable with their sexuality.

Throughout the world, there are many examples of homophobic and transphobic attacks occurring on a daily basis (Galvan, 2020; Igual, 2018; Wareham, 2022). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reported "in some

countries, 85 per cent of LGBT students experience homophobic and transphobic violence at school” (2016). This discrimination is particularly outlined in a report by Humpries-Waa and Sass (2015) which focuses on school bullying in the Asia-Pacific region of the world. This cohesive report discusses young people who have been victimised for their actual or perceived sexual orientation. The major emerging theme suggests a need for better education surrounding sexual orientation and gender identities. Moreover, America has been a very prominent area for anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric recently, in particular when it come to trans healthcare, as outlined in a study by Xavier et al. (2013). This qualitative study had a small number of participants, but the findings from the interviews suggest the implementation of programmes with a specific focus on trans issues could be hugely beneficial.

Closer to home, in Northern Ireland, where religion is a strongly contested topic, and sectarian violence was extremely prevalent in its history, a study was carried out between 2000 and 2006 interviewing gay and bisexual men in Northern Ireland. This detailed their coming out process in an area of Ireland marred by trauma and turmoil (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). The interviews were conducted during two larger mixed-methods project. The combination of qualitative and quantitative can be sometimes quite time consuming and labour intensive, especially for a sample of 20 participants. Another study in Northern Ireland found that people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Travers et al., 2020). The LGBTQ+ community are underrepresented in this study, only making up 11% of the overall sample.

Recent studies

Even over recent years in the Republic of Ireland, there have been numerous attacks on various members of the LGBTQ+ community (Fanucci, 2023; Fanucci, 2023; Linehan, 2022). A simple Google search lists the many homophobic attacks happening throughout

Ireland on a regular basis. Regardless of the country's progression, these old-fashioned attitudes still exist and puts the lives of the LGBTQ+ community at risk. Cumulatively, these numerous factors would suggest members of the community tend to find it difficult to come out. A study carried out in 2019 investigated happiness among the LGBTQ+ community, which was the largest study at the time within the community addressing mental health. (de Vries et al., 2019). The results suggest people who identify as LGBTQ+ are on average less happy than the general Irish population. Interestingly, people who identified as bisexual, transgender, or intersex reported significantly lower levels of happiness in comparison to the gay men or lesbian women who participated. This would support similar studies regarding erasure of bisexuality (Yoshino, 2017), transgender people (Hoffkling et al., 2017), and intersexuality (Morrison et al., 2021). These studies suggest this erasure introduces further barriers for people who perhaps do not identify as gay or lesbian. The misunderstanding of certain terminology emphasises the importance of increasing educational supports in this area.

An important quantitative study, carried out among the LGBTQ+ community investigated the availability of mental health services in Ireland. Higgins et al. (2020) reported the experience of 1,064 participants and highlighted the benefit of cultural competency training to break down these barriers for the community. Ceatha et al. (2019) highlighted the benefits of various social supports available for the LGBTQ+ community as a protective factor for their mental health. A lack of sufficient education also affects the older LGBTQ+ population, according to a study by Sharek et al. (2014), in which they discovered two out of three participants found healthcare professionals to not have sufficient knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues. Another point of note from this study is the participants' concerns about elderly care homes being built around a heteronormative standard. This standard is further discussed in a study investigating the heteronormative environment created and sustained in

Irish schools, and its links to homophobic or transphobic bullying (Bryan, 2019). The findings from this study also compliments other research in this area. Bryan (2019) demonstrates the necessity of reassessing practices used within an Irish school setting in order to reduce bullying and other risk factors associated within the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland.

Rationale for Current Study

Previous literature alludes to the various gaps in Irish research around the lived experience of the LGBTQ+ community, and more specifically, the supports required to assist these individuals as they navigate secondary school. The My World Survey 2 (Dooley et al., 2019) outlines how this particular subject is ever changing and research should be continuing and progressing. The research mentioned highlights the importance of early education and support on LGBTQ+ issues. A realist approach will be utilised in this study to record the experience of the participants. The entire dataset will be examined to distinguish the most important themes, and an inductive analysis will help better understand and analyse the emerging themes in the data. These themes will be identified on a semantic level, allowing the researcher to describe and interpret these themes in relation to the existing literature. This study intends to compliment the previous literature in its findings and shed light on this topic. It is hoped the findings from all of these studies will put pressure on Irish secondary schools to implement sufficient protective factors and supports for the community.

Methodology

Design

For this study a qualitative methodology was used. A qualitative design is more beneficial in this circumstance as the data represents the lived experience of a community which have been under-represented in research studies (Frost & Ouellette, 2011; Levitt et al., 2018). This was a semi-structured interview to investigate the perceived and lived experience of support systems in Irish secondary schools for people of the LGBTQ+ community as they navigated coming to terms with their sexuality. The interview questions were more generalised, to avoid using leading questions (see Appendix D).

Researcher's Position

The LGBTQ+ community in Ireland have not been well represented in Irish research. Therefore, as a member of this community, I feel it necessary to add to this research. I am a white, cisgender gay man from Ireland. I approached this study with as much objectivity as possible. It was anticipated that the interviews would provide additional information around the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community while in a secondary school setting. By using open-ended questions, I allowed the participants to tell me their own personal, individualised stories. Based on the literature and personal experience, the study was conducted under the assumption that more supports would be required for people struggling with their sexuality.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used for this study. This is a form of nonprobability sampling where the researcher recruits participants who fit certain criteria. This method is affordable, easy, and the participants are readily available (Etikan, 2016). I approached friend groups to recruit participants. If there was interest, I would provide them with an information sheet outlining what the study consisted of. Inclusion criteria for this study included anybody over the age of 18 who identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and also went to

an Irish secondary school. Other LGBTQ+ members who did not attend an Irish secondary school or heterosexual participants were excluded as they did not meet the criteria.

There have been few studies outlining the sample size for qualitative studies. One paper analysed what literature was available and suggested that, when deciding on a sample size, it is “contextual and partially dependent upon the scientific paradigm under which investigation is taking place” (Boddy, 2016). Boddy (2016) also defined qualitative research as “developing a depth of understanding rather than a breadth”, inferring that it is the quality of the interviews as opposed to the quantity. Therefore, seven interviews were conducted, including one pilot study, at which point data saturation was reached, “or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (Guest et al., 2006).

For this study, I initially had 12 participants interested. Unfortunately, due to other commitments and conflicting schedules, only seven participants completed the interview, one of which was a pilot study. Six of the participants were recruited via Whatsapp, and the seventh was via a friend of a friend, who was sent the information sheet and reached out via email showing interest in participating. The age of the participants ranged from 20-64 ($M=32$, $SD=14.49$). All participants were Irish and identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. Five of the participants identified as men and two identified as women. Four participants identified as gay, two identified as lesbian, and one identified as bisexual. Four participants went to a catholic secondary school, two attended an inter or multi-denominational school. One participant attended a multi-denominational school with a Christian ethos. One participant identified as atheist, two identified as catholic and four identified as agnostic.

Materials

My personal laptop was used to conduct all interviews via Microsoft Teams. I availed of the transcription service built into the Microsoft Teams app. The transcription service had

difficulty with the Irish accent, therefore I read through the transcripts proceeding each interview to ensure it was fully accurate. The interview questions were structured in a way which allowed the participant to give their personal experience in an Irish secondary school while navigating their sexuality, which included whether any supports were utilised or if they confided in any members of staff. Before the interviews commenced, as well as signing a consent form, the participant completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E). A pilot study was initially carried out with one of the seven participants. Due to a methodological error in recording, the data cannot be used, but this pilot study allowed me to practice my interview questions and assess if any adjustments were necessary before interviewing future participants.

Procedures

I used Whatsapp messenger to ascertain if any acquaintances would like to take part and if so, to reach out. The information sheet (see Appendix A) was then provided to give context to the study. A consent form (see Appendix B) was emailed to the participant, which required their official signature. Once complete, a time and date were set for the interview to take place. All interviews were conducted remotely.

Before commencing the interview, I ensured that the participant read the information sheet clearly and obtained verbal consent to add to the consent form. I reminded them that breaks could be taken at any time and they had the right to withdraw at any point during the interview. This interview was semi-structured, with the questions being used as a guide by the researcher and could allow for elaboration if needed. Microsoft Teams was utilised to record and transcribe each interview. The interviews ranged from 9-45 minutes ($M=22$). The difference in time length was a result of participants having more or less to say on their personal experience.

Once the interview was complete, I thanked the participant for their time and informed them that they would receive a debriefing sheet immediately after, outlining what the study was hoping to achieve. This debriefing sheet also provided helplines if the participant felt like they were in any way affected by the topic of discussion. Once the transcription was anonymised and deidentified, a copy was emailed to the participant. This allowed them time to make any redactions or changes to their own interview transcript.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) was used to analyse the raw data in order to find relevant themes emerging from the interview. Thematic analysis was used as it gives a much more personalised overview of the topic. As this study discusses support systems, it is important to have a more individualised experience. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the transcripts to gain an overview of the findings. This involved reading through the transcripts and cross checking them with the interview recording, ensuring every word was accounted for. The next stage involved providing a brief summary of the interviews and highlighting any important and relevant information. From this I generated themes from the summary along with various sub-themes. Finally, I grouped the various themes together to have them more generalised for the discussion and overall subject matter, which will be the LGBTQ+ experience in Irish secondary schools.

Ethical Considerations

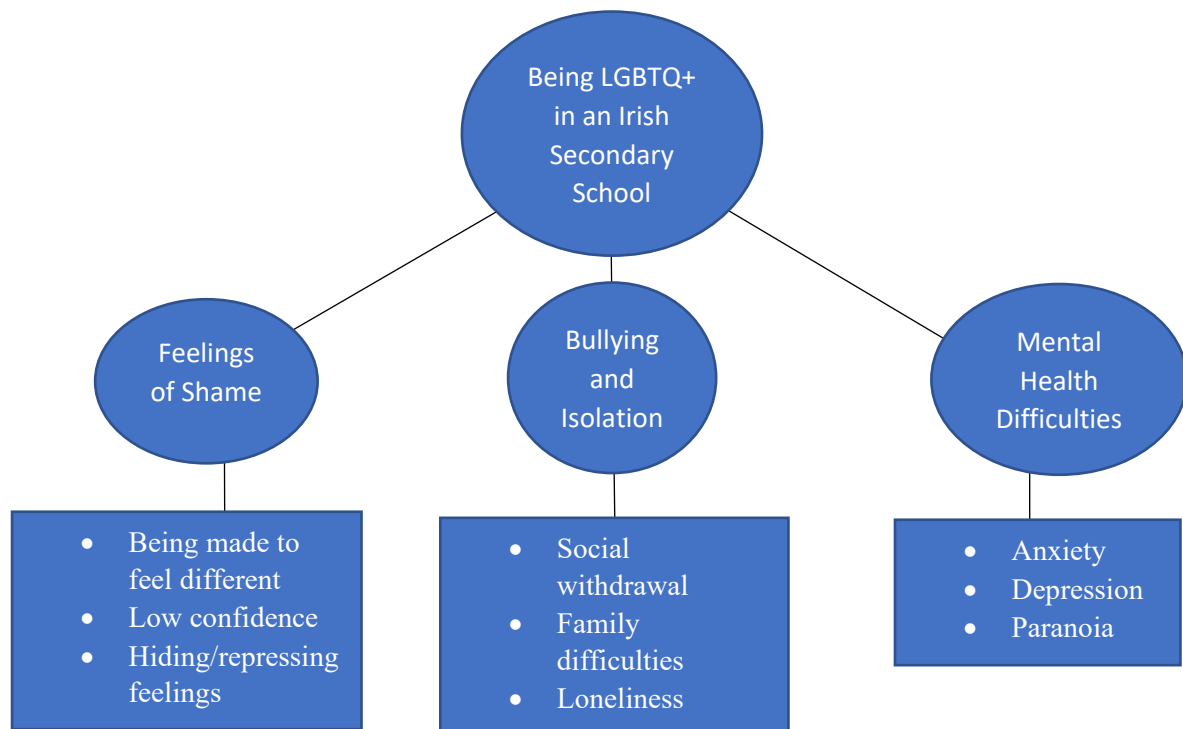
The current study followed the Psychological Society of Ireland's code of ethics, as well as the National College of Ireland's ethics guidelines. The research was approved by the ethics committee in the National College of Ireland. This study aimed to investigate a potentially impactful part of life for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, as it could potentially be a sensitive area of discussion, there was a minor risk of distress. This was outlined in the information sheet, consent form and was mentioned before the interview

commenced. Each consent form was signed by the participants and securely stored in NCI, where they will be kept for five years, before being destroyed. Furthermore, there were a list of helplines provided on the debriefing sheet at the end of the interview, and my details were provided should they have any further questions or queries. The participant was notified of their right to withdraw at any time up until the data was completely anonymised and de-identified. All recorded information was stored and encrypted securely in accordance with GDPR guidelines and once the information was de-identified, the audio and video file were permanently deleted.

Results

Figure 1

Themes and Associated Subthemes



After using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) model, there were three dominant themes identified in the analysis. There were also a variety of subthemes which have been grouped together under each theme. Figure 1 outlines the themes and relevant subthemes taken from this study, which are feelings of shame, bullying and isolation, and mental health difficulties.

Feelings of Shame

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the data was underlying feelings of shame surrounding their sexuality. Seeing peoples’ attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, whether directly or indirectly, had a profound effect on one of the participants who stated that “Growing up with, with seeing other people and being, being kind of bullied or, or kind of harassed for their sexuality that you kind of take that in, and you internalise

that.” (P2). The same participant, when asked about being accepted in school mentioned that “Maybe the atmosphere or the culture, whether that’s in the school or in society as a whole. I’m not sure, but it wasn’t as accepting.” One participant said “People from where I’m from, the way that they spoke about gay people just like kind of de-humanized them. And I didn’t want to be viewed in that way, I don’t want to be seen as lesser.” (P6). As a result of this environment and these feelings of shame, another participant felt their coming out was delayed in comparison to students coming out now.

Nowadays, because there is a little bit more because maybe schools are a bit more cognizant of what goes on that. I kind of feel like my coming out was maybe if I had been born five years later. I kind of feel like my coming out was put on hold, if that makes sense because of because of my experiences. (P2)

Similarly, another participant mentioned the delay in coming to terms with their sexuality and the heteronormative narrative every child is subjected to.

This is what you’re meant to do, this is what you’re going to grow up and have babies and have get in a relationship with a guy... It definitely took me a lot longer to come to terms with it, because I felt like the rhetoric that been pushed on me was like, it’s wrong and it’s not what you’re supposed to do. (P5).

This is also echoed by another participant who tried their best to repress these feelings, and coming out was not an option in their secondary school. “I tried to kind of push that down a bit because the last thing I wanted really in my life was to be a lesbian” (P3). This participant was hyper aware of standing out or being thought of as different, due to other teenagers and their lack of understanding of sexuality and gender. “I think I kind of felt like ohh, the girls would think there’s something wrong with me or I’m a weirdo, or I’m a creep.” (P3). This feeling was shared by another participant. “When you’re in secondary school, you just you do

everything you can to fit in and anything you do different to what's going on around you just kind of singles you out.” (P5).

When asked about any changes in their friend groups, one participant said “I was friends with so many of the people who I now know have come out and none of us came out to each other. Like none of us confided in each other.” (P3), suggesting these feelings of shame meant they felt they couldn’t come out to their own friends. This participant also discussed referring to things as “gay”, which is a common word used by teenagers in school.

Calling things gay like as a negative thing like homework's gay. Your pencil case is gay. Stuff like that. It can be harmless, but it can also just be like this thing that's a part of who you are has just become like this blasé curse word. (P3)

As mentioned by P3, this may seem harmless, but when something so personal to you is used in a negative context, this could potentially add to these feelings of shame. Furthermore, another participant discussed coming out to their family. “My family don't know, still, because they're a bit iffy around the whole topic.” (P4), and they also finish with “I didn't tell the people who I thought would hurt me in any way”. This was interesting as, when discussing support systems in school, this participant connected with certain teachers. “Three teachers that I got on with really well. Like we just chill and have conversations. Em over lunch time as well. And that was really helpful.” The positive experience of having accepting teachers would be reassuring. “If adults get it, I know I'll be fine later in life” (P4). Although this is a positive, it is the underlying feelings of shame which adds to the difficulty of coming out to family members “What could have happened if everyone was OK with it? If it was like more normal?” (P4).

Similarly, another participant discussed being unable to come out to their parents “They weren’t going to be happy if you know, if their children were queer” (P5). As a result, they could not be honest with their parents, which led to some risk-taking behaviours.

I did develop a relationship with a girl that I like completely hid that from my parents and travelled to a different country and did not tell my parents because I felt like I couldn't be honest with them (P5)

This participant mentioned simple changes to the school setting in order to benefit LGBTQ+ members, which would help address feelings of shame “If you had one person, or a simple poster on the wall or something that could say it's OK, you're not wrong, and there's nothing wrong with who you are but yeah that definitely would've helped”. Fortunately, the participant persevered, but discussed the importance of support in a school setting. “I'm very lucky that I was able to come out of the other side and get through without that support and but I know there's a lot of people that haven't.”. In another example of a participant having feelings of shame, they discuss the stereotypes of gay people that are constantly shown in the media and the resulting effects on the LGBTQ+ community.

It just really feeds into that stereotype you're fed of, like it's so tragic to be gay. You're gonna be so lonely... But trying to get out of that kind of headspace when you're trying to come to terms what it is you know, easier said than done. (P6)

This feeling is also shared by another participant who discusses the heteronormative mindset.

Well you have to shift the way you expected your life to turn out, because you're raised in a heteronormative mindset and expected to get married, have kids, have a career. You know, have grandkids, retire, etcetera. So, you know you have to kind of be like, well, that's not gonna work out for me because I don't have those feelings that everybody else has. (P1)

Bullying and Isolation

Another theme very prevalent in this research is that of bullying and isolation. Multiple participants brought up these feelings throughout their interviews. This can come in many forms.

I didn't really confide in any adults about the coming out process because anytime I had ever gotten to them about being bullied or what was being said to me while I was being bullied, it was always dismissed, or if I ever stood up for myself I'd get in trouble. So I didn't trust anybody. (P1)

This participant also detailed supports he used to get through school. This is also an example of somebody isolating themselves.

I mean, there weren't really any supports that I could rely on apart from, you know, my own. My own ways of dealing with things, which was music, and I would spend a lot of time in the music class. You know, sometimes I'd stay in there over break and just practise music with like one person who I may have connected with. (P1)

Another participant outlined their feelings of isolation within their own friend group "I was very insular and I felt quite isolated in terms of my friend groups" (P2). This participant mentioned how important having their family on side was, and how isolating they imagined it would be for others who have a more unaccepting family "I can only imagine what it would be like to go through- If I had went through some of the stuff that I went through without the support of family" (P2). Some participants withdrew from family and friends. "Um so I definitely think there were barriers over time that I did put up with family and my community and even close friends" (P3) which increased their feelings of isolation. This participant also elaborates on what may have helped them in this situation "If I could have felt like I could have talked to an adult, that could have potentially really helped" (P3).

For one participant, hiding their identity or not making many friends really added to their feelings of isolation. “You're either trying to hide it or just not being friends with many people” (P4). The realisation of their sexuality also caused one participant to isolate themselves and no longer be their authentic selves. “I think it just really caused me to like go repress into myself and get very, very quiet and not speak my mind as much and just not want to be seen or acknowledged” (P6). As a result of this, the participant had this to say in regard to relationships “I feel like in terms of relationships with my straight friends and stuff, I'm like 10 years behind”. This calls back to members of the LGBTQ+ community not experiencing certain milestones due to isolation or bullying.

Similarly, another participant engaged in risk taking behaviour while navigating relationships as a teenager, which pulled him away from his family “I didn't feel love at home, so I was looking elsewhere and I got caught and essentially forced out of the closet in that way.” (P1). Isolation as a result of bullying is something shared by most of the participants. This was outlined by one of the participants.

I felt that I didn't have the space, maybe to actually think about my own sexuality, of my own identity, em I went through a bit of bullying at the end of primary school and that was centred around my being perceived as gay (P2)

One participant describes their journey navigating their sexuality as “a really slow process with probably a lot of denial in it” (P3). The fear of being othered or discriminated against was a prominent reason for participants retreating into themselves “I couldn't imagine coming out to my friends in school and I didn't want to be bullied. I didn't want to be treated differently” (P3).

Moreover, one participant mentions how there was no discussion in their school around gender or sexuality, which would be very isolating for somebody already struggling with their identity.

Feeling the pressure to conform to what you think you should have done by this age and what you think you should be doing based on your gender and your sexuality... It was so taboo like nobody talked about it. The teachers didn't talk about it. Nobody talked about it (P3)

This extends to another participant who had no idea of any supports in their school, if there was any “It never occurred to me that I could ask for help in in terms of exploring my identity” (P5). As a result of this, some participants felt that certain social events were too much because they were not being themselves, which would be another example of somebody withdrawing themselves from milestones most teenagers engage in. “I think I used to find them social events much more exhausting because I was just trying to not think about it or just being a version of myself that wasn't true.” (P6).

Mental health difficulties

The final theme discovered from examining the data is that of mental health difficulties among the LGBTQ+ community. One participant mentioned how having a supportive family helped him immensely, but recognises that is not always the case “So someone without maybe a supportive family and not in a supportive school. It's no wonder that mental health issues are, so, I think prominent amongst the community” (P2). One participant detailed their experience in school and their mental health journey “It did add anxiety and I think having that extra layer of anxiety in secondary school um impacted me negatively” (P3). This anxiety was felt by another participant “You spend a lot of time trying

to deny you are, who you are... If everyone around you is telling you that it's wrong and then you're gonna start to tell yourself that it's wrong" (P5).

A huge amount of worry was expressed by one participant who outlined their experience in dealing with school and friendship groups.

If in secondary school, you've anything that makes you stand out as different. That will be always the thing they'll bring you down on... What I worried about would happen would be that they would start treating me differently or not be as close with me (P3)

One participant outlined his solution to LGBTQ+ students being anxious or withdrawn and how this would have helped them while they were growing up. They run a club in their school.

You can come in and eat your lunch and have a chat with other people. Em it's not do you know that anyone has to discuss their sexual orientation, right? Anything like that, and I think something like that would have helped a lot (P2)

When asked about any supports that may have helped them, one participant discussed teachers having education on LGBTQ+ issues.

There's definitely a lot of things that I would recommend such as, I mean counselling. First of all, like we didn't have a counsellor of any sort. Having somebody you can just go to who's not exactly a teacher per se, but just someone you can speak to who, you know, is maybe closer to your age, or maybe has some education in more difficult topics like LGBT issues, trans issues, em, you know, mental health. (P1)

Discussion

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the LGBTQ+ community's lived experience in an Irish secondary school setting and their experience of support. It was anticipated that the interviews would indicate the need for increased support systems to be put in place for this community. Using a thematic analysis of the data, three dominant themes emerged; feelings of shame, bullying and isolation, and mental health difficulties. The current study adds to the existing literature surrounding this topic.

In relation to feelings of shame, this incorporated a broad range of subthemes. Participants discussed repressing certain feelings and not disclosing their sexuality to anybody. This would be consistent with findings previously mentioned from the My World Survey 2 (Dooley et al., 2019), which discovered only 32% of queer people in Ireland are comfortable in their sexuality. A study conducted by Greene et al. (2014) outlines the importance of addressing these feelings while counselling members of the LGBTQ+ community. Greene et al. (2013) carried out another study among the community investigating the importance of self-forgiveness to reduce the shame prevalent among the LGBTQ+ community. These feelings of shame was also a theme discussed in a study investigating school based sexuality education (Naser et al., 2020). The results of this study emphasises the importance of inclusivity in education. Another study by Mereish and Poteat (2015) found shame was a mediator between various stressors, such as discrimination and internalised homophobia. All of these studies, including the current study, reveals that shame is such a prominent feeling among the LGBTQ+ community and this needs to be addressed by education, support and recognition in the secondary school system.

The second theme uncovered from the interviews was that of bullying and isolation. This was consistent with previous research also. One study investigating social isolation emphasises the importance of addressing LGBTQ+ issues and provide a healthier

environment for them to grow and discover their identity (Garcia et al., 2019). The study by Humpries-Waa and Sass (2015) also correlates with the theme of bullying and isolation in the current study. Yang et al. (2017) investigated isolation among the older members of the LGBTQ+ community. The findings are still relevant to the current study, as the older people in the LGBTQ+ community are significantly more likely to live alone. It would be interesting for a future study to compare perceived isolation between queer teenagers and the older queer community. The findings of the current study can also translate over to a working environment. This was discussed in a study by McFadden and Crowley-Henry (2017) which found the LGBTQ+ community can experience isolation in the workplace, and the importance of inclusivity in a work setting. The LGBTQ+ community have experienced a huge amount of discrimination and erasure over the years. This has led generations to become isolated or more reserved, unable to be their true selves.

The third and final theme discovered in the data was that of mental health difficulties. Multiple participants discussed their mental health during the interviews, emphasising the significant anxiety experienced in school. The current study also shares similarities with multiple studies highlighting the mental health of the LGBTQ+ community (de Vries et al., 2019; Higgins et al., 2020; McDonald, 2018; Travers et al., 2020). The study by McDonald (2018) in particular discusses how low levels of social support tends to lead to higher levels of mental health difficulties. Another study which supports the current research was carried out by Yarns et al. (2016). This also investigated the older members of the LGBTQ+ community and emphasised the significantly higher risk of mental health difficulties in this section of the population. An area of future study could investigate support systems for older members of the LGBTQ+ community. A model utilised in Massachusetts for educating elderly care providers in LGBTQ+ issues could be beneficial in assisting queer people elsewhere (Krinsky & Cahill, 2017). It is widely recognised that mental health issues are

extremely prevalent among the LGBTQ+ community, as these multiple studies infer. If sufficient protective factors are implemented, such as open conversations about gender and sexuality, as well as inclusive LGBTQ+ sex education in all Irish schools, then it would be anticipated that mental health difficulties could decrease as a result.

Strengths and Limitations

There were a number of strengths along with certain limitations to this study. As this was the researcher's first time conducting interviews in this form, there may have been missed opportunities to get participants to elaborate on certain issues. However, the researcher was invested in the study and therefore tried to get as much information as possible. As previously mentioned, the data from the pilot study was unusable due to a methodological error. The pilot study was still useful, as it helped the researcher understand the interview process in order to improve the following interviews. The sample size was relatively small at seven participants, although the researcher discovered multiple similarities between participants and reached data saturation, it makes it difficult to say with certainty that the results are necessarily generalisable to the Irish LGBTQ+ population. It would be interesting for future research to replicate this study with a much larger sample, including a wider range of sexualities, as this study was limited to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Another limitation of this study would be in relation to the interview technique used. Microsoft Teams is useful and the transcription service is helpful, however, organising participants proved difficult. The researcher attempted to make each participant as comfortable as possible, given the method of interview. As this study dealt with a sensitive topic, perhaps a future replication could include one-on-one interviews in person. Furthermore, as the researcher knew the majority of the participants, that may have led to bias or participants not disclosing certain information. Another potential future study could

incorporate a mixed methods approach; assessing the individual's personal story, while also measuring certain criterion through quantitative methods.

Conclusion

This study is consistent with other research in the area of support systems for the LGBTQ+ community. The interviews allowed participants to discuss the Irish school environment as they navigated their sexuality. The data suggests the past treatment of LGBTQ+ teenagers in Irish secondary schools was subpar. One point of note from this data is the changing attitudes more recently. The younger participants still discussed feelings of isolation, shame and mental health difficulties, yet there were some supports mentioned, suggesting that certain schools are changing the curriculum to be a lot more inclusive. It would be hugely beneficial if the Department of Education followed the lead of these schools and implemented more sufficient education on LGBTQ+ issues in Ireland.

As mentioned by one participant, “not that we're living in a utopia now either, but, I just kind of feel that there was nearly an uncomfot in talking about things like that” (P2). The most important take away from studies like this is to have more open conversations around gender and sexuality, and be more inclusive in the language used. The LGBTQ+ community is becoming a lot more visible and vocal over recent years, and all school curriculums need to incorporate education and support systems for this community. This would positively impact the LGBTQ+ community of Ireland, allowing people to come to terms with their sexuality without prejudice or discrimination.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Information Leaflet

Being LGBTQ+ in an Irish Secondary School and the Lived Experience

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before deciding whether to take part, please take the time to read this document, which explains why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. If you have any questions about the information provided, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details at the end of this sheet.

What is this study about?

I am a final year student in the BA in Psychology programme at National College of Ireland. As part of our degree we must carry out an independent research project.

For my project, I aim to explore the Irish secondary school experience from the point of view of members of the LGBTQ+ community.

This project is being supervised by Dr. Amanda Kracen.

What will taking part in the study involve?

If you decide to take part in this research, you will be asked to...

Attend an interview on Microsoft Teams. This interview will be conducted by myself and will be recorded. Turning your camera on is optional.

The interview will be reflecting on your personal experience in secondary school. Some of the discussion may address a difficult period of your life. You may withdraw at any time.

The interview will last approximately one hour. Breaks can be taken if necessary. There are 11 questions I will ask over the course of the interview.

Who can take part?

You can take part in this study if you are over 18 years of age and identify as LGBTQ+. You must also have attended an Irish secondary school, as this is one of the focuses for this project.

You cannot take part in this study if you identify outside of the LGBTQ+ umbrella. You cannot take part in this study if you have not attended an Irish secondary school.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary; you do not have to take part, and a decision not to take part will have no consequences for you. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw from participation at any time up until the audio files have been transcribed and the original audio file has been deleted, which is when the data collected has been made unidentifiable. The process of transcribing the data usually takes approximately 2 weeks. If

you wish to withdraw, you may contact me using the details below. There will be no penalty or consequence if you decide to withdraw from the study.

This interview will deal with sensitive issues. If you feel that these questions may cause you to experience an undue level of distress, you should not take part in the study.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this research. However, the information gathered will contribute to research that helps us to better understand an Irish school setting for LGBTQ+ members. There is a small risk that some of the questions contained within the interview may cause minor distress for some participants. If you experience this, you are free to take a break or discontinue participation and end the interview. Contact information for relevant support services are also provided at the end of the interview.

Will taking part be confidential and what will happen to my data?

All data will be treated in the strictest confidence. The interviews will take place one-to-one over Microsoft Teams. All interviews will be recorded and these interviews will then be transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed. Any information in the interview transcript that could identify the participant or any other individual will be anonymised. Each participant will be assigned a unique ID code, and their data will be stored under this ID code, separate from their name or other identifying information. A transcript of the interview will be sent to the participant after the interview to look through in case they would like something redacted.

As this is a qualitative study, direct quotes from interviews may be included in the presentation of the results, but these quotes will be anonymised and will not contain any information that could identify the participant or any other individual. The data will be stored and managed in line with GDPR guidelines. If you have any queries in relation to data protection, you can contact the NCI data protection officer, Niamh Scannell (Niamh.Scannell@ncirl.ie).

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be presented in my final dissertation, along with an oral presentation, which will be submitted to National College of Ireland. The project may also be shared at a scientific conference and or published. All data will be unidentifiable.

Who should you contact for further information?

Researcher

Kealyn Dunne (he/him)

x18130232@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor

Dr. Amanda Kracen (she/her)

Amanda.Kracen@ncirl.ie

Appendix B
Consent Form

In agreeing to participate in this research I understand the following:

- The research project has been approved in principle by the Departmental Ethics Committee. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.
- I am 18 years of age or older
- I identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- I attended a secondary school in Ireland
- If I have any concerns about participation, I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any stage by informing the researcher.
- I understand that once my participation has ended, that I cannot withdraw my data as it will be fully anonymised.
- I have been informed as to the general nature of the study and agree voluntarily to participate.
- All data from the study will be treated confidentially. The data from all participants will be compiled, analysed, and submitted in a report to the Psychology Department in the School of Business.
- At the conclusion of my participation, any questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

Please tick this box if you have read, and agree with all of the above information.

Please tick this box to indicate that you are providing informed consent to participate in this study.

Appendix C

Debriefing Sheet

Thank you for taking part in this study aiming to investigate members of the LGBTQ+ community navigating secondary school in Ireland. It is hoped this study will complement other research around supports available to LGBTQ+ people especially in a school setting.

It is also hoped that this study will allow for improvements around support systems currently in place in Irish secondary schools, as well as providing better education and knowledge around people and their sexual identity.

All audio data from this interview will be transcribed in order to anonymise and de-identify the data, after which the audio file will be deleted. The only people who will have access to these audio files will be myself, the researcher, and my supervisor, Dr. Amanda Kracen. All data will be kept secure in accordance with GDPR guidelines.

Participants can withdraw from this study at any point without penalty or consequence, up until the audio file is destroyed, upon which the data will be anonymous and de-identified.

If you have any further questions or queries, please contact myself or my supervisor with the details below:

Kealyn Dunne - x18130232@student.ncirl.ie

Dr. Amanda Kracen - Amanda.Kracen@ncirl.ie

If you have been affected by any questions or topics discussed in this interview, I have provided a number of helplines below:

Samaritans - Call 116 123 or download Samaritans Self-Help app

LGBT Helpline - Call 1890 929 539

BeLonGTo/Pieta House - Call 01 462 4792 or visit www.belongto.org

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me when you first realised your sexual identity was different to others?
2. What issues did you envision you would have to deal with?
3. Thinking back to secondary school, how would you say this realisation of your sexuality affected your life?
4. How did your sexuality impact your school work, social life or family life?
5. For some people, confiding in members of staff helps with the coming out process. Tell me about any adults you confided in and why.
6. Tell me a little bit about your friendship groups. Did anything change?
7. What kind of supports, if any, did you use in school when you were coming to terms with your sexuality?
8. Can you think of a specific time when you found it especially difficult navigating being a teenager and queer?
9. Did you feel like you got sufficient support from school?
10. Looking back, is there anything you would do differently to benefit your secondary school experience?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about today regarding this study?

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age?

What gender do you most identify with?

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Non-Binary
- Prefer to self-identify (please specify) _____

What sexuality do you most identify with?

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other

What type of secondary school did you attend?

- Denominational school (e.g. Catholic, Protestant, etc.)
- Non-Denominational school (e.g. Educate Together)
- Other

What religion, if any, would you currently identify with?

- Catholicism
- Protestantism
- Agnosticism
- Atheism
- Other

Appendix F

Sample of Interview Transcript

0:0:0.0 --> 0:0:1.430

Kealyn Dunne

OK. I think we're good to go. OK.

0:0:5.290 --> 0:0:12.590

Kealyn Dunne

So have you read the information sheet and the consent form and do you consent to participate in this study?

0:0:12.600 --> 0:0:13.001

P4

Yes, great.

0:0:13.440 --> 0:0:13.500

Kealyn Dunne

So to start off, can you tell me when you first realized your sexual identity was different to others?

0:0:13.650 --> 0:0:43.10

P4

Em probably around 4th, 5th class? Em I went to an all boys school, so I was kind of, like attracted to the people around me and that was obviously different. Em yeah, that was kind of the main indicator I was like looking at people around me. I was like, I really like you and obviously didn't get that back because. Yeah.

0:0:43.960 --> 0:0:47.750

Kealyn Dunne

So like what issues did you envision you'd have to deal with?

0:0:48.550 --> 0:0:50.680

P4

Rejection, I guess and.

0:0:51.740 --> 0:0:52.320

P4

Em.

0:0:54.10 --> 0:0:57.220

P4

I don't know. I guess like not like, just not being liked or.

0:0:58.160 --> 0:1:0.510

P4

Being taught I was different. Yeah.

0:1:3.850 --> 0:1:4.280

Kealyn Dunne

Yeah.

0:1:6.110 --> 0:1:6.880

Kealyn Dunne
And.

0:1:9.610 --> 0:1:14.310

Kealyn Dunne
Thinking back to secondary school, how would you say this realization of your sexuality affected your life?

0:1:19.350 --> 0:1:19.920

P4
Em.

0:1:24.620 --> 0:1:38.670

P4
I think making friends was very different because obviously like I was out in secondary to most of my close friends, but trying to expand like your group of friends. It's like if they are in any way homophobic, they're not gonna want to be friends with you so.

0:1:39.70 --> 0:1:42.820

P4
Em you're either trying to hide it or.

0:1:43.580 --> 0:1:56.400

P4
Just not being friends with many people. So it was kind of like it decreased the amount of social events that I went to because no ones really inviting me places because, you know, lack of friends. Yeah. And then if I was out places.

0:1:57.550 --> 0:1:58.540

P4
It was Umm.

0:1:59.710 --> 0:2:4.870

P4
I don't know like quiet kind of like, for drinks with people or like, you know, stuff like that. It wasn't.

0:2:5.570 --> 0:2:8.440

P4
Anything usually big, but yeah, yeah.

0:2:9.320 --> 0:2:9.890

Kealyn Dunne
So.

0:2:10.890 --> 0:2:23.140

Kealyn Dunne
How did your sexuality impact your school work, social life or family, or and family life?

0:2:23.850 --> 0:2:25.150

P4
Em well my family don't know, still, because they're a bit iffy around the whole topic. So. In terms of school life.

0:2:26.170 --> 0:2:28.620

P4

Again, most of my friends were in school and.

0:2:29.630 --> 0:2:33.860

P4

Like school work, it was kind of fine. Like, again, the people who knew, knew. The people who didn't. Well, they kind of knew but you know, em not really.

0:2:34.540 --> 0:2:47.390

Kealyn Dunne

So did it impact like what you were doing like with the kind of work you were doing in school?

0:2:48.180 --> 0:2:50.20

P4

Em I don't think so. I think I was like, I was doing pretty good in school but em, I don't think it really had a massive impact.

0:2:51.610 --> 0:2:52.560

Kealyn Dunne

And em.

0:2:53.980 --> 0:3:3.70

Kealyn Dunne

So for some people confide in the members of staff, help with the coming out process. Em tell me about any adults you confided in and why.

0:3:4.670 --> 0:3:7.380

P4

It was probably three teachers.

0:3:8.200 --> 0:3:18.470

P4

Em that I got on it really well. Like we just chill and have conversations. Em over lunch time as well. And that was really helpful because it made it.

0:3:19.530 --> 0:3:25.320

P4

Easier. It was like this is a normal thing. They're completely on board with it. It's fine. It's just the students who are like.

0:3:26.510 --> 0:3:31.860

P4

Don't get it basically, whereas if adults get it, I know I'll be fine later in life.

0:3:33.80 --> 0:3:33.550

Kealyn Dunne

Yeah. Yeah, I get you.

0:3:34.610 --> 0:3:36.60

P4

Yeah, they made that a lot easier.

0:3:37.80 --> 0:3:55.490

P4

Especially like when I came out to my friends in school, they like the teachers were the first people I

kind of went to and I was like, I don't really know to this. And they were like just if you trust your friends, tell them. So, that made it a lot easier.

0:3:55.650 --> 0:3:55.890

Kealyn Dunne

What type of school did you go to?

0:3:55.950 --> 0:3:56.560

P4

It was an all boys em catholic school, em. Yeah. [Name of school].

0:3:56.570 --> 0:4:22.440

Kealyn Dunne

That's surprising because like normally just like, especially in from what I've heard, it's like the Catholic, various Catholic schools have been very they don't talk about it or anything like that. But so the fact, the teachers were there like for you.

0:4:23.700 --> 0:4:25.210

P4

Yeah it was em. I know when I went there, they just got a new principal and the staff was like, all very young. So it was obviously as like as of now, they're all very inclusive. So it's actually pretty great.

0:4:25.940 --> 0:4:28.750

Kealyn Dunne

That's great. So tell me a bit about your friendship groups did anything change?

0:4:29.300 --> 0:4:29.980

P4

Em.

0:4:30.710 --> 0:4:42.30

P4

Actually, when I came out probably like a month or two later, someone else came out as well, which was pretty interesting because I genuinely didn't expect them. Usually you have that like bit of an inkling, but like genuinely did not expect it from them. So that was.

0:4:42.740 --> 0:4:56.330

P4

Em really cool. Em. Yeah. No, nothing really changed. It was more just language actually kind of changed. Like instead like sometimes there'd be like an odd joke made. But then the jokes kind of disappeared once they realized.

0:4:57.20 --> 0:4:58.530

P4

Yeah. Yeah, that was kind of.

0:4:59.690 --> 0:5:1.260

P4

The main thing that I noticed.

0:5:1.940 --> 0:5:5.800

P4

And then actually they start using a lot of like inclusive language, just in general, like instead of.

0:5:6.570 --> 0:5:33.760

P4

Like there was like the ones I kind of educated them on say people like who are non binary or trans they kind of got on board with it. So using inclusive language like they/them pronouns and stuff when talking to other people. And that was actually really cool to like experience because I didn't think they would so yeah.

0:5:34.720 --> 0:5:38.600

Kealyn Dunne

Yeah and even a few years ago like you wouldn't of either. That's great. Em that you had like the kind of like a support around you as well. Em. Were there any other supports you used in school when you were coming to terms with your sexuality?

0:5:39.710 --> 0:5:42.980

P4

Not really. I kind of went to the guidance counselor and.

0:5:43.760 --> 0:5:44.760

P4

Yeah, that was.

0:5:47.0 --> 0:5:54.460

P4

Helpful in a way. But then she left the school after, like, a year or so, like, you know, that was gone. Em but yeah, that was helpful for a while.

0:5:55.290 --> 0:6:4.500

Kealyn Dunne

Were there counselors or anything in the school or?

0:6:5.330 --> 0:6:6.100

P4

Not really. Again, they were jumping in and out every few months. So there wasn't really. I didn't stick with any of them because yeah, yeah.

0:6:6.820 --> 0:6:12.220

Kealyn Dunne

Can you think of a specific time when you found it especially difficult navigating being a teenager and queer?

0:6:13.650 --> 0:6:14.420

P4

Em.

0:6:18.710 --> 0:6:22.710

P4

There was a time I had made a new group of friends and.

0:6:24.160 --> 0:6:26.630

P4

I didn't know if they were gay.

0:6:27.370 --> 0:6:29.210

P4

Turns out they were, but.

0:6:29.910 --> 0:6:40.90

P4

It was, I think I was 17. Yeah, 17. They were 16. And. Em I tried to get with them. But at the time they weren't out. So it was.

0:6:41.50 --> 0:6:53.790

P4

Really awkward and they were like they DM'd me on Instagram and they were like I am gay, but I don't want to get with you because I don't want to come out to people yet. Yeah. That was really difficult and hard, but.

0:6:54.700 --> 0:6:56.330

P4

Yeah, it's kind of the thing of like.

0:6:57.90 --> 0:7:6.490

P4

What could have happened if everyone was OK with it? If it was like more normal? Yeah. The fact people feel like they have to hide makes it worse for everyone involved. Kind of.

0:7:8.840 --> 0:7:12.660

Kealyn Dunne

Exactly. So did you feel like you got sufficient support from school?

0:7:13.380 --> 0:7:18.210

P4

I think so. Yeah. I think that the people that I did tell were very supportive.

0:7:18.980 --> 0:7:24.40

Kealyn Dunne

And sounds like the school was, well the teachers were anyway.

0:7:26.980 --> 0:7:31.140

P4

Em yeah, the teachers were very supportive and like I know there was a few teachers who.

0:7:32.370 --> 0:7:41.980

P4

Usually the men teachers em who were a bit iffy around it but again wouldn't say, you know, anything controversial, because they're not allowed obviously but.

0:7:42.770 --> 0:7:47.580

P4

There was definitely a few male teachers. You can tell outside the school they weren't very supportive, but.

0:7:48.530 --> 0:8:15.0

P4

A lot of the female teachers were quite supportive.

0:8:15.620 --> 0:8:25.900

Kealyn Dunne

Em so looking back, is there anything you would do differently to benefit your secondary school experience?

0:8:26.520 --> 0:8:32.410

P4

Em honestly, I don't think so. I think everything went the way it should've, em, like I was out to the people who needed to know and that was kind of all that mattered.

0:8:34.610 --> 0:8:37.960

P4

Yeah, I think everything's pretty OK.

0:8:38.890 --> 0:8:45.580

P4

Because like, again, I didn't tell the people who I thought would hurt me in any way. So. Yeah.

0:8:47.290 --> 0:8:54.280

P4

Em I feel like it would have been different if I was just out like in general because I know of people who were in the same school and.

0:8:55.60 --> 0:8:57.440

P4

They were treated very differently and.

0:8:58.280 --> 0:8:58.670

P4

Yeah.

0:9:1.190 --> 0:9:6.530

Kealyn Dunne

And so just the last question. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about today regarding this study?

0:9:7.30 --> 0:9:8.660

P4

Em not really.

0:9:13.160 --> 0:9:15.310

Kealyn Dunne

Think I got everything there now.