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The courage to be: LGBTQ+ youth within the heteronormative and cisgenderist school environment

Recent research studies tend to view LGBTQ+ youth through lenses of marginalization and victimization, or through ideas of resilience and accommodation to heteronormative and cisgenderist practices. Insufficient attention has been paid to the courage many LGBTQ+ students display through daily life at school to continuously stand up to these norms. This study explores the experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ+ in in 10 secondary schools in southern England gathered through 11 focus groups (total $n = 67$). Using corpus-assisted discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis, we identify a number of ways in which LGBTQ+ students display courage in navigating their day-to-day existence, often challenging hetero-and cisgenderist norms. The authors urge schools to rethink and promote affirmative action, as courage to instigate change should not fall solely on the shoulders of LGTBQ+ students and a handful of allies.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students; courage; secondary school; heteronormative; cisgenderist.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reposition the way in which we view LGBTQ+ youth, and acknowledge their actions as courageous. Research into the challenges LGBTQ+ youth encounter in school have been increasingly well documented in recent years, through small-scale qualitative studies (e.g., BLINDED, 2022; 2023; Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013) and larger national surveys (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2022; Stonewall, 2017). These often focus on ways LGBTQ+ youth are marginalized and victimized or on supportive interventions (e.g., Black et al., 2012; Gower et al., 2018). Although these studies are important, there is the danger that they position individuals in a deficit model, which can homogenize experiences within a narrative of victimhood and risk (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

To counter such deficit thinking, there has been a greater focus on LGBTQ+

youth and resilience. Studies such as Meyer (2015), Asakura (2019) and Travers et al. (2022) illustrate LGBTQ+ youth's coping mechanisms in dealing with adversities, minority stresses and microaggressions they encounter. Such research importantly positions LGBTQ+ youth in a more positive light. However, there are several issues with focusing on resilience. Robinson and Schmitz (2021) argue resilience is often seen as how LGBTQ+ individuals successfully assimilate into dominant hetero- and cisnormative expectations, or achieve academic or professional 'success' despite hardships, rather than how hetero- and cisnormative structures need to change. Also, focusing on resilience fails to portray the full complexity of the lives of LGBTQ+ youth (Gooding et al., 2023). Additionally, studies of resilience seldom look at matters that are precursors to resilience.

Focusing on courage offers an alternative way of understanding the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. Identifying acts of courage, and the situations where courage is needed, can illuminate specific issues that need changing. Courage is also a precursor to resilience (Ruff et al., 2019), providing additional insights into the development of resilience. Looking at courage therefore provides a space that offers a more positive framing of LGBTQ+ youth.

This paper is based on two data sets, in which focus groups were carried out with the initial aim of generally exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students within a number of secondary schools in England and their views of staff and teacher actions (or inactions). The initial analysis had highlighted particular ways in which the students had been marginalized and victimized; although we felt this was an important story to tell, we were also uncomfortable about how this positioned these LGBTQ+ students within a victim narrative (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). A re-reading of the data from the perspective of resilience offered a more positive insight into these young people's

experiences, but did not adequately highlight, what Asakura (2019) calls the 'extraordinary' act of simply 'showing up' at school. It seemed that the mere act of being in school, for some focus group participants, demonstrated resilience but also required an act of courage to come to school in the first place.

This paper reanalyzes data gathered from these eleven focus groups (first wave=5, second wave=6). We continue by reviewing the notion of courage and common threads in how it is understood (and differs to similar notions like resilience), and introduce the idea of 'vulnerability-in-courage'.

Vulnerability, resistance and courage

There is little in the literature about the courage of LGBTQ+ youth. Asakura (2019) recognizes that coming to school is an extraordinary act, but conceives this in terms of resilience. Ruff et al.'s (2019) study on trans women of color, is however an exception in explicitly referring to courage. In their conceptualization, courage grows from hope, is linked to goals, and is a *precursor* to developing resilience. Although courage and resilience are connected, they are different—resilience is commonly seen as the ability to bounce back from adversity, whereas courage is the initial act through which resilience can be developed. A focus on courage, therefore, seems worthy of greater attention.

However, focusing on courage may simply identify individualized actions and ignore the systemic and institutionalized forces of hetero- and cisnormativity, which privilege heterosexuality and cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014; Martino et al., 2022; Ullman, 2014). To address this, some adapt the concept of 'vulnerability-in-resistance' (Butler et al., 2016; McBride and Neary, 2021). McBride and Neary (2021) argue vulnerability rests in belonging to a marginalized group that is often victimized, yet also involved in degrees of activism, and therefore engaged in forms of resistance. Resistance to oppression and the development of resilience stems from a sense of

vulnerability, compelling people to find ways to survive and be themselves. However, alongside resistance, analyzing courage to exist can also provide a more positive framing of LGBTQ+ youth, whilst exposing the circumstances, which force LGBTQ+ youth into being courageous. Hence, we rely on the idea of 'vulnerability-in-courage'.

Defining courage, is tricky. Although there is no universal definition of courage, as it is a hypothetical construct, there seems to be some generally agreed elements—it is a voluntary act, involves overcoming fear. includes a risk to the person undertaking the act, and is directed towards a worthy outcome (Hannah et al., 2007; Pury et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2021). It is also considered to be about acts, rather than actors, emphasizing the importance of behaviors (Detert & Bruno, 2017; Pury et al., 2007). Pury et al. (2007) distinguish between general and personal courage. The former involves acts that would be widely recognized as courageous (e.g., physical risks of bomb disposal), whereas the latter are specific to individuals and their contexts; e.g., the act of going to school, for someone with genuine fears of being victimized by others at school, would also be considered courageous. There is also a general consensus that courage can take physical, moral or psychological forms (Detert & Bruno, 2017; Pury et al., 2007). Physical courage applies when there is a risk of personal harm, whereas moral courage is opposing the status quo and standing up for what someone believes is morally correct, whilst psychological courage is about overcoming personal fears and having the courage to be (Detert & Bruno, 2017).

For the analyses later described in this paper, we ascribe to the idea that courage is a voluntary act (or set of acts), involving the possibility of physical, moral or psychological harm, in the pursuit of a worthy outcome. Besides offering a more positive, affirmative framing of LGBTQ+ youth, these acts of courage, which challenge and disrupt binary notions of sexuality and gender (Ingrey, 2018; Wozolek, 2019),

highlight the heteronormative and cisgenderist structures that make the lives of LGBTQ+ youth challenging.

This paper's research question asks how LGBTQ+ youth exhibit courage and navigate the heteronormative and cisgenderist structures they encounter in their everyday lives in secondary schools.

Methodology

This research draws on focus group data with LGBTQ+ students, from two projects. These covered a range of issues linked to students' school experiences. In total, ten secondary schools in southern England participated, from around 100 that were approached—one school was involved in both projects, hence 11 focus groups. Reasons for non-participation were not collected.

Focus groups were considered well-suited for dealing with personal, potentially sensitive, topics (see Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 110-115 for a review, but see Nye et al., 2023), especially as the intention, which was shared with students, was to explore their experiences of school as they perceived them[1]. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2014) optimized limited resources and ensured appropriate participants were selected. In each school a staff member acted as the liaison, and organized the groups of LGBTQ+ students with, in some cases, their allies. These sessions typically lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted to provide a supportive space where participants could freely express themselves. In most cases teachers refrained from attending the focus groups, while in Rowan, Maple, Sycamore and Willow schools insisted on a teacher presence. Nonetheless, this did not seem to deter students from offering candid

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[1] While there has been some concern expressed regarding the veracity of LGBTQ+ adolescent views in focus group settings (see Nye et al., 2023), much of this concern centres around discussion of sexual intimacy issues. The researchers were not given any causes for concern that span beyond the normal limitations implicit in any qualitative study.

criticisms of both peers and staff.

Participants

In total, 67 students, aged 11-18, participated. The focus groups were in 2019 and 2022 (see Table 1). Table 2 shows student participants' sexual and gender identifications, which were varied.

Table 1. *Focus group participants by school and data collection year*

Data collection year	School	*n*	FG number
2022	Birch School	7	FG6
	Cherry School	3	FG5
	Maple School	5	FG1
	Sycamore School	5	FG2
	Willow School	7	FG4
	Yew School[*]	6	FG3
2019	Elm School[***]	14	FG10
	Fir School	6	FG7
	Oak School[**]	1	FG11
	Rowan School	8	FG8
	Yew School[*]	5	FG9
	Total	67	11

Note. [*]This is the same school that wished to be involved but the participants at each point were different. [**]An interview was carried out at Oak Tree instead of a focus group due to staff absence on the day, as students were unaware of where and when the meeting was happening, and it was too late in the academic year to reschedule (see also BLINDED., 2022). [***]Focus group larger than expected; in this case all the students in the school LGBTQ+ group wanted to attend and the school facilitated this.

Table 2. *Student participants' self-identification*[*]

Sexuality	*n*
Bi	15
Pan	11
Gay	9
Queer	7
Lesbian	5
Panromantic	1
Polyamorous	1
Asexual	1
Biromantic asexual	1

Omnisexual	1
Questioning	1
Gender	
Trans man	9
Non-binary	6
Gender fluid/questioning	3
Trans woman	2
Agender	2
Genderqueer	1
Other	
Allies	3
Undisclosed	1

*The total is more than 67 as some students expressed a gender and sexuality identity.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed combining a more quantitative corpus-based approach to discourse analysis with qualitative content analysis through directed category application (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2004), offering the opportunity for triangulation and enriching analyses. Curry & Pérez-Paredes (2023) have shown that using keyword analysis can identify specific moments in focus groups where key themes are constructed through discourse. Our corpus analysis identified overarching patterns and themes based on comparative word-frequency (described below). This served as a starting point for further exploration though the qualitative content analysis, which was used to contextualize and examine the issues identified in the corpus analysis. Distinguishing between physical, moral and psychological courage (Detert & Bruno, 2017; Pury et al., 2007) proved valuable in adding a more nuanced understanding of the data, although individual acts of courage could easily fit more than one type of courage. Several corpus-based discourse studies have looked specifically at LGBTQ+ issues (e.g., Love & Baker, 2015; Wilkinson, 2021). In corpus-assisted discourse analysis (see Gillings et al., 2023), frequency, concordance, collocation and keywords are used to identify

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linguistic patterning across texts, relating these to the social context in which they occur. Keyword analysis compares word frequencies of a study corpus with that of a larger reference corpus to determine statistically which words occur more frequently. The researcher then bases their analyses in those differences.

CQPweb (Hardie, 2012), was selected for the corpus analysis. It is a versatile and robust platform, tagging words for part of speech (POS) and semantic categories, thus allowing for different kinds of searches. Our focus group corpus was labelled 'Courage'. In order to identify keyness (statistically significant overuse or underuse of linguistic items), the 97,302-word study 'Courage' corpus, was compared to the Spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC2014) (Love, et al., 2017), an 11.5-million-word collection of general conversations.

The comparison statistics used to determine keyness were Log-likelihood (a statistical significance measure which shows how much evidence there is for a difference between two corpora) with a Log Ratio filter (an effect-size statistic which represents how big the difference between two corpora is for a particular keyword). The use of two measures ensures more robust keyword results. The p value was 0.01%. For further information about Log-likelihood and Log Ratio, see Hardie (n.d.).

Ethics

Carrying out focus groups with LGBTQ+ students in school raised some issues, particularly regarding those who were out at school but not home. Where students were out at home, parental permission was requested. However, in some cases, students who were not out at home were keen to be involved. Where the school was also keen for those students' voices to be heard, permission was granted by the school. Some schools insisted on a staff member being present for safeguarding reasons, but those staff were

active in supporting LGBTQ+ students and known to the students. Otherwise, any

safeguarding concerns were passed on by the researcher to the liaison person.

Results

Firstly, we explain how the corpus data were categorized and then present the findings

under the themes of physical, moral and psychological courage. We do acknowledge

that some acts require more than one form of courage, but have presented examples

which best reflect the particular type of courage being exhibited (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The corpus data results in relation to the themes of physical, moral and psychological courage, in the authors' view.*
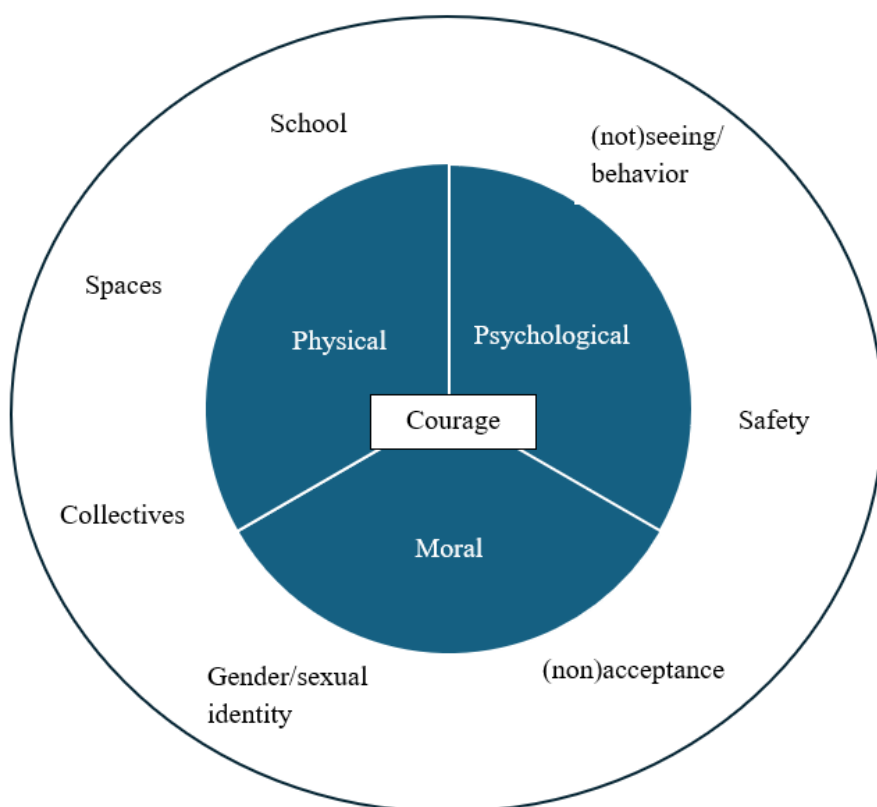
Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

Table 3 shows keyword results from a comparison of the 'Courage' corpus with the

Spoken component of the BNC2014. These keywords reveal the distinctiveness of the

focus group data and represent many of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students. The

most characteristic keywords (i.e., statistically significant) are classified thematically into seven categories. To save space, multiple keywords with the same lemma are shown thus: accept(ance)/(ing). While many of the categories and keywords are predictable, others are less so and worthy of closer inspection. Within each category, words are grouped semantically where possible. In the examples below, we embolden keywords for ease of reference. We will present our analysis of the keywords under the headings of physical, moral and psychological courage, though they are not necessarily exclusive, and particular acts reflect different combinations of courage (see Figure 1). For example, an act of physical courage may well include a moral or psychological element.

Physical acts of courage

Physical acts of courage were mostly associated with the key categories related to school and spaces in the corpus analysis, and the categories of identity and (not)seeing/behavior in terms of being overtly out. This was because students were having to navigate the interaction between their sense of identity and visibility within physical spaces and their engagement with others. For example, in the corpus analysis the wearing of **badges**, where students chose to be **publicly, openly, explicitly, outwardly** LGBTQ+, required a visible display of identity making students vulnerable to verbal or physical abuse:

> I wear the **badges** because I think… I wonder whether I should, I shouldn't have **people** stopping me just because they've got a problem (FG2).

In another situation, a student avoided wearing **badges**, highlighting that acts of physical courage are voluntary and considered. This does not necessarily betoken an absence of physical courage, but highlights the need for psychological courage as well, as the hetero- and cisnormative pressures of school, can make LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe:

There are certain lessons, I'll take all the **badges** off my blazer, because I don't want **people** making **comments** (FG2).

Key lemmas in the corpus, such as **afraid** and **fear**, were often linked to certain places, such as the **changing rooms** or **toilets**. LGBTQ+ students often regard these places with trepidation; for some, merely entering such spaces requires deliberation about personal safety and therefore physical courage:

It literally got to the point where I would get **changed** in the **toilet** cubicles and then I would wait outside for the rest of them to get changed (FG9).

The qualitative analysis expanded considerations of space to include the route to school or entering in a shop. If "[c]ourage requires sacrifice, risk, and overcoming fear for a good purpose" (Rate et al., 2017, p. 83), then it is not unreasonable to view the act of coming to school as courageous behavior:

Walking into school, I have to take quite a long route…I know that they hide out there…I can't go that way out of pure fear. Even though the school is well aware of that, they just kind of told me to change my route (FG2).

The following comment also illustrates the choices that LGBTQ+ students feel they have to make, merely to come to school:

I don't go shopping before school, they're at the shop just outside because they all kind of stand in front. I can't go in there without having to pass someone. And it's kind of scary (FG2).

The focus groups revealed how students navigate the risk of physical harm in various school environments. Despite facing challenges, students take proactive measures to ensure their physical safety, such as altering routes or avoiding certain spaces altogether, highlighting a degree of hypervigilance with which LGBTQ+ students have to engage.

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Table 3. *Thematic categorization of keywords in the Courage corpus.*

gender / sexual identity	school	(non)acceptance	behavior	space	collectives	safety
LGBT(Q+)	school(s)	slur	openly	bathrooms	friends	(feel)/(felt) safe
gender(s)	student(s)	insult	explicitly	toilets	group(s)	(un)comfortable
neutral	teacher(s)	faggot	outward(ly)	corridors	community	
sex(ual)/(uality)	staff	comments	actively	changing (rooms)	people	
bi/bisexual	tutor	harass(ed)/(ment)	generally	changed	allies	
heterosexual	assembly/ies	bullied	personally		club	
trans(gender)	lessons	(verbal) bullying				
queer	class	homophobic				
non-binary	educated	homophobia				
lesbian	taught	exposed				
gay	policy/ies	lack				
straight	uniform	problems				
questioning	skirt	multiple (occasions)				
fluid	curriculum	accept(ance)/(ing)				
crushes	PSHE	support(ive)				
aromantic	(sex) ed(ucation)	counselling				
Pride	PE	inclusive				
id(entity/ies)	History	aware(ness)				
identify	primary	issue(s)				
being	year	understanding				
badges	Sixth	helpful				
pronouns	Form	experience(s)/(d)				
name	lower					
out	younger					
disclose						
diversity						
girl(s)						
boys						
female/male						

Moral courage

The corpus analysis highlighted two issues where students felt they needed to stand up for themselves, which can be seen as moral acts of courage. The first issue was largely rooted in the category of (non)acceptance, shown by the language that students encountered, but also linked into the categories of identity, school and (not)seeing/behavior. A second issue was around institutional indifference as indicated by the term 'lack of' (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *'Lack' in the Courage corpus.*

The frequency of lemmas such as **slur**, (33 instances), **insult** (11 instances), **faggot** (12 instances), **harass** (11 instances), **bully** (39 instances) and **homophobic** (53 instances), alongside common collocational patterns identified in the corpus analysis including '**say/call** (a/the) F/S/T/faggot/homophobic slur' and '**get/be harassed/bullied'**, highlight the hostile environment which many students encounter.

While it is common to view such aggression in terms of victimization, enduring or standing up to such common behavior suggests moral courage, whilst also exposing the hetero- and cisnormative attitudes that pervade certain schools. In such instances, students felt compelled to stand up for themselves, even in the face of institutional indifference:

> I get called **slurs** in class and obviously, well I had a cover teacher and she did nothing about it. Basically, everyone was being like 'you're **gay'**, 'you're a **faggot'**. And I was like, OK. And then I responded aggressively and then the teacher told me off for responding, for sticking up for myself (FG9).

> I will not hesitate to snitch when it comes to those kind of things [boys picking on a trans student] (FG7).

> As someone who's had to complain on many occasions, about people being homo-

phobic towards me, and calling me a faggot, and stuff like that, my experience is that no action is ever taken aside from detentions or IERs [internal exclusion rooms] (FG3).

-I mean, I've been questioned about what surgeries I'm going to be getting…
-Right. Have you told them [boys] it's not their business?
-I mean, most of the time, yeah (FG5).

Here students advocate for change or challenge discriminatory practices, albeit this often takes a subtler form. As some of the examples show, responses are not one-off remarks, but rather a continuous vocal opposition to the prevailing heteronormative and cisgender norms.

Standing up for what is perceived to be an injustice is also illustrated in this explanation, drawing on lemmas around **uniform,** where a trans student had challenged the school over their refusal to allow her to wear a **skirt**:

The headmaster had agreed for her to come to school in a **skirt** and then like a week before the term began, went completely against her and was like, no, you have to come in wearing trousers, and then that was just, really…demoralizing? (FG6)

Students were also willing to challenge the hostile environment by addressing the 'lack of' things. The 'lack of' essentially underscores the way in which institutions effectively render LGBTQ+ issues as invisible through inattentiveness or ignorance. In this example the issue was a lack of acceptance illustrated by inappropriate use of deadnames and pronouns:

One of my friends in the lower school came out as transgender…it was a very, very long difficult fight for them to be actually recognized as transgender…. They were buying binders in order to hold their breasts and they were really trying to be more visible, and to their friends saying don't call me that name, call me that name because it makes me really uncomfortable and it triggers my body dysmorphia when you say 'her' and 'she' when it's actually 'his' and 'him' kind of thing. It used to really trigger and cause anxiety in him. And in the end, after that really

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long fight and with the help of a teacher…it started a movement where if a student said I'd rather, can you please call me this rather than my actual name, they would do it (FG11).

This is further illustrated in the following examples where misuse of pronouns was challenged, even if it meant confronting the authority of a teacher:

We're standing up to start correcting people's pronouns, like I didn't do before, because I was so nervous that I'd get in trouble. But you know, I don't even care because it's the teacher's problem and not mine (FG2).

My group…they'd be like, oh no but he's still a boy…oh no but she's still a girl…I'd fight back always and I'm like, shut up, it's got nothing to do with you. If someone wants their name to be different, let them, let them be themselves (FG8).

Psychological courage

Psychological acts of courage are related to students' state of mind and the extent to which LGBTQ+ students are able to be themselves. Key categories in the corpus data were identity, the role of collectives and feelings around safety (see Table 3).

The data revealed the key lemmas **anxiety** (x10), **afraid** (x12) and **fear** (x11). While acknowledging participants' courage to exist in a variety of situations, and the courage that entails, LGBTQ+ students have to cope with fear: 'I was very nervous and anxious (FG8)', 'I just had a random spike of anxiety (FG10)', 'I was afraid' (FG5), 'we're all really afraid' (FG2), 'I can't go that way out of pure fear'(FG2), 'there's always still that fear'(FG8).

The analysis highlights 86 instances of the key lemma **safe** (safety, safeguarding, safely, safer, unsafe). Of the 75 instances of "(un)safe", 44 collocate with the verb "feel". This is partly as a result of the focus group questions about feeling safe. Nevertheless, almost half of student's answers indicate not feeling or only partially feeling safe: "I don't feel very safe, being queer" (FG2); "if I do feel safe, it's because I am

taking precautions to make myself feel safe" (FG2); "some people feel unsafe not because something that's gone on in school but something that's happened outside of school" (FG11). "Feel" is also the natural collocate of **comfortable** (72 instances) and **uncomfortable** (22 instances), but frequently in negative contexts: "I kind of worked out that I wasn't comfortable being a girl" (FG2); "she didn't feel comfortable expressing her gender fully whilst at school" (FG6); "I was so uncomfortable because then I was getting so many stares" (FG10); "[other students] don't want to know about it [LGBTQ+ matters] 'cause it makes them feel uncomfortable" (FG3). The last example also highlights the discomfort that non-LGBTQ+ students may feel, probably because of under-exposure to discussion of LGBTQ+ issues and over-exposure to heteronormative norms.

The frequency of such comments shows that the schools in the study still have a significant way to go in order to address the hetero- and cisnormative agendas that shape how schools work and that fail to make LGBTQ+ youngsters feel comfortable in school. Here we can see 'vulnerability-in-courage'. The mere act of attending school can be seen be seen as courageous if it is a space where you are made to feel vulnerable.

Several of the LGBTQ+ students expressed profound anxiety about being rejected or isolated by their peers, teachers, or even family members due to their sexual orientation or gender identity**. Anxiety** was one of the key lemmas identified in the corpus analysis. Many students commented on the anxiety of coming out, as revealing gender or sexual identity poses risks:

> I used to meet up with some girls in my class every lunch and we'd have a discussion about queerness and they were some of the first people I told. They were just so lovely and accepting and they said they were afraid to come out to other people because they were worried other people weren't going to be as accepting (FG4).

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One of my friends, because she knows possibly that I'm bi…she came out to me and only me because she's very scared of what other people would think, but because I'm out she knows that it's not like I'm going to judge her. I thought that was quite a brave thing for that girl to do, to come out to me (FG8).

It had to be me personally that had the courage to do that in order to feel like accepted instead of them being accepting (FG9).

The importance of countering anxiety with social acceptance becomes clear with a closer look at the data. In the above excepts other key lemmas identified in the corpus analysis, **friends**, **group(s)**, **community** bring to light the importance of inclusive spaces where individuals can express their identities, which are crucial in mitigating the anxieties associated with coming out. Friends, groups, communities, allies and clubs seem to play a pivotal role in empowering LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate the complexities of self-disclosure with greater confidence and resilience.

The experiences of students in the following extracts also makes evident that many students do show courage in disclosing their gender/sexual identity to the wider school population in spite of repercussions:

I've transitioned fully whilst in school, so people have known me as who I was before have seen the transition. And I feel that's left me in a lot more of an unsafe place, but I'm not sure. That's just my experience with it (FG3).

[Other LGBTQ+ people] don't feel safe coming out because we have faced some discrimination because of the way we live our lives. Just stupid stuff with people throwing stuff at us. But … we've all dealt with it together so it's kind of made us stronger in a way (FG10).

Despite the fear of rejection or isolation from peers and teachers due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, many student participants highlighted acts of bravery in confronting their anxieties and coming out. Anxiety emerges prominently in these focus

groups, underscoring the internal struggle and vulnerability associated with coming out and visibly forming part of the LGBTQ+ community in UK secondary schools.

Discussion

Combining the use of corpus and qualitative content analysis allows us to triangulate data from different perspectives. The corpus analysis, in particular, helps to identify the ways in which schools act as oppressive institutions, where LGBTQ+ students are policed and expected to conform to heteronormative and cisgender expectations (e.g., Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013), and highlights deep-seated cultural issues in schools. For example, the number of issues linked to the idea of a "lack of" (Figure 2), shows an indifference to or inability to engage effectively with LGBTQ+ matters, and emphasizes the significant barriers created by schools' cultural norms. This lack of institutional engagement suggests a failure to empathize and/or understand the needs of LGBTQ+ students and why the ways schools operate can cause them genuine harm.

Visibility versus invisibility is a 'central component' in maintaining cisnormative power dynamics within schools (see McBride & Neary, 2022, p. 1092; also, Payne & Smith, 2022). Our results suggest schools are perpetuating the invisibility of their LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ identities in general. It seems to be up to individual students to decide when to be visible or not, whether that visibility is in the form of a badge or reminding teachers of pronoun preferences, but this requires courage. Participants made clear that deciding on whether or not to affirm visibility is a continuous process (see Roseik, 2016). Challenging that invisibility requires different forms of courage. The seemingly simple act of wearing a badge renders an individual visible, and can potentially lead to physical and/or psychological risk, and also reflects a desire to stand up for one's identity.

Schools clearly need to do more to counter heteronormative and cisgenderist

norms, and that responsibility should not be devolved to LGBTQ+ students. As Roseik (2016) writes:

> Resisting the invisibility enforced by normalization is not something that can be accomplished by LGBTQ students and families alone. This transformation requires whole communities to do the work of making gender and sexual pluralism visible. It requires education of teachers and administrators so they can expand their imagination to include anticipation of the needs of LGBTQ students and families. Teachers need to learn to interact with students in ways that do not assume heterosexuality and cisgender status as a default (p. 456).

This requires extra "effort" (Airton, 2018), yet it is LGBTQ+ youth who are making the effort to be open (and thereby displaying courage in that action). This is not reciprocated by others—schools are not providing strong outward messages about being LGBTQ+ inclusive, suggesting a lack of courage on their part.

The analysis helps us to see the ways in which LGBTQ+ youth act courageously, demonstrating 'vulnerability-in-courage'. LGBTQ+ students have to find ways to navigate through the microaggressions, minority stresses and institutional repressive frameworks (BLINDED, 2022; 2023; Meyer, 2015; Travers et al., 2022). However, as Gooding et al., (2023) show, the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth within schools are mixed, being neither entirely traumatic nor ecstatic, rather these students are in a process of constantly negotiating their way through their daily lives. This is also reflected in decisions to act courageously. LGBTQ+ students make choices over when to act and when not to. These students are engaged in a process of determining when to demonstrate physical, moral and/or psychological courage (Detert & Bruno, 2017; Pury et al., 2007), and when the risks are seen as too high or requiring too much emotional labor, they choose to protect themselves. Clearly, schools should be safe spaces where students should not have to engage in daily acts of courage. Nevertheless, as the data

analyzed shows, students often feel compelled to stand up for themselves, due to their vulnerability (Butler et al., 2016).

LGBTQ+ students make active choices regarding their actions. Clearly there is a strong volitional element—students are choosing to attend school and classes, choosing to be out and choosing to challenge certain behaviors, language and social norms. The decisions, in many cases, are cognitively and emotionally calculated—many of these students are making considered choices about when to be out, when and how to attend school and so forth. In some ways, this reflects a careful consideration of risk, so there are times when some students will not feel safe and opt not to attend a class, but at other times, students put themselves in situations where they perceive risk. This helps to provide a more nuanced and positive framing of the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, showing activism and agency through calculated acts of courage (Gooding et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020). All of this again requires emotional labor, with students choosing when to put themselves in positions where they might be harassed or abused—such calculation takes a great deal of fortitude.

Conclusion

We recognize that participant selection by school staff and non-inclusion of students who still feel the need to hide their identity may limit how representative our focus groups are of LGBTQ+ and ally school populations. However, in common with the existing literature, our findings highlight the challenges that serve to alienate and marginalize LGBTQ+ students, which can negatively impact their mental health and general wellbeing. Fear of attending school means affected LGBTQ+ youth are likely to have lower levels of attendance, find it harder to concentrate once in school and thus may struggle academically. This is the context within which many LGBTQ+ youth in the UK seem to have to navigate their school lives. This study adopts a fresh

perspective on this reality and identifies various ways in which LGBTQ+ youth display courage and navigate heteronormative and cisgenderist environments. We highlight the courage displayed by LGBTQ+ students, for example, in wearing badges or skirts, dealing with slurs, insisting on chosen pronouns. We argue that we not only gain a better understanding of how individual acts of bravery can pave the way to greater acceptance and LGBTQ+ education among the wider school community, but also how such courage can ultimately lead to policy changes.

From a methodological perspective, the use of corpus-assisted discourse analysis complements our qualitative content analysis, highlighting particular issues around school culture, particularly the discourse around 'lack of', and feeling "(un)safe" and "(un)comfortable". We encourage other researchers in LGBTQ+ youth studies to consider using corpus-assisted discourse analysis in a complementary way.

Above all, we urge further exploration of how to transform schools so that the courage to navigate LGBTQ+ identities in UK secondary schools does not fall solely on the shoulders of identifying students.

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