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Article

Revisiting Past Experiences of LGBTQ+-Identifying Students: An Analysis Framed by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract: The United Nations (UN) places inclusive and equitable lifelong quality education at the center of its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education. Nevertheless, the express inclusion of gender non-conforming and sexual minority students is omitted from UN communications. Drawing on interview and focus group data with recent secondary graduates who identify as LGBTQ+ ($n = 20$), we investigate their experiences, in terms of equity and inclusivity and lack thereof, in schools during the first years of the SDG-era in Spain (the data collection type respected participants' personal preferences). Three SDGs, complementary to SDG4, were used as a framework for data analysis: SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG5 Gender Equality, and SDG10 Reduced Inequalities, with SDG4 interconnectedly at the center of the overarching analyses. Participants reported preventable aggressions that affected their mental health and wellbeing in schools, receiving little LGBTQ+-related content in classes other than one-off mentions, and reflected on gender inequalities in their treatment from both peers and teachers. The authors discuss the need for local and national development education action plans and policies to address the exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ+ students in Spanish high schools and elsewhere.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students; secondary schools; SDGs; inclusive education; global citizenship and sustainability; social science in sustainability



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1. Introduction

A crucial challenge facing education is how to best equip teachers to educate future citizens who widely effectuate meaningful change and work toward a fairer, more just society [1–3]. The United Nations' widely-championed global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [4] have been touted as a map of guidance for schools and educators [5,6]. Generally, the SDGs aim to “set the world on a path of peace, prosperity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet” [4], p. 2. There is a clear emphasis throughout the SDGs on equality and inclusion.

The SDG 4 Quality Education places special focus on the need for an inclusive and equitable lifelong quality education for all. Many of the SDGs are highly interconnected [7] and webs of relationships and overlap can be found throughout the 17 SDGs. Three of the SDGs interconnected to SDG4 are highly relevant to LGBTQ+ students and their right to an inclusive and equitable lifelong quality education. As authors we consider that these are: SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG5 Gender Equality, and SDG10 Reduced Inequalities. Equality and inclusion should be addressed at the educational policy level, school level, and in teacher and student actions, relevant to these three interrelated and complementary SDGs.

1.1. SDG3, SDG5, and SDG10 and Their Relation to Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education for LGBTQ+ Students

The literature shows that in stark contrast to SDGs 3 (Good health and well-being) and 10 (Reduced inequalities), LGBTQ+ students who do not feel supported and safe at school may drop out or leave secondary education with comparatively lower levels of learning than their peers [8], which, in turn, affects their opportunities in life in terms of finance and mental and physical health [9,10]. The isolation of LGBTQ+ students, which takes several forms at secondary school [11], can have drastic consequences, including suicide [12–14]. Again, this is a far cry from SDGs 3 (Good health and well-being) and an inclusive and equitable education for all. Harmful, unfair treatment of LGBTQ+ peers may lead to students not disclosing their sexual or gender identities and violence may be directed toward LGBTQ+ individuals [15]. While not explicitly mentioned in the SDG3, SDG5 and SDG10 targets, it should be recognized that LGBTQ+ individuals in general, including students in many schools, are in danger of not receiving equal treatment. The heteronormative organization of curriculums and stereotypes of students and teachers alike pose the greatest challenge. Regarding gender equality, many (e.g., [16,17]) find the SDGs not only heteronormative, but also unambitious, and oversimplified in its conceptualization of gender and what it implies. The SDGs, in general, need a more explicit focus on marginalized groups, and this includes sexual and gender minorities, e.g., [17–19].

1.2. The Study Context

Despite social, political and legislative changes that have given rise to greater acceptance of people who identify as LGBTQ+ in Spain, e.g., [20–22], studies of young people in Spanish secondary schools generally highlight significant levels of victimization and marginalization, e.g., [9,23,24], and misunderstanding of LGBTQ+ students, e.g., [25–27]. This largely seems the result of schools failing to ensure that students who identify as LGBTQ+ receive the necessary support from school staff, e.g., [11,28–31]. The current literature pinpoints challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students in their school experiences and reveals how schools and teachers can inadvertently and unknowingly contribute to an exclusionary and unfair treatment of sexual and gender minority students, e.g., [11].

Teachers in Spain often feel that they have insufficient training to support LGBTQ+ students and to cover and integrate LGBTQ+-related content [28,31]. One study [28] surveyed teachers in twenty Spanish public high schools and concluded the following:

... not all teachers act in situations of harassment occurring in the school. Most teachers reported that they had heard homophobic discourses and indicated that support for sexual minority students was not available. Some refer to the fact that they do not have adequate training, others do not know how to act in such situations, but a large percentage gives no reason for why they do not intervene. This leads us to wonder whether the reasons and their role in these situations have never been raised. Training policies should therefore remedy this omission by designing actions to address teachers' passivity to LGBTphobia, because it is crucial to develop a safe environment for these young people.

(p. 2445)

These same authors revealed that many teachers reported witnessing incidents in which LGBTQ+-identifying students or identified students were verbally insulted and ridiculed, but many of these teachers did not see this as harassment.

Furthermore, with respect to education legislation, the integration and/or inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues is not mandatory in Spanish schools and these are rarely addressed [32]. Although education laws theoretically encompass aspects related to sexual diversity respect and integration and, therefore, to LGBTQ+ matters, these are not clearly reflected in the educational competences of secondary school curricula [28,32] and only occupy a marginal place. Topics related to LGBTQ+ integration and equality are limitedly mentioned in some parts of the legislation and in some autonomous community curricula. However, it is assumed that students' social and emotional development and integration issues

are incorporated in an interdisciplinary manner through the 2013 educational legislation LOMCE [33] but, as with the former education 2006 educational legislation, LOE [34], this is so broad that LGBTQ+ topics are rarely actually covered in the classroom [28,32].

The results of these studies on the experiences lived by LGBTQ+-identifying and identified students in Spanish secondary schools are a far cry from the direction envisaged by the United Nations' SDGs [4] focus on educational equality and inclusion. However, in light of the documented victimization and marginalization present in seemingly many schools, e.g., [23,27], it seems we are a long way from achieving equality and productive, vibrant and peaceful lives for many LGBTQ+-identifying students. The literature reveals the need for the development of local and national education action plans and policies to address the exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ+ students in Spanish secondary schools and in teacher training programs.

1.3. The Present Study

In an aim to create a framework for educational policy action required to support students who identify as LGBTQ+, the qualitative data analyses carried out were based on three SDGs, closely connected to the SDG4 Quality Education (see [7]). Specifically, we used the SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG5 Gender Equality, and SDG10 Reduced Inequalities [4] in order to deductively analyze data. These SDGs were used as an analysis framework for LGBTQ+ student interview and focus group data (total $n = 20$) to better understand their secondary school's experiences, and as a way to analyze and address shortcomings in the SDGs in order to recommend policy reform and action, see [35]. In light of SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), the research questions explored in this study are as follows: (1) How does the experience of discrimination or lack thereof by LGBTQ+-identifying recent secondary graduates minorities operate in Spanish schools? (2) What preventable aggressions do these recent graduates identify? Furthermore, the authors posed the question of what educational legislation, schools and staff can do to improve, in regards to these SDG, in order to bring about a more equitable and inclusive education for LGBTQ+-identifying students.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Qualitative data was drawn from a sample of twenty LGBTQ+ students attending one of two Spanish universities in Catalonia (one larger public university and a smaller private university). All participants were born in Spain had completed their secondary school studies in Spain. An email was sent out from the University of Barcelona's Faculty of Education's Dean of Students, and recipients were encouraged to share the call for participants with potentially-interested peers. A liaison at the University of Vic contacted students directly. Twenty-five current university students responded to the calls for participation and twenty of these ended up participating. Participants were given the option of taking part in a focus group or a one-on-one interview, based on their personal preferences regarding how they felt most comfortable sharing their past high school experiences. Seventeen participants opted for one-on-one interviews, sometimes reporting that this was the more comfortable option for them, and in other cases, because it was logistically easier to schedule the interview at their individual convenience instead of needing to coordinate with others. The three participants that opted for focus group participation were friends who had met at university and preferred to participate together.

The one-on-one interviews ($n = 17$) and one focus group ($n = 3$, see Table 1) were conducted with participants who had graduated from secondary school in the past five years, which had given them sufficient time to reflect on their experiences but was not so long that they had forgotten relevant aspects, see, for example, [36]. This also allowed us to include students who were not 'out' during secondary school. At the beginning of the interview, students were asked how they self-identified within the LGBTQ+ collective and whether or not they were out as LGBTQ+ in secondary school (as in [11], p. 172–173). As

reported in Table 1, six students self-identified as lesbian, six as gay, six as bisexual, one as non-declared and one as asexual at the time of data collection. Half of the participants were out during high school and half came out after leaving high school (see Table 1). No selection specific selection criteria were used regarding volunteer participants' self-identification. Unfortunately, no trans or nonbinary students responded to the call for participation. The names of the participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Table 1. Participants self-identification at time of data collection and pseudonyms.

Data Collection Type *	Pseudonym	Self-Identification	Openly-Identified as LGBTQ+ during High School	Openly-Identified as LGBTQ+ after High School
Interviews	Alba	Bisexual	✓	
	Albert	Gay		✓
	Alfred	Gay		✓
	Anna	Bisexual	✓	
	Arnau	Gay	✓	
	Clàudia	No specific identification	✓	
	Coral	Bisexual		✓
	Cristina	Bisexual	✓	
	Dani	Gay		✓
	Estela	Lesbian		✓
	Ester	Lesbian		✓
	Iris	Lesbian		✓
	Jana	Lesbian	✓	
	Laura	Lesbian		✓
	Mercè	Lesbian		✓
	Paula	Asexual	✓	
Xavier	Gay		✓	
Focus group	Aina	Bisexual	✓	
	Mariona	Bisexual	✓	
	Martí	Gay	✓	

* At request of participants.

2.2. Data Collection, Instrument and Analyses

The face-to-face interviews and the focus group discussion were conducted by the University of Barcelona and University of Vic-based authors who explained that the overarching aim of the research project was to better understand LGBTQ+-identifying students' secondary experiences, in order to contribute concrete recommendations for training future high school teachers. The tool used for the interviews and focus groups was a translated and extended version of Harris et al.'s instrument [11], pp. 172–173, which was adapted to the Catalan/Spanish context and implemented in a semi-structured manner. Additional questions were added to this instrument that focused specifically on interventions or lack thereof in the social studies classroom, such as "In secondary school, did you teachers include LGBTQ+ content in your social studies classes?" and "Was LGBTQ+ content ever covered in history class, for example?" If the answer was "yes" students were asked to provide concrete examples.

With participant consent, interviews and the focus group were recorded; they were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed in their original languages (Catalan or Spanish), then the selected excerpts were translated into English by the first author. The interview excerpts published in this article were cross-checked with the translation by a member of the University of Barcelona's translation services. As explained previously (see Section 1.3. "The present study" for more detail), the SDGs: SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG5 Gender Equality, and SDG10 Reduced Inequalities were used as a conceptually deductive coding frame, see [35].

Deductive analyses drawn from an existing framework are especially useful in contextualizing and complicating existing knowledge [37]. Given the promotion of the SDGs in many countries and contexts, for example, in educational contexts [5,6], we consider this analytic strategy especially timely. Thus, as mentioned, data were coded by the Spain-based authors, who had all participated in the interview process, adopting a deductive analytical approach leveraging the use of the previously identified SDGs as a specific theoretical framework. This approach was deemed beneficial by the researchers who considered that by applying a novel framework different to that used previously by the team, e.g., [11,30,38], novel connections within the data would become evident. In other words, analysing data through the language of the SDGs revealed connections and patterns that otherwise would have been concealed [39].

Nevertheless, more research and depth are still needed to aid in reaching an understanding of the immediate contexts at hand and placing data within the context of a larger frame [40]. It is important to note that the data generated from the same interview and focus-group instrument are intentionally being employed for four distinct purposes by research group members in both Spain and the UK. Therefore, the data presented in this article is a subset of a larger study currently aiming to: (1) corroborate and expand on previously qualitative data collected in the UK, (2) act as a base for the composition of subsequent quantitative surveys, (3) to help explain quantitative pilot survey findings, and (4) as an argument for future large-scale and international research proposals. This means that different domains of inquiry have concurrently been employed, each corresponding to one of these four aims. The current analysis, published here, corresponds to aim number two in the much broader scope of the larger research team's study exploratory mixed methods study.

3. Results

3.1. SDG3 (Good Health and Well-Being)

In the interviews, it was clear that there was a great deal of variation between schools, resulting in very different experiences for students who identified or would end up identifying as LGBTQ+, depending on what school they attended. Not all participants had negative experiences in their schools, however, some had suffered extreme bullying and a sense of isolation. The treatment of select peers and a failure of the school to address this treatment clearly affected student mental health and well-being.

In the case of Anna, her high school climate was so negative that she, and other peers in a similar situation, ended up moving to different schools. Anna describes a worrisome school climate where teacher support was limited to someone who was not even Anna's own teacher:

So, I changed schools in year 3, because it was unbearable. They didn't do anything to help us at that school. It was awful. In fact, I didn't want to go out to recess at break time. I told my teacher and he said stuff like, "Well, today they're picking on you but tomorrow they'll move on to someone else". And there was a German language teacher who wasn't even my teacher but was supervising at recess time, and she let me and another girl who was being bullied go to her office, because she was a nice person and didn't know what else to do. She knew that no one would help her [help us], so that's what she did with students who didn't feel comfortable. But she was the only one who . . . oh, and the conserge [man who worked at the front desk] but the other teachers [did nothing]. We spoke to the headteachers but nothing was done. The year I left, five people out of two classes left because we couldn't take any more.

Anna clarified that five people that left were LGBTQ+-identifying.

Generally, study participants felt that there was a lack of staff support within their high schools. However, like Anna, Alba and Arnau also came across individuals at their school who expressed their willingness to help, but who lacked the support of general school policies or school leadership.

There was a teacher when I was in my second year of bachillerato [final university track years of secondary school] who made it very clear that she was very open and that we could go and talk to her if we wanted (Alba).

[My assigned mentors¹] were always willing to have sessions to support us and, when we had a problem, they suggested that we speak directly to the headteacher. They were always willing to help us. I think there could have been more general awareness in the school, rather than depending on the [luck of which] class group [you were in] (In Spanish high schools, students are often placed in stable class groupings who do not change in composition except for elective courses, see [41]). These classes are assigned a stable mentor with whom parents communicate if need be). I mean, they should have made it general school policy, instead of [this support] being based on the personal relationship of teacher X with class X (Arnau).

Here, Arnau recognizes that support from individuals from his school was down to good fortune as to who was assigned as class mentor, more than as by design from the institution. He recognizes his fortune as an openly-identified homosexual male, compared to the situation of less fortunate students, in receiving support from his class' different assigned mentors over the years. It is important to note that Arnau, like Martí who we will meet later, as white males from non-religious, middle class families, may have had different experiences than some of their LGBTQ+ peers living different home and peer situations.

Martina agreed with many of the other students interviewed in that she felt that, as a general rule, the teachers did not know how to deal with LGBTQ+-related conflicts or insults, whether minor or major.

For example, we were in class and, you know... someone said, 'Well, she's not really a woman, she's a dyke'. And none of the teachers said anything. Nothing happened to them. And I couldn't believe it was really happening and no one was doing anything. I just remember losing it. I started to say, how can you say that? But the teacher just stood at the whiteboard, completely silent, without saying a word. I thought, this is awful, so much needs to change... I don't know. It was intense.

Martina went on to reflect on how the fact that her teacher was unable to stand up for her and the LGBTQ+ community in general in the face of this and similar aggressions affected her sense of self and her mental well-being.

Alba mentioned that the failure to discuss LGBTQ+ matters at school in anyway negatively affected her health and well-being, since it caused her to experience an identity crisis. She found it difficult to pin down what she was feeling and how that related to her potential identification as bisexual:

I remember thinking about it and telling myself maybe it wasn't true, maybe I was lying to myself. Now I think about it, it doesn't make any sense... maybe I was bisexual or something. I remember hearing a voice in my head that told me I was just doing it for attention, but of course I hadn't told anyone so how could I have been doing it for attention? But I said to myself, I only see things like this online, but I shouldn't rely on the Internet. I have to trust what my teachers say, and my parents and so on, but especially teachers. They're not saying anything about it, so I must be making it up, it can't be right, what I am thinking? And sometimes I had a hard time because I doubted myself and then I thought, well if I'm doubting myself, what will others think if I tell them?

Alba said that if teachers had addressed LGBTQ+ issues in a normalized way, she would not have felt as lost and detached and could have identified and communicated her bisexuality to her peers, family and school staff much sooner. Acknowledgement of the acceptance of different sexual and gender identities would have made her process of coming out much less painful and difficult.

Importantly, there were students who praised their high schools, like Clàudia and Jana, and even Anna, now in her new school. Nevertheless, normalization seemed to occur in a bottom-up way, by way of student-led initiatives and general peer acceptance, and was not necessarily due to institutional policies or teachers' targeted interventions. Clàudia remarked on how she felt her situation in high school was exceptional:

I think I am a quote unquote an exception, because I was really lucky to go to my high school where everyone was really open... all of my classmates that went to high school with me currently identify in some way with the [LGBTQ+] community... in this way, I mean, I think I was lucky.

Along these lines, Jana commented:

*At [my] high school girls walk out of school holding hands, kiss each other, and it is totally normalized. At school it is normal, especially thanks to TV series like *Élite* (The TV series that Jana refers to here is a Spanish Netflix series that focuses on various storylines of LGBTQ+ characters, prominently featuring a homosexual relationship between characters of acutely differing class and religious backgrounds), etc., that normalize it. I think that in this sense we have advanced a lot.*

Here, Jana comments only on girls holding hands and kissing. It is unclear if she felt that kissing and holding hands between girls was more acceptable at her school or these instances were more salient to her as an out lesbian during high school.

Anna, who had left her former school with a toxic school climate (along with other LGBTQ+ schoolmates), now at a new school, commented on the widespread normalization of LGBTQ+-identification once she changed schools and attended an art-focused university track high school program:

*I was in the artistic *batxillerat* [university track], and everyone was very openminded... and almost all of us were practically bisexuals in the class, and there were 16 of us. It was the most normal thing in the world. I never had any problem.*

Clearly, the school environment significantly influenced whether students had positive or negative experiences in school regarding their overall mental health and well-being. Unfortunately, but for these exceptions of peer-supportive school climates, in other schools, limited support seemed to come from specific individuals who for one reason or another, made themselves more available to LGBTQ+-identifying students and/or those who seemed to need support.

3.2. SDG3 (Reduced Inequalities)

There were missed opportunities for including LGBTQ+ issues in the curriculum. One clear example of this came from Clàudia, as she reflected on her primary school's surrounding social geography. She pointed out the following:

*My primary school was actually in a part of the *Eixample* [a centric Barcelona neighborhood] they call the *Gaixample*, because it's full of gay bars and nightclubs, but we never talked about it. I remember there was a *conserge* [person that works at the entrance a school]... we thought he was gay, so we had the typical impressions of 7-year-old kids, and the teachers were fully aware of that, but it was never addressed, it was like whenever we started talking about it in front of the teachers, they made us change the subject, as if it was taboo. So, no, it wasn't talked about among the kids or among the teachers.*

Clàudia's comments are perhaps more concerning when one considers that the curriculum that the school was supposed to cover during her primary years largely focused on the physical and social school surroundings. There was, and still is, in the current legislation, a clear curricular emphasis on field trips in the surrounding neighborhood, mapping surrounding buildings and finding out about the social and economic factors relating to the local community. This failure to address student comments and curiosity adds to the severity of the lack of inclusion of the clearly visible LGBTQ+ community

surrounding the school grounds. This omission sent a clear message to students about who was considered acceptable to include in the school curriculum and who was not, contributing to student perceptions of inequalities.

A recurring issue raised by the participants was the minimal inclusion of highly specific LGBTQ+ topics that were all covered in a day and the inclusion of “fun facts”:

Those issues were mostly covered in citizenship class in ESO [the first four years of high school], when we talked a bit about feminism, racism, etc. Once they played a monologue of an LGBT person . . . but they just put a video on and that was that, job done (Albert).

But in history and stuff we didn't study any figure who . . . no . . . I mean, if there was anyone who openly identified as LGBTQ+, we never discussed it in class, maybe they said it as a kind of fun fact, but it was like . . . it was nothing to do with how it had affected their thinking or actions (Clàudia).

Nothing about sexual orientation or gender identity or anything like that was ever discussed. Maybe there was the odd debate in philosophy, or maybe in ethics or citizenship, subjects like that, but they were one-off situations. It was stuff like what is pride month like, let's do a class about it. And then it wasn't mentioned again for the rest of the year (Estela).

In the focus group, Martí, Aina and Martina also talked about opportunities in which content related to LGBTQ+ issues could have been included but were not:

No, in fact, there's a really lovely subject called ethics, but they don't make the most of it. It's like . . . it's just there to tick a box and then it's like bye, see you later . . . and I think a subject called ethics could be used to address these issues, but it's just not the case (Martina).

I was told about Plato in ethics. It was like “introduction to philosophy”. I mean nothing to do with ethics or, I don't know, modern society or anything. No, they told me about Plato. Or how if you saw an older person on the street, you could ask him if he needed help crossing. So those issues weren't raised in those classes either, you know? (Aina).

In citizenship class, we watched films about how to carry out good deeds, help older people cross the road, stuff like that. And you think, well, maybe they could use some of that time, or in our mentoring classes, when the mentor is supposed to establish a relationship and turn it into a safe space, but then he uses the time to go over Section X of the maths textbook because we ran out of time in maths class. So that time is used to catch up with other stuff because otherwise they won't get finished by the end of the year. So, there is time, but I don't think it's used properly. It's badly managed (Martí).

None of the participants mentioned that LGBTQ+ issues were included in the curriculum beyond one-off incidents or “fun facts”, a phrase mentioned multiple times in English during the Catalan and Spanish-language interviews as a lexical Anglicism. They all agreed that a clearer commitment to LGBTQ+ issues is needed, for example, in the subject of ethics or when covering historical subjects. Dani pointed out that if LGBTQ+ matters and historical figures had been integrated into the school curriculum, not only would it have helped him in his acceptance of himself, but also aided the rest of the students to see LGBTQ+-identification as more normalized.

Laura mentioned that although LGBTQ+-related content was not integrated in their secondary studies by her teachers, she herself, presented to their class LGBTQ+ related matters in their final year projects. She reported:

Honestly, hmm, I don't remember [LGBTQ+ content integration in high school], I would say no. But what is true is that I did my final year research project on adoption by homosexual couples . . . it was very well-received. I was really surprised because in the beginning I was embarrassed, but in the end, I came out [of the experience] very happy because of the response, both that of students as well as teachers.

Other proposals were not as well-received as that of Laura by school staff. Mariona explains a pitch she made about her desire to walk in her secondary graduation ceremony alongside her girlfriend:

At our graduation from batxillerat [university-track high school], the school assigned you a partner, obviously, heterosexual, girl-boy. So, we wanted to walk together because we were really excited about this. We commented it to one of the headteachers, who was in charge, and she told us we were just saying [that we were girlfriends] because we didn't want to walk with who we were assigned, that it was obvious that we were pulling her leg, that when a person is a lesbian you can tell, and with us it wasn't evident. And she knew that we were doing this because we didn't want to walk with the boys.

Here we have students excited about being seen together in an important public ceremony, and institutionally being denied that right, to the extent that the headteacher questioned their LGBTQ+-identification as they did not conform to her stereotype of what a lesbian looks or acts like. This situation is concerning beyond the heteronormative insistence in boy-girl groupings in a graduation ceremony as it leads to a more extreme denial of these two students' identifications and deeper relationship with each other.

3.3. SDG5 (Gender Equality)

Not all discrimination is equal within the LGBTQ+ group. It seems that 'masculine' behavior was generally more accepted. Interestingly, this privilege was mostly recognized by many of the participants themselves, whether they "benefited" from this or felt they were victims of such privilege. Martí told us that he did not suffer discrimination because, according to him, he was openly gay, but his behavior was more 'masculine'. By contrast, he said, male peers with more 'feminine' behavior were treated differently:

Well, the guys who were more quote unquote effeminate, shall we say, got called names like 'faggot' or whatever... Or there were times when someone new came to class and said something to me without being aware my sexual orientation. But I've never had a problem. Some people in my class did have problems, though, especially boys who didn't identify as gay but behaved in a way that was associated with being homosexual. They got quite a lot of comments and to be honest they were pretty derogatory.

Dani, like Martí and also identifying as a homosexual male, says he did not remember ever being discriminated against during or after high school, while he did, however, notice that others, who were not homosexual males, but who identified within the umbrella of LGBTQ+, were discriminated against.

Martina, who identified as bisexual female when she was in high school, also recognized her privilege within the LGBTQ+ student collective within her school. She explained why she thought she did not suffer discrimination like other students:

I think they left me alone because there's always a kind of sexualization with bisexual women... They think, wow, she likes men... well, at that time it was men and women, of course, and it's taken for granted that bisexuals only like men and women. And they were like, 'Wow, I can have something with this girl and another [girl]', you know? I think that's why I didn't get bullied in that way, because they thought, 'Oh well, she likes girls, the same as me'.

The privilege Martina seems to recognize here goes beyond the treatment she perceives as being a bisexual female, both as a sexual object and like "one of the boys". We can also observe privilege here in how she refers to "they" as the students to who one infers have the power in this situation are the heterosexual males that choose to accept Martina. As in the case of Martí, it is these heterosexual males who seem to be policing the heteronormative norms.

Clàudia talked about the differences between how people who identify as LGBTQ+ are treated in terms of their sexual orientation compared to people who identify as LGBTQ+ in terms of their gender identity. She noticed a huge difference:

I think that sexual orientation is more normalized, shall we say, and it's something that also maybe doesn't affect others. It's a case of, you come out of the closet and that's that. You get on with your life. But with trans issues and gender identity, since you actually have to change as a person, with different pronouns and everything... hey struggle more and it's treated as more of a taboo.

Alba also highlighted gender and identity differences within the LGBTQ+ group, and pointed out how men who identify as gay are privileged:

Yeah, people who identified as gay men received virtually no support, but at the same time they also received the most support, because the others [other LGBTQ+ students that were not homosexual males] were treated like they didn't even exist.

Others like Paula, who identifies as asexual, complained that the few times LGBTQ+ issues were addressed at her school, they focused on lesbian and gays and overlooked other sexual orientations and gender identities.

Also, when LGBTQ+-related mentions (the “fun facts” indicated in earlier participant excerpts in this article) were made in the social studies classrooms, they seemed to be exclusively focused on homosexual male historic figures or touched on a general acceptance of male homosexuality. In the focus group, Martina pointed out the following:

We had an art history teacher who actually retired that year, so I mean she wasn't exactly young. She always told us all this stuff about the artists. She got a kick out of it because teenagers find it very funny. She'd tell us about how Van Gogh was gay and how he was involved with Gauguin. Sometimes she mentioned it in the usual way you talk about the life of an artist, like 'he was married and had three children', but instead, 'he had three lovers and two of them were men' and that was it.

Martina went on to lament that this teacher did not enter into any more depth than this, reflecting on the acceptability of homosexuality or not in the social reality of the time. Coral reported on her social studies experience in high school:

Only a mention was made when we were studying the Ancient World that relations between men were frequent. Especially when talking about Sparta and Athens.

Three participants explained that teachers made mention of the sexual orientation of the well-known male Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, but all reported that none of these teachers went into any sort of detail into the social reality/level of acceptance of homosexuality at the time. According the reporting of many of the participants, one-off mentions of the LGBTQ+-identification of historical figures, not only of García Lorca, but also of others, or periods of acceptance of homosexuality in general, exclusively referred to homosexual males. This limited focus was not confined to historical references. Referring to her health class, Mercè pointed out:

They talked to us about aspects related to HIV, but always from a gay perspective: male-male. The homosexual relations were catalogues as male-male and not female-female.

The few and far between references to LGBTQ+ matters and issues reported by participants in the classroom seemed to be largely focused on male homosexuality with no reference to female historic figures or other content related to other genders and sexual identifications.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

If the SDG are truly to be used as a map of guidance for schools and educators [5,6] and this map leads toward equity and inclusion, this study shows that the SDGs suffer evident shortcomings concerning the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students. The former high school student participants in this study reported how they felt their mental health and well-being suffered during high school due to treatment by peers and teachers. They also discussed how occasional well-intentioned attempts to integrate LGBTQ+ content in the classroom or deal with LGBTQ+ victimization fell short in truly reducing inequalities for

sexual minority students in the participants' schools. Many also directly and indirectly highlighted gender privileges that further enhanced inequalities within their schools.

4.1. A Need for High Quality Teacher Pre-Service Education and In-Service Educational Leadership Programs Focused on LGBTQ+ Equity and Inclusivity

Analysis of participant comments showed a need for teacher pre-service education and in-service educational leadership programs that focus on LGBTQ+ matters to enlighten teachers on issues they might otherwise avoid out of indifference, lack of awareness or insecurity [28,42,43]. In the framework of the SDGs, a number of steps can be taken to improve teacher pre-service education and in-service educational leadership programs. Teacher training programs must help teachers navigate their implicit bias and acquire the tools to deal with LGBTQ+ victimization in schools [32,42,43].

Regarding SDG3, Good health and well-being, the present study is consistent with many carried out in Spain, e.g., [23,26], that have pointed to the abuse suffered by many people who identify as LGBTQ+ at high school both on the part of peers, but also in inaction of teachers. It seemed that the student participants in this study felt their teachers were unaware of the drastic consequences of teacher and administrative inaction in the face of LGBTQ+ victimization. A failure to address these issues in a constructive way could end up affecting the long-term health and well-being of people who identify as LGBTQ+ (see, for example, [10]). Educational leadership programs must emphasize mental health awareness and a need for visible LGBTQ+ institutional support [43] at the level of the entire institution. These actions must be part shared, school projects and not relegated to individual initiatives that, although well-intended, fall short.

With respect to the interrelated SDG10 (Reduced inequalities), the present study is consistent with [32] in its criticism of more recent education laws [33,34], which are so broad that LGBTQ+ issues are rarely included in the classroom. According to the former high school students we interviewed, there was zero or very minimal integration of LGBTQ+ topics and issues, and when they were included, they were restricted to the odd fun fact, one-off video or talk in which LGBTQ+ members were presented as victims; these findings are in line with [11]. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that many teachers consider that they do not have sufficient training to cover and integrate content related to LGBTQ+ issues, lack general awareness or are they themselves indifferent [28,31,43]. The student participants in this study clearly show that they perceive their teachers as ineffective in meeting what they consider curricular integration of LGBTQ+ content. The data in this study reveal a need for schools to normalize LGBTQ+-identified individuals in a way that is integrated throughout the curriculum and avoid focusing on LGBTQ+ individuals as victims [11,44,45]. In this way we will have more welcoming classrooms for people who identify as LGBTQ+, or who could potentially identify LGBTQ+ one day, and that both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students understand that there are many ways of being and identifying and that this diversity should be celebrated and normalized. The only way to celebrate and normalize is through initiatives that spur from school and statewide commitments to change.

Regarding SDG5 (Gender equality), the limited curricular integration of LGBTQ+ matters tended to center on male homosexuality. Furthermore, both this study and that of [30] demonstrate that some forms of LGBTQ+ are less socially acceptable than others. It seems from the data in this study that some sexual orientations are more accepted in high school settings (e.g., gay and sometimes bisexual and lesbian) and that men with 'masculine' behavior experience fewer problems, see [30,38]. In addition, people who identify with less normalized forms of LGBTQ+, such as Paula who identified as asexual, were frustrated at the lack of recognition of their identity and the increased marginalization she perceived to have experienced. Teacher pre-service education and in-service educational leadership programs should work to enlighten future and current school staff that a sort of moral licensing of LGBTQ+ inclusion may occur when teachers exclusively or principally integrate LGBTQ+ identities that are masculine or well-known. This can lend to a "false sensation of

equity” [46], p. 46. An effort must be made to extend gender justice efforts, e.g., [42,47], to include those within the LGBTQ+ community.

4.2. Policy Changes

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are endorsed by the United Nations as a framework to show the way to reducing global poverty and inequality. Nevertheless, no mention is made of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. Given the estimated growing percentages of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ globally, e.g., [48–50], this is a grave omission. Unless the SDGs and other international and local policies and policy frameworks recognize LGBTQ+ individuals and thus encourage transformative local, national and global strategies and alliances, LGBTQ+ injustice will remain the norm, see [18,19]. This small study is specific to high school experiences of former students in a limited number of schools in relatively progressive regions within Spain. It is important to note that compared to 27 other European countries, Spain shows comparatively high levels of LGBTQ+ life satisfaction, and low levels of LGBTQ+ identity concealment [51]. Given these contextual realities, the data analyzed in this study points to a problem that is likely exacerbated in high schools elsewhere in the globe, and therefore, even more argument for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ minorities in policies like the SDGs.

Therefore, in light of the results in this study, secondary schools in Spain and elsewhere should reflect on their current practices concerning the LGBTQ+ collective. This reflection should include inquiry into whether they are addressing the SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) regarding LGBTQ+ students themselves and LGBTQ+ matters in general. Without an interconnected reflection on these three SDGs, SDG4 (Quality Education) cannot be achieved given that equity, inclusion and well-being for all students go hand-in-hand with quality education. Keeping in mind the many volunteer participants in our study who did not identify as LGBTQ+ until after they left secondary school, we would like to emphasize that schools should not only focus on inclusion and equity regarding ‘out’ LGBTQ+ students, but also ensure on covering LGBTQ+ matters and content in a consistent and normative way, e.g., [11,30]. Furthermore, SDGs and other international and local policies and policy frameworks need to expressly and saliently recognize LGBTQ+ individuals and their right for equity and inclusion, thus formally inviting transformative local, national and global actions in a top-down manner.

4.3. Study Limitations

This study, like all studies, presents some limitations. It should be noted that our sample was small and homogeneous and consisted of mainly university students with a medium or medium-high socioeconomic level who were willing and motivated to spend time participating in the study. Unfortunately, no trans or nonbinary students responded to the call, nor did students with an immigrant background. Future similar studies should aim sample LGBTQ+ students who opted to not attend the university or were unable to attend. An effort should also be extended to obtain a more diverse sampling of LGBTQ+ students, one that is more diverse regarding class and ethnicity and that includes trans and nonbinary participants.

4.4. Concluding Remarks

Spain was the third country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2005 and compares favorably to averages of European countries in the passing of pro-LGBTQ+ legislation [52]. Nevertheless, given the anti-LGBTQ+ agenda promoted by far-right groups in Spain, like the political party Vox, who aims to prohibit the inclusion of LGBTQ+ matters in the school curriculum [53] and applauds the banishing of books that contain LGBTQ+ content [54], it is an important time to engage in conversations about the true nature of equity and inclusion of the SDGs.

A number of teaching associations have worked internationally to identify and disseminate high-quality aspects of social studies teaching [1–3]. All have underlined a number of valuable opportunities offered by social studies teaching that are missed if sufficient time is not spent on them. One of these is democratic principles and values with a clear focus on equality. These associations have stressed the need to encourage our students to be compassionate, committed, ethical and collaborative individuals. Furthermore, they have also highlighted the importance of having frank, reasoned discussions in an environment conducive to presenting a variety of views and perspectives in a respectful manner. Another central principle they share is that diversity and inclusion that affirms and celebrates cultural and identity diversity can help fight discrimination and raise awareness that there are multiple perspectives, experiences and ways of life. It is clear that these aspects are closely linked to SDG3 (Good health and well-being), SDG4 (Education quality), SDG5 (Gender equality) and SDG10 (Reduced inequalities). Nevertheless, like the SDG's, these policy recommendations and frameworks should make express mention of LGBTQ+ inclusion. It is part of the task of policy makers, education-focused think tanks and organizations, school administrations, teacher trainers and teachers to try to make classrooms and schools more inclusive through the effective curricular integration of LGBTQ+ topics, ensuring that this integration extends beyond a simple chat or an approach that presents LGBTQ+ people as victims. This will give rise to more welcoming classrooms for people who identify as LGBTQ+, or who could do so in the future, and will help our students understand that there are many ways of being and identifying. It will also help ensure that this diversity is celebrated and normalized in future classrooms.

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