The impact of gender diversity on expression - the language of sexuality - how early childhood studies students understand the semantics of gender dysphoria

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Abstract
Gender diversity is a current and much debated topic. Students are entering university with contemporary meanings and beliefs around the use of language in the discussion of gender that can challenge traditional value systems surrounding biological determination. This qualitative research was carried out with Early Childhood Studies students by means of self-directed focus groups. The aims were to investigate students' views on the language of gender diversity, gender differences, and the extent to which language can reflect and create gender identity. The research finding provides deeper understanding about how a group of traditional and non-traditional students interpret, use, and understand the language of gender.

Keywords: *Gender dysphoria, gender inclusive language, discourse, semantics, identity*

Introduction

Gender inclusive language and the debate surrounding this topic is relatively new, although it has gained a significant place in higher education [HE] in recent years (United Nations, 2024). In 2017 the UK government announced that it would undertake a review of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA) (Gender Recognition Act, 2004). The GRA had been significant; for example, in enabling trans people to change their birth certificates to their acquired gender without the requirement of surgical interventions. Therefore, the use of pronouns has become increasingly important, as well as conventional ways of addressing students and staff in terms of gender identification. Considering this opening in the body of knowledge, this qualitative study sought to investigate the collective perception of traditional and non-traditional students, attending childhood studies programmes at a Post 92 university in England. Post 92 universities also known as 'new or modern' universities were given university status in 1992 (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992).

The focus of the study was to find out the views of students on gender identity and language, how they use it, what is considered acceptable to them, and what barriers they may come up against. The term traditional *student* is typically defined as someone between the ages of 18 and 24, who first enrolled in their university immediately after graduating high school (or after a planned 'gap year'), while *non-traditional students* may deviate from their traditional counterparts in more ways than age. For example, they are 21 or over at the start of their studies, may have a dependent(s) other than a spouse, work part time or full time (UCAS, 2020). In this study we refer to *gender identity* as an individual's sense of their own gender (e.g., as a male, female, nonbinary). *Gender expression* is how an individual presents their gender to others through physical appearance and behaviour, while *gender diverse* is a term that addresses the spectrum of gender identities (NSPCC, 2024). In this work Atkinson and Russell's (2015) basic definitions were used:

Biological sex- based on reproductive organs

Gender identity- the inner sense of being a 'man' or a 'woman'
Gender presentation- how gender is expressed on a 'feminine' to 'masculine' scale.

Therefore, the aims of the research were:

1) To determine views of Early Childhood Studies (ECS)] students on 'gender' discourse in language
2) To find out how students, both traditional and non-traditional, use language to present gender identity
3) To explore students' 'ideologies' about variable gender identity

The research was carried out with two different types of students, traditional and non-traditional, on Early Childhood Studies [ECS] programmes. Almost all the students were female and this reflects the sector, with estimates only 2% (NCFE, 2022) to 3% (Bonetti, 2018) of early years practitioners being male. Against a theoretical background which included relevant definitions, gender related ideology, language and identity, the research was conducted using words derived from the University and College Union (UCU, 2021). The UCU is the trade union for university and college staff in the United Kingdom and has provided training materials for negotiating the language of diversity. The methodological approach was qualitative, involving four focus groups, as they were considered appropriate in securing meanings from the students. The method used was developed and selected specifically to allow the groups to discuss the words freely and to minimise the influence of the researchers on the groups. Data were coded and analysed against the theoretical background and conclusions drawn from this, significant differences were found in how the words were interpreted between the two main groups.

Review of the literature

Based on the assumption that the use and meaning of the language of diversity has changed rapidly in recent years, the first step in the context was to arrive at definitions to work with. Definitions addressing 'gender' were influenced by the feminist framework in particular considering biological determinism (Connell, 1987), and gendered inequalities (Davies and Gannon, 2006). It has been claimed that the reason for having gender categories (that are constantly constructed and reconstructed) in any social group, is that gender is a 'fundamental component of the structure of domination and subordination' (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 5). For example, the competence of men and women as gendered begins with how well they demonstrate qualities that are associated with understandings of femaleness and maleness. Davies (1989) further claimed that those who adopt identities outside the dominant versions of gender (male v female), that is, those who do not perform within the socially accepted boundaries of masculinity and femininity, risk marginalisation. For example, understanding sex-role stereotyping tends to reinforce the biological understanding of being female and male. In terms of Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] and in English context, the employment of males in nurseries is not always considered 'normal'. Male nursery workers are often treated with scepticism (Mikuska, 2021) and, in this context, the status of the gender group is not equal. Examining the aims of this research considering these debates, can we illuminate the ways in which the gender related language has been constructed in the current educational environment.

These debates further influenced the development of gender related definitions which were broad and widespread, but helped with the research focus. For example, the meaning of gender is further complicated by the universal cultural belief that gender differences are due to underlying biological determinations (Conelli, 1987), leading to traditional meanings of gender that typically focus on the difference between two distinct gender categories (Walker, 2014; Ward and Lucas, 2023). Whereas it could be generally accepted that babies born as female sex will later view themselves as 'women', and those born into male sex will develop into 'men' and dress accordingly, it was accepted that sex and gender are more likely to fall on continuums rather than in neat, dichotomous categories (Atkinson and Russell, 2015). The following model was used to work with this continuum (Table 1).

Table 1: (A Gender Agenda, 2024).

	Intersex	
Male	Biological sex (Anatomy, chromosomes, hormones)	Female
	Genderqueer/bigender	
Man	Gender identity (Sense of self)	Woman
	Androgynous	
Masculine	Gender presentation (Communication of gender)	Feminine

With basic definitions of gender arrived at, further investigation was carried into variations between birth, or cis gender i.e., decisions about a person at birth based on genitals (Healthline, 2024), and gender as identified by an individual. Definitions included 'gender dysphoria', i.e., the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics (Mayo Clinic, 2024), and 'gender diversity'. This was to acknowledge and respect that there are many ways to identify one's authentic self beyond the binary of the male and female framework (Walker, 2014). The extent of gender diversity was also considered; figures from the Riittakerttu et al. (2018) indicate that of 17–70-year-old males and females in the Netherlands with desire to undergo sex reassignment were 0.6% and 0.2% respectively, with about 0.5% of adults in the general population identify as transgender. Across Europe and North America 1.3% of 16–19-year-olds had potentially clinically significant gender dysphoria (Riittakerttu et al., 2018).

Conceptual framework

Gender identity was viewed as a form of ideology, or a system of beliefs shared by a social group or movement that could be social, political or religious ideas (Van Dijk, 2007; Cerezo et al., 2020). Van Dijk (2007) accepts that ideology need not be dominant, but simply the basis of social practices for group members which can often emerge from group conflict and struggle, and this definition was considered appropriate for gender diversity issues. Van Dijk views ideology as a form of social cognition or the basic beliefs that underlie the social representations of a social group, and that much of our discourse, especially when we speak as members of groups, expresses ideologically based opinions. In a Foucauldian sense (Khan and MacEachen, 2021), discourse concerns power balances and the nature of truth. These ideologies, it can be argued, are learned through the media, reading textbooks at school, or participating in everyday conversations with friends and colleagues, and this was felt significant for the study.

The concept of language was interpreted in a semantic sense, as '… a guide to social reality …that powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes' whereby the 'real world' is unconsciously largely built up on the language habits of the group…." (Sapir 1949: 68-69). Kearns (2011) distinguishes between two aspects of language. The first is the *literal* meaning of words and how they are combined and taken together to form meaning, and the second is the *pragmatics* of language or how literal meaning must be refined, enriched or extended to arrive at an understanding of what the speaker meant. In other words, language is a mirror of culture that simultaneously reflects culture and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is a symbolic representation of a people, that signals historical and cultural backgrounds, an approach to life, and a way of living and thinking (Jiang, 2000). As Wittgenstein (1961) stated, the limits of one's language mean the limits of their

world. Wittgenstein wrote about 'linguistic confusion' and 'private language'. By linguistic confusion, Wittgenstein accepted that language can be used to communicate different ideas and concepts, however language cannot convey all possible meanings. By private language, Wittgenstein referred to language as meaningful only where it is shared by a group of people, and thus not meaningful if used by an individual alone. Language can have different meanings in different contexts; according to Crystal (2005) the word *meaning* itself has 25 different meanings, so the elements of verbal communication should not be taken for granted. The codes of language are culturally agreed through symbols to assist in organising, understanding and creating meaning (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993), they are complex and subject to constant change (Zimmer, 2017). According to Shahrebabaki (2018), language has influence on our identity formation; it reflects race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality, and helps in the realisation of one's 'self' in given social environments. Language helps us to communicate observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (McKay, Davis, and Fanning, 1995) but is also a method to encode and share collective experiences (Chiu, 2011). Affective language expresses a person's feelings and creates similar feelings in others; it can be used in relationship building by developing interpersonal bonds (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). Therefore, language will reflect the shared experiences of a group (Ross et al., 2002). If words are *felt* as such, language has the potential to influence and transform the perceptual world (Abram, 1997). Darvin and Norton (2019) refer to the different aspects of the 'self' and that in recent years, the relationship between social and cultural identity has become more significant but also more fluid. They argue that meaning making takes place at the micro-level of interactions, and that cultural identity arises from how an individual relates to a particular group who share language and similar ways of understanding the world. Shahrebabaki (2018) argued that through the influence of language on identity, people learn to be e.g., male, female, a nationality and, or ethnic group. For Wittgenstein (1961), language does not reflect reality; as Barraclough (2004) states, it is a metaphor for reality. It was against the backdrop of these ideas that the research took place to gain an understanding of how students understand and express issues around gender identity and diversity.

As well as language, the research approach was also interested in how identity is formed. According to Crocetti (2017), adolescents attempt to create continuity and self-sameness in their lives. The continuity and sameness are based on real, although subjective, experiences according to their own understanding of what is important for who they have become. Crocetti writes about cycles of identity formation, *identity formation* and *identity maintenance.* Identity formation occurs when adolescents consider identity alternatives and form identity commitments. Identity maintenance cycle is a function to maintain and further strengthen chosen commitments, although uncertainties may lead the person to reconsider and go back to the identity formation cycle (Crocetti, 2017). These cycles are used as a process as to how adolescents form their own identities.

Thus, the data was collected and analysed through the lens of definitions of feminist debates, ideology, discourse, semantics, pragmatics, and culture. The findings of this research could inform policymakers in education that can be seen as a potential vehicle to challenge and renegotiate symbolic and cultural notions of gender identity.

Methodological approach

The overall research strategy was qualitative, as the intention was to explore how the sample group makes sense of their everyday world, and the assumptions they hold about gender related language, what practices they adopt, and how they understand from within (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The aim was to find out how meanings were shared by the participants through indexicality, and how language is used to find the taken for granted meanings, and how everyday conversation conveys more than is actually said through linguistic methodologies (Cohen et al., 2018).

Apart from the reasons outlined above, logistics posed a problem, i.e., the time and location of getting the participants involved, thus a group approach was selected to enable 'conversations' between participants. This would gain a wide range of responses especially as participants were familiar with each other and would allow for a number of students to get together (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987). However, due to the subject matter, there was a risk of "poor prompting, bias probing, poor rapport" (Oppenheim, 1992: 96-97) on the part of the facilitator. Conventional focus groups were also considered as these would offer interactions within the group to gain collective responses rather than the researcher's agenda dominating (Morgan, 1988). However, this did not guarantee that all the participants would feel comfortable enough to say something (Cohen et al., 2018). Also, there remained the risk of dominance by some intra-group disagreements and conflict (Newby, 2010). Despite identifying benefits to these approaches, the issue of reflexivity was perceived as a significant perceived barrier to successful unfettered data collection. This problem is outlined effectively by Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), where researchers should self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate their own subjectivity and influence the research processes. The issue being faced was how to disentangle personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors that could have influenced the research. A perceived issue was the age of the two researchers (late fifties and mid-sixties respectively) and the effect this could have on interactions over the issues on the language of gender. As well as this, one of the researchers is a native Hungarian speaker in which language the commonly used pronoun for gender diversity is 'they'. In Hungarian, this does not translate either linguistically or culturally. So, the issues faced were identified as potential poor rapport between researchers and participants (Oppenheim, 1992), the potential for the use of leading questions (Cohen et al., 2018), acquiescence, i.e., agreement by the participants with the researchers despite what is really felt or thought (Breakwell, 2000), power lying with the facilitators (Thaper-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004), and the defining of the questions, topics and course of discussions by the facilitators (Kvale, 1996).

To overcome these potential issues, a decision was made to use the method of the self-directed focus group to make use of minimal structure, reduced role and power of the facilitators, to achieve emergent understandings about potentially sensitive issues (Wood and Ristow, 2022), although as Wood and Ristow point out this approach does not necessarily eliminate power issues *within* the group. The final decision was made to simply use relevant words to attempt to stimulate conversation and allow the dynamics to find their own direction. The words used were taken from training literature from the University and College Union document 'LGBT+ a guide to language in use' (UCU, 2021) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Words used.

Words used
Words used; Sex; Gender; Gender identity; Sexual orientation; Pronoun; Binary-gendered; Cis-gendered; Heterosexual; LGBTQ+; Gender queer; Gender dysphoria

These words were written on A4 sheets of paper and given to a volunteer in the group to show the rest of the group in their own time, to get reactions from the group, and stimulate conversation. The procedure was as follows: all groups were Early Childhood Studies students, the conversations were 'timeless', in other words allowed to run as long as needed. The conversations were almost entirely self-directed with minimal or no contact between facilitators and the groups, and the discussions were video recorded. Data analysis was thematic, but as stated above, subjectivity should be considered due to researchers' background, identity, and background. Research variables were collected (see Table 3).

Table 3: Group characteristics.

Group 1: Traditional students (in total 15)	**Group 2: Non-traditional students (in total 13)**
Most in placement in various EY setting and some in Primary School	Most worked in an EY setting OR as a Teaching Assistant in primary schools
10 female 1 male	12 female 1 male
Most white British	All white British and between 32-58 years
Most in 18-30 age group (1 in 56-61 age group)	9 identify as she/her and 1 identify as gay
12 identify as she/her 1 identify as he/his and 2 did not disclose identity	10 have children on their own

Data analysis

The recordings were reviewed, and data analysed by layers of coding to determine emergent themes and sub-themes (appendix 1), group the themes addressing if there are hierarchies, and link themes to theoretical models (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In general, there were similarities, but considerable differences between how the groups managed themselves and discussed the words.

Group 1

The following extract is from a self-directed focus group of 6 individuals discussing gender pronouns and societal awareness. They related to the kind of education needed to raise awareness about gender identity. The recording was 22 minutes long, in which they discussed issues around the number of pronouns and about the need of educating people:

R: I find it difficult to remember them, there are so many of them now, the more I see them the more there are I just need to have my head around.
G: there are six I think, the usual one, she, he her but then got they, he-she, the mixture of them, and I don't know
R: Exactly, so confusing.
T: I am really confused, I ask people's names so it is secure. I always double check. yeah… (all agreement).
R: It is almost more controversial using the wrong pronouns.
T: I don't really follow it which does not mean I am not respectful, just not really following this. I don't think I know anyone who is not he or she.
B: Is transgender a gender? Sorry to ask this, but I am really confused. It is a scale no? But how would you identify yourself then?
C: Do we have to? I guess, I really like the poster, like downstairs in the library, so everyone can read about this.
B: I think every student needs to have it in their starter pack, and to be included in the induction week.
F: Yeah, it is such a good idea. I feel people who are ducating and those who educated, slike everyone has to have an open mind, yes, open minded
B: What about having it on your student ID card? Yes, I like my idea.
C: But why should we educate, what should be there, a lesson about something that should be just integrated in the society, only raising an awareness is needed.
G: Yes, I think when you grow up it is just normal, and the need to raise awareness is just temporary for older generation,

The conversation carried on about from what age the posters should be put up in schools, and whether primary schools should or should not address gender identity other than biological determination. This group took a highly

personal view of terminology used, and they had some reservations about the ability to meet needs of those with gender dysphoria.

In the other focus group, a considerable amount of time was spent on the words directly, and the remainder in free discussion after (the only) prompt from facilitators. The words on paper were used mainly for description, with more detailed analysis when 'off-script'. From analysis of the data, three themes were identified showing sympathy for, comment on the terminology, and acknowledgement of the novelty or 'newness' of gender diversity issues (Table 4).

Table 4: Traditional students - themes.

Group 1: Traditional students		
Theme 1 **Sympathy**	Theme 2 **Terminology**	Theme 3 **Novelty**
Personalisation Sympathy for Trans people and those adjusting to new terminology Acceptance of controversies around gender dysphoria Felt some terminology is derogative e.g., 'queer' Sensitive to potential for offending sensibilities Conscious of 'labelling' trans people, respect individual wishes Reservations about hormone blockers for children	Struggle with some terminology as there are 'so many' and it is 'hard to follow' Recognition of time and use of terminology Difficulty adjusting to use of pronouns Consider terms as 'gay' and 'lesbian' to be sexualised Some acknowledgements that terminology may became mainstream eventually	Accept that Trans issues are more mainstream today Some terminology is new and developing Pragmatic about terminology Empathize with those who struggle with terminology Traditional views may be the 'problem' Sense of exclusion from Social media important Aware of a moral panic about gender diversity issues Importance of education/educating people

Group 2, the older group, were more confused over the terminology, and rather than taking a personal view, took a broad, societal view of these issues. The following extract indicates how they feel about some people treat them:

A: With the 'they /them' people are getting angry at you. If you don't call them how they want to, you get in trouble.

C: I just think that for them [other than biological gender] they think it is normal, but for us it is not. Typically, it is male or female, you were taught that from a young age, and now you suddenly find yourself in a situation where it is not.

D: This doesn't mean we don't accept the younger generation.

[A B C D talking at the same time agreeing what was said.]

A: Automatically we go he or she.

B: But this is because we don't know anyone who is not.

C: Exactly.

A: If we to know someone maybe we would pay more attention

D: I think sometimes they are confused, and if the person in question gives clear instructions on how to be called, then it would be easier. You address them THEY, you don't want to offend.

A: Yes, like Ze or Zem

C: And what is that? I am really getting confused now.

A: I think you don't identify yourself as gender.
B: Oh God. But this should be THEY.
C: Maybe. Probably. Oh… I don't know.
D: I'll go with whatever, but I cannot follow this anymore.

They needed to and helped each other to understand some of the words and were focused on the terminology throughout and said little 'off script' except for elaboration or anecdotes. Those participants, who had personal and/or professional experiences with different gender identities (such as transgender, cisgender or non-binary) were more in a 'leading a conversation' role. Generally, this group required no prompting from the facilitator, (it can be called participatory facilitator) and looked to the facilitator for guidance at only one point. From analysis of the data, three themes were identified showing confusion, tolerance, and a societal view of gender diversity issues (Table 5).

Table 5: Non-traditional students – themes.

Non-traditional students		
Theme 1 **Confusion**	Theme 2 **Tolerance**	Theme 3 **Societal view**
Confusion over meaning of terms esp. cis gender, dysphoria, gender queer Some explanations discussed Dysphoria thought to be a mental health condition View that terms are interpreted in different ways More than binary male/ female is baffling Pronouns 'they/ them' are plural and not suitable for individual people 'Gender queer' considered a derogative term Terms such as LGBT+ are getting more and more difficult to understand	Accept and respect those with gender dysphoria No need to understand Express a limit, e.g., young children and gender identity Gender dysphoria suffers from tokenistic attitudes Some people are oversensitive Difficulty to override gender stereotypes Some resentment over priority of Pride over e.g., Armed Forces Day Acceptance that celebration compensates for hiding sexuality in the past Trans people need to understand the difficulty others e.g., older people, have in understanding them Fear of offending trans people	Babies are born either 'male' of 'female' Beyond the personal and into e.g., policy Historical anecdotes Cultural view of stereotypes- Father Christmas/ tissues/ chocolate Awkwardness, e.g., midwives labelling babies Men who transition are not 'women' but 'transgender women' Pronouns are social construction Resentment over trans men entering female spaces, e.g., toilets, female sport events

Findings summary

The findings were linked to the research aims and after coding, data was divided under five subgroups: ideologies, discourse, semantics, pragmatics and culture. The discussions were based on our understanding of the language used which considers the perspectives of the traditional and non-traditional students, interpreted through some of the debates discussed in section two and three (Crocetti, 2017; Barraclough, 2004). The

participants understood gender identity development as an ongoing process that was also contextual, which was seen as simultaneously freeing and restricting.

The finding showed that there are similar discussions between the two main groups. For example, both groups:

- struggled with terminology, but the older group more so,
- empathise with those who struggle with trans terminology,
- saw some terminology, e.g., 'gender queer' as derogatory,
- are sensitive to negative labels being applied to trans people.

While there were similarities there were some inconsistencies, such as:

- traditional students took a much more personalised and pragmatic view that the older students,
- traditional students more sympathetic than the older/non-traditional students,
- traditional students see traditional values as an obstacle to progress, whereas older/non-traditional students feel traditional values are being threatened,
- non-traditional students are more concerned about trans men entering female spaces (e.g., toilets),
- non-traditional students feel that trans people need to have more concern for e.g., older people who do not understand trans issues.

Theoretical discussion

This article builds upon recent research on gender inclusive language (e.g., Zimman, 2017), and investigates the school experiences of binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning adolescents separately in the UK context. Findings demonstrate that gender-diverse adolescents experience considerable discrimination within the school environment (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights, 2018). This study extends previous research by focusing on multiple aspects of the school environment, including space, peers, and teachers. Additionally, this study adds to the existing knowledge base by highlighting the strategies that gender-diverse adolescents use to navigate the school environment.

This discussion is divided into five sections that feature in the conceptual framework; first, the research aims and definitions are revisited. In terms of definitions, neither of the groups had great difficulty in recognising and discussing the words given to them, in general, the traditional students (Group 1) were able to carry out debates more readily. Even so, the younger students still struggled with some terminology, and found difficulty in adjusting to pronouns such as 'they/ them'. However, non-traditional students (Group 2), were more confused with some terms, especially those that develop such as LGBTQ+, and were wary of different meanings attached to some of the words.

Ideology

In terms of the systems of ideology as beliefs and social practices (Van Dijk, 2007), Group 1 took a highly personal view of the words discussed; they saw these issues as devolved to the individual and personal choice signifying their identity. The emphasis is, therefore, on the gender identities that tend to be constructed through several socially defined voices rather than through one unified and coherent storyline. Gender identity formation, therefore, operates between the personal and the surrounding social world. whereas the older group took a much more societal, albeit binary, view with reference to wider social issues such as the restraints on midwives labelling babies at birth. Having said this, the younger students drew the line at hormone blockers for young children. The traditional students considered gender diversity as more mainstream than the non-traditional students, with the older students expressing some suspicion about (especially male to female) transitions. Both groups expressed reservations about their ability to avoid offending trans people. This was more about an inability to meet the needs of trans people by the younger, and more about falling into a trap by not knowing how to relate to trans people,

by the non-traditional students. However, non-traditional students did question social priorities over what they considered the excessive celebration of 'Pride' over more traditional events such as 'Armed Forces Day'. So, there were subtle but tangible differences over ideology between the two groups.

Discourse

In terms of power issues (Khan and MacEachen, 2021), Group 1 accept the novelty of diversity issues whereas Group 2 found the language of diversity overpowering with some difficulty in overriding gender stereotypes; there was a certain awkwardness in this (Zimman, 2017; Wittgenstein, 1961). Participants in Group 1 felt terminology is new and developing and embraced this, while participants in Group 2 feel that gender dysphoria issues suffer from tokenism and that they are given too much importance. Group 1 accepted controversies around gender dysphoria with little question whereas Group 2 see some in the gender diversity sphere as 'oversensitive', and that trans people need to understand the difficulty others, e.g., older people, have in understanding diversity issues (Ward and Lucas, 2023). The traditional students felt a sense of exclusion from gender diversity issues, in other words they felt a sense of shame that they did not know enough to engage fully; they also outlined the significant role of social media in understanding diversity questions. Group 2 did not mention social media, but they did see a shift in a power balance for previously excluded groups; they accept that celebration of diversity issues today, compensates for the hiding of sexuality in the past.

Semantics

In terms of the semantics of the language of diversity, (Kearns, 2011), the shared cultural meanings of the words discussed brought out some differences in interpretations. Although both groups struggled with some of the evolving language, participants in Group 1 were more confident and quicker in giving definitions. Group 2 discussed at length confusion over terms such as 'cis gender', 'transgender' 'dysphoria', and 'gender queer'. To this group the word 'queer' was seen as a derogatory term and there was some difficulty accepting it in the lexicon and in the changing language landscape. Overall, the older students felt that that terminology was getting increasingly more difficult to understand despite seeing it as a potential tool in recognising gender identity development. It is interesting that participants in Group 2 questioned the use of 'they/ them' from a grammatical point of view, while participants in Group 1 who were much more open, expressed sympathy not only for trans people, but those who find it difficult to adjust to the evolving terminology (Ward and Lucas, 2023).

Pragmatics

In terms of Wittgenstein (1961), participants in Group 1 considered the words less in terms of linguistic confusion than participants in Group 2. Non-traditional students looked for more definitive universal meaning of the words, whereas traditional students were happy with 'looser' interpretations. The latter fit more with Wittgenstein's (1961) concept of 'private language', that the language of diversity is meaningful mainly in the group most associated with it, and they themselves felt out of the loop and excluded from much of the discourse of diversity. However, Group 2 did accept that words can be interpreted in different ways (Zimman, 2017), and like participants in Group 1, they felt (more) excluded to the point that they did not feel the need to engage with the language of diversity. For example, they expressed that the recent use of pronouns is an example of an unnecessary social construction that they are expected to adhere to (Cerezo et al., 2020). In terms of words like 'queer', both groups were conscious of labelling and insulting trans people due to other meanings they have been aware of in the past. However, only the younger group were confident that the terminology in question would eventually become mainstream.

Culture

'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world' (Wittgenstein, 1961), and the limits of one's world reflect the culture they live in. There were varied if subtle differences in the cultural outlook of the two groups. Group 1 saw traditional values as an issue in advancing the cause of gender diversity, in other words people with traditional views about sex and sexuality were holding progress back. Therefore, it can be argued that identity formation was rooted in resistance against social pressures including from family of origin and valued community spaces (Cerezo et al., 2020). Specifically, it was noted the importance of community resilience and how they created their own social support networks upon facing marginalization whereas the older group felt that the trans movement expects too many people to adjust to the new realities. This is despite participants in Group 1 having some sympathy for those trying to adjust their use of language, and they themselves having difficulty with pronouns. Participants in Group 2 displayed open support for trans people, but used cultural examples such as Father Christmas and advertising for tissues and chocolate to regret how traditional assumptions about gender have changed. Having said this, traditional students questioned how terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' are unnecessarily sexualised, and the non-traditional challenged diversity on the grounds of protecting female spaces such as toilets and sports events from trans men.

Traditional students viewed gender diversity and language as natural, whereas the non-traditional students saw it more ideologically, even though both had their own reservations. Group 1 accepts, and understands the language of diversity more than Group 2, in general, participants in Group 1 feel excluded from the main debates, while on-traditional students harboured some resentment at being expected to adjust. It was evident that they have more difficulty with how language is changing to meet the needs of what they consider to be a 'minority group'. Therefore, some traditional students view that language of diversity as 'matter of fact and those traditional values hold back the development of gender inclusive language. Whereas some of the non-traditional students expressed their view on language as an unnecessary social construction which challenges the traditional values.

Conclusions and reflections

In terms of analysing the data, the respondents have been presented as the 'traditional' group and the 'non-traditional' group. In some respects, the responses were distinct for each group, but the students also share common ground. The former group embraced the language of diversity, whereas the latter found it more confusing, troublesome, and threatening. There were also differences in how the two groups felt about the words used in the research; for the traditional students, the language of gender diversity is more of a personal identity issue whereas it was more of a wider society issue for non-traditional students. There were differences in how the groups interpret cultural change, traditional students look forward to further cultural developments and accept that language will change with it, but non-traditional students tend to look back and compare cultural change and the language that accompanies it with a time before gender diversity issues were in the public discourse. However, both traditional and non-traditional students share the fear of offending trans people over language used e.g., pronouns. This micro study illuminates the ways that the interpretation of the gender inclusive language has changed over a short period of time. However, it would be useful to find out if these findings would be similar with a different sample, i.e., students from different, or outside, academic programmes, those with more diverse age differences, or more of a gender mix.

The method of self- directed focus groups was justified in meeting the aims. The self-direction of the group with minimal involvement of facilitator allowed for more naturalistic discussions and allowed for different approaches for each group. However, it is proposed that should subsequent research be carried out, a grounded theory approach may be more appropriate. In view of the freedom the respondents were given, the theoretical framework may have restricted the analysis of data on the topical subject of gender diversity.

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Appendix 1: Theming of data

Table 6: Theming of data.

Gender diversity theming of data		
Concept	Traditional students	Non-traditional students
Ideology	Personalisation Acceptance that trans issues are more mainstream today Sensitive to offending Consider some terminology derogative, e.g., 'queer' Reservations about hormone blockers for children	Beyond the personal/ historical anecdotes Gender dysphoria thought to be a mental condition More than binary- male/female is baffling Fear of offending trans people 'Gender queer' considered a derogative term Some resentment about priority of 'Pride' over e.g., Armed Forces Day Express limits, e.g., young children and gender identity Babies are born either male of female Men who transition are not 'women' but 'transgender' women

Discourse	Accept novelty of trans issues Feel terminology is new and developing Accept controversies around gender dysphoria Sense of exclusion from gender diversity issues Social media is important in transgender issues Reservations about hormone blockers for children	Gender dysphoria suffers from tokenistic attitudes Some people are oversensitive Difficulty in overriding gender stereotypes Accept that celebration compensates for hiding sexuality in the past Trans people need to understand the difficulty others, e.g., older people, have in understanding them Awkwardness, e.g., midwives labelling babies
Semantics	Good with most definitions but struggle with some, e.g., LGBTQ+ Sympathy for trans people as well as those adjusting to new terminology Empathise with those who struggle with terminology	Confusion over meaning of terms, e.g., 'cis gender', 'dysphoria', 'gender queer' Some explanations needed 'They/ them' are plural and not suitable for individual people Terms such as LGBTQ+ are getting more difficult to understand
Pragmatics	Pragmatic about terminology Conscious of labelling trans people Acknowledgement that terminology will eventually become mainstream	View that words are interpreted in different ways No need to understand terminology Pronouns are a social construction
Culture	Traditional views may be the 'problem' Difficulty adjusting to use of pronouns Consider terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' to be sexualised	Accept and respect those with gender dysphoria Father Christmas, tissues and chocolate, and gender assumptions Resentment over trans men entering female spaces, e.g., toilets, female sports events