

Research Article

Beyond Binaries: Non-Heteronormative Vignettes in School Workbooks

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Abstract

The use of vignettes in school workbooks is usually intended to provide an effective way for students to think about real-life situations or historical events and better understand their significance. This paper presents a study that outlines a content analysis of vignettes that are part of three workbooks, which are currently being used in secondary schools in Malta for the subject *Personal, Social and Career Development* for students aged 14-16 years. In particular, the study focuses on vignettes that are not heteronormative and pays attention to how LGBTIQ+ individuals are portrayed or made absent within the brief narratives. The vignettes selected for the study depict examples of life situations, aimed as a learning tool for students to discuss issues revolving around dating, connection, sexual consent, harassment and sexting, among others. These situations often imply some kind of decision making that involves a transition, such as experiencing sex for the first time or initiating casual sex. The study shows that non-heteronormative vignettes are well-represented in the corpus of the workbooks' vignettes. The study argues that vignettes could be useful in linking abstract and complex concepts associated with intimate relationships, sexuality and love with tangible experiences. Their use could also facilitate classroom discussion about the narratives depicting scenarios and situations. The study posits that school workbooks could be an effective tool for students to gain more self-awareness

Keywords

Vignettes; non-heteronormativity; school workbooks; LGBTIQ+ young people; youth transitions

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Introduction

This paper presents a study on the use of non-heteronormative vignettes (NHV) in school workbooks, as a learning tool for adolescent students. The study outlines a content analysis of vignettes that are part of 3 *Reflective Workbooks*, which are currently being used in secondary schools in Malta for the subject *Personal, Social, Career Development* (PSCD) for students aged 14-16 years (Forms 3,4,5/Years 9,10,11) attending all secondary schools in Malta (Camilleri et al., 2018; Camilleri et al., 2019a; Camilleri et al., 2019b). Vignettes were selected as the primary focus of the study, because they provide evocative stories or scenarios recounted in more detail than in other workbook components. The study aims to capture this captivating power of vignettes to better understand how students can learn to negotiate complex social identities, as they go through different transitions, and pivotal moments in their life. In the context of the study's vignettes, the transitions outlined in navigating relationship dynamics, revolve around social scripts that students could be immersed in. By prioritizing these detailed accounts, the study focuses on the interpretative process that students could engage in, to understand and explore specific cultural scripts during classwork. More than in other parts of the workbook, the contents of vignettes hold the potential to lead to social inquiry, enabling learners to deconstruct social biases, and identify how institutional or cultural scripts marginalize specific identities. The qualitative content analysis of vignettes under study, focuses on the depth of meaning surrounding the situations and experiences portrayed within the narratives.

PSCD is a compulsory subject in Maltese schools. PSCD lessons are held weekly. The classroom setting is informal. Groups of not more than 17 students sit in a circle format, aimed at facilitating discussion. The use of the circle format during PSCD lessons in Malta is generally "linked to heightened student wellbeing, empathy development, and empowerment through a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere, supported by educators skilled in managing group dynamics" (Scicluna & Bezzina, 2025, p. 66). PSCD aims at the development of students' intra/interpersonal skills. PSCD draws on experiential learning and the processing of personal experiences (Camilleri & Bezzina, 2022, p. 451). The PSCD *Reflective Workbooks* (Camilleri et al., 2018; Camilleri et al., 2019a; Camilleri et al., 2019b) constitute only one resource PSCD teachers can use in class. Teachers can opt not to use these workbooks.

A vignette is a short piece of writing, or visual art that describes an idea, setting, circumstance, event, or character. It is often characterized by its focus on particular details and mood rather than a complete narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Vignettes often present complex issues through portrayals of particular scenarios and situations. In classroom discussions they could be useful for students to share their viewpoints, beliefs and attitudes. The content of vignettes may not necessary be fictitious. It can be derived from blogs, vlogs, websites, YouTube videos and transcripts, and other material in the public domain. The study focuses mainly on vignettes that are not heteronormative. These short descriptive scenarios intentionally move beyond the assumption that heterosexuality is the only "normal" sexual orientation, and that gender identity aligns strictly with the sex assigned at birth. The research questions that guide the study are (i) Do the workbooks' vignettes predominantly present heteronormative and cisnormative perspectives? (ii) Specifically, how many NHV are there in PSCD workbooks? (iii) Do these vignettes represent the diversity of LGBTIQ+ students' experiences and identities, family structures, romantic relationships, and gender expressions present in society? (iv) What transitions are depicted in the NHV? In order to

understand whether NHV are given prominence in the 3 workbooks, the number of heteronormative vignettes (HV) and the topics they depict are also presented in the study. Although some comparisons will be drawn, the main aim of the study is not to conduct a comparative analysis between NHV and HV. Rather, the study involves a critical analysis of the workbooks' content and examines the representation (or lack thereof) of diversity related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and lived experiences within these widely used educational materials in Malta. PSCD holds central importance for socio-emotional learning in Maltese schools (Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). It seeks to develop students' social and emotional competences and promote positive and healthy relationships (Camilleri & Bezzina, 2022). Understanding the extent to which it addresses or overlooks the diverse realities of LGBTIQ+ students through workbooks is considered important. The study seeks to identify areas for improvement in the teaching of PSCD. It also aims to inform the development of more inclusive and affirming learning resources for all students in Malta.

The rationale for choosing vignettes as the focus for this study revolves around their potential impact on students' learning. Through the use of vignettes, students could be informed about perceptions, social norms, relationships, and identities. Their brevity could make it easier for students to understand the described situations and perhaps identify with the scenarios they represent. Although vignettes in educational workbooks might not directly depict the full complexity of LGBTIQ+ young people's transitional life experiences, they can offer valuable insights on significant life choices and serve as a starting point in classroom discussions on youth transitions. The study discusses how vignettes could be utilised as an effective tool to share knowledge and debate issues, which might not be talked about enough in classroom situations (Cassar, 2015). It promotes discourses of openness and inclusion through NHV. The study acknowledges discourses that resist the inclusion of non-heteronormative content in school curricula (Cassar, 2022). In a number of schools across different parts of the world, "LGBTQ issues have long been recognized as a dangerous form of knowledge in school settings" (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021, p. 88). A number of teacher training programmes overlook sexuality education, and even when they do address it, they lack the depth required by LGBTIQ+ students (Carman et al., 2011). Adolescent students "are calling for education that includes information related to sexual orientation, gender identity and the prevention of gender-based violence so that they can develop respectful sexual relationships" (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2024, p. 10).

Contribution of the study

Existing studies about the use of vignettes with LGBTIQ+ youth mostly revolve around their care and mental wellbeing, and around mental health promotion (Lothwell et al., 2020). Research on LGBTIQ+ students has mainly focused on the challenges they face, such as experiences of discrimination, bullying, and their impact on mental health and academic outcomes within educational settings (White et al., 2018; Cassar, 2007). Less research has been conducted on whether sexual orientation affects the transitions sexual minority youth go through. Sexual orientation could be a determining factor that affects the transitions LGBTIQ+ youth go through, as they navigate the developmental stages of adolescence during their school years.

Some research studies explored the use of case studies in teaching, and their impact on the learning process (Pilz & Zenner, 2018). Case studies are often used as part of a student-centred approach that highlights classroom interaction, leading students to actively construct knowledge, rather than passively receiving information (Pilz & Zenner, 2018). Research shows the positive effects on the learning of various competencies, that result from interpreting cases from different viewpoints (David, et al. 2018). These studies however, focus on the use of cases in business studies and management education. Studies, which provide empirical evidence for the usefulness of using case studies in the teaching of PSCD, and similar school subjects are limited.

Vignettes have been used in research to explore the experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth (McInroy & Beer, 2021). This research tool has also been employed to study heteronormative dominance in school settings (Stones & Glazzard, 2020). There is however, a general lack of research on the use of vignettes, which address LGBTIQ+ experiences in the content of school workbooks, particularly within the Maltese educational context. There are also limited studies on the use of NHV as a learning tool for students, as they traverse transitions during adolescence. Additionally, research on youth transitions has mainly focused on young people's educational and work trajectories, and independent living (Furlong, 2016), and less on the transitions involving their sexual selves. With the exception of studies on transitions related to coming out (Cassar & Grima Sultana, 2016), there is a general lack of research on other transitions revolving around the sexualities of LGBTIQ+ young people. This study addresses these research gaps.

Contextual background

Sexuality and relationships education as a specific subject is not part of the curriculum of Maltese schools, but is part of the subject *Personal, Social, Career Development* (PSCD). The *National Education Strategy 2024-2030* highlights the importance for students to have the ability to “connect to others” and “form meaningful relationships” (Vella & Borg Saliba, 2024, p. 38). The guidelines for Maltese teachers of PSCD recognise individual differences among students, based on sexual orientation (Camilleri, 2013). This is also highlighted in the *National Curriculum Framework* (Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 32). Some Maltese students have however reported lack of sufficient engagement with coursework on LGBTIQ+ issues during PSCD classes (Suban, 2023). A retrospective study on Maltese students' perspectives on the sexuality education they received at school when they were in Form 3/Year 9 - Form 5/Year 11 shows that there were shortcomings, such as teachers only mentioning contraception without elaborating on it, and referring only to heterosexual sex (Suban, 2023, p. 48). At the same time, there is some resistance to curricular content on some topics on sexuality, including LGBTIQ+ issues, coming from a number of Maltese parents, especially those with children attending primary school. In 2025 the Maltese law court rejected a Maltese couple's request to remove their 10-year-old child from PSCD lessons, which they considered inappropriate. The court ruled they had no right to alter the national curriculum and that lessons of PSCD are obligatory (Agius, 2025).

Students pertaining to sexual minorities, who attend Maltese schools, are safeguarded from stigmatisation, bullying and homo/bi/trans/intersexphobia through mandatory school policy that aims to protect all students. The policy document *Trans, gender variant and intersex students in schools* (Agius et al., 2015) provides guidelines for students, educators and parents to work “through

differences”, and protect students “against isolation and marginalisation whilst they explore who they are” (Cassar, 2018a, p. 176). A number of LGBTIQ+ young people in Malta however, still feel vulnerable, and face personal struggles both online and offline, even though legislative frameworks that grant sexual minority rights and civil liberties to all, are in place (Cassar, 2021). One of the reasons which accounts for this dissonance between Malta’s top place on the Rainbow Index, a position held for the past 10 years (ILGA Europe, 2025), and the everyday reality of a number of LGBTIQ+ persons, is because “the privileging of heteronormativity had often resulted in social pressures on sexual minority young people to conform to heterosexual roles” (Cassar, 2021, p. 9). This has consequently reinforced closeted identities, reflecting other LGBTIQ+ youth in other countries (Cassar, 2022). While the majority of LGBTIQ+ young people are resilient and mentally healthy, they face a higher chance of experiencing various mental and physical health issues compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers (Lothwell et al., 2020). This has been confirmed pre and post the Covid pandemic (Nowaskie & Roesler, 2022). These elevated risks include victimisation through anti-LGBTIQ+ stigma, and conditions such as anxiety and depression, in addition to being susceptible to smoking, drug use, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts (Lothwell et al., 2020). Trans and gender-diverse students face significant personal, structural, and interpersonal obstacles at school, which impact their school attendance, causing them repercussions on their lifelong, academic, and socio-emotional life (Watts & Brömdal, 2026). Consequently, overall LGBTIQ+ young people have been consistently more disadvantaged. With regards the situation in Malta, the effects of policy implementation about LGBTIQ+ rights take time to be integrated into the everyday life of citizens. Although in certain situations there is a disjuncture between policy and how a number of LGBTIQ+ persons are treated in the personal and social arenas, the stigmatisation of sexual minority youth, which was more prevalent a decade ago in Malta (Bradford & Clark, 2011), seems to be decreasing, as LGBTIQ+ persons living in the Maltese Islands were amongst the least discriminated-against across the European Union (Costa, 2020).

Life portrayed through vignettes

Vignettes hold the potential to support students' understanding of social norms, relationships, and identities. Vignettes provide contextualized and relatable scenarios that can offer clarity about the complexities of their lived experiences. Vignettes, which feature characters or situations that resonate with the experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth, such as questioning identity, coming out, navigating relationships, or facing discrimination, can make LGBTIQ+ youth feel seen and understood. This can be validating, especially if they feel marginalised or invisible in society, or even within their immediate circles. This validation can reduce feelings of shame, confusion, sadness and isolation. Vignettes can prompt internal questions and self-reflection about one's own identity, feelings, and experiences. Vignettes depicting challenges and how to overcome them through skills and supportive environments can provide a sense of possibility, and encourage help-seeking behaviours, if needed. The use of NHV in classroom settings that are inclusive and safe provides one of the ways for “context-specific approaches to the study of LGBTIQ+ issues” (Cooney-Newton, 2022, p. 728). NHV however, mostly deal with the same issues that all youth populations go through. Although there are specific circumstances that often pertain to sexual minority youth, such as coming out or bullying related to one’s gender or sexual orientation, there are universal experiences that occur regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Therefore, NHV can potentially

address common experiences that occur in “the everyday world” (Smith, 1988, p.156), and they could be an effective educational tool not only for LGBTIQ+ students, but for all.

The use of NHV could form part of students’ learning about the rights and duties of being a sexual citizen. The concept of sexual citizenship refers to the knowledge and skills young people require to actively protect their socio-sexual rights and those of others (York et al., 2021). This concept permeates different topics on sexuality and intimate relationships, which are related. It is not unusual for classroom discussions on one topic to lead to other topics. For example, a discussion of a vignette about coming out could spontaneously lead to a discussion on personal disclosure in general, or about hegemonic and toxic masculinities, gender stereotypes or intimate partner violence (IPV). Young people’s sexualities, and how these are lived out “are connected to multiple other phenomena” (Cassar, 2025, p. 55).

Youth Transitions

Youth transitions are broadly characterised by significant changes and transformation that young people experience as they move through the different stages of adolescence into adulthood. This involves navigating multiple interconnected pathways and taking on new roles, responsibilities, and levels of independence. The intersections between experiences of continuity and those of personal transformation generally underlie youth transitions (Woodman et al, 2020). The markers of a “successful” transition can vary across cultures, socioeconomic contexts, geographical regions, and individual experiences (Visanich, 2020). Youth transitions are now characterised by uncertainty, but also by the promise of new adventures. For young people transitions are “no longer just diversified and prolonged; they are reversible and fragmented with uncertain outcomes” (Mangion, 2024, p. 8). In the absence of stability “the identity tasks to be completed are immensely challenging and fraught with risk and young people are forced to make crucial choices in situations where previous norms no longer apply” (Furlong, 2013, p. 126). This necessitates that young people continuously analyse, revise, question and re-interpret their “biographical projects” as part of the adulting process (Furlong, 2013, p. 10). Young people may navigate more than one transition simultaneously, such as leaving home for work or study, adapting to a new way of life and place, making new friends, and fitting in. For LGBTIQ+ youth, new environments might present added challenges, especially if they are characterised by heterosexism, which might feel overwhelming for them (Glazzard & Thomas, 2024, p. 5). New settlements might require coming out for yet another time (Cassar & Grima Sultana, 2016, p. 989).

Adolescence is also characterised by transitions that relate to sexual development. These are usually marked by increased awareness and interest in sexuality, romantic relationships, and intimacy (Hegde et al., 2022). Young people are reaching adulthood at a time when societal norms around gender and sexuality are rapidly evolving (Cover, 2019). The period of adolescence highlights young people’s exploration of their sexuality. However, it’s also a time when they may encounter challenges associated with risks, such as unsafe sex, casual sex, sexual activity influenced by illicit substances, unplanned pregnancies, and the stigma faced by sexual minority youth (Hegde et al., 2022). Like their Southern European counterparts, Maltese youth face multiple forms of anxiety, and grapple with social instability and personal struggles as they attempt to gain autonomy (Visanich, 2017, 2020). A number of LGBTIQ+ Maltese young persons are also susceptible to stigmatisation

(Cassar, 2016). This situation is similar in other countries, despite attempts at inclusion of sexual minority youth in schools (Glazzard et al., 2022). In England sexual and gender-based violence in schools is “a pressing concern” (Setty et al., 2024, p. 434), despite rapid changes occurring around the understandings and practices of gender and sexualities (Risman, 2018). Students pertaining to sexual minorities are more likely to experience bullying during their school years and even after (White et al., 2018). LGBTIQ+ students recount having more negative school experiences (White et al., 2018). For a number of young people who identify with queerness, and non-normative sexualities, navigating through adolescence could signify personal struggles marked by doubts and perplexities about sexual and gender identity, intimate relationships, mental health, and societal acceptance. These challenges often start showing up during the school years.

The Study

All the 3 workbooks under study are written in English, because Malta is a bilingual country (Cassar, 2011, p. 177), and proficiency in both Maltese and English is a requirement for students in compulsory education (Cassar & Attard Tonna, 2018). The workbooks forming part of the study do not use the word “vignettes” but “case studies”. The vignettes presented in the study were identified as being non-heteronormative if they specifically refer to characters who are not heterosexual, and on the basis of the first names mentioned, as normally used in Malta. Unisex names have not been used in the workbooks of the study. Vignettes pertaining to the workbooks under study, are used in conjunction with other types of coursework, such as crosswords and word-meaning matching. The vignettes do not cover all the topics of the 3 *Reflective Workbooks* (Camilleri et al. 2018, Camilleri et al, 2019a, Camilleri et al. 2019b). Included in the mosaic of activities presented in all 3 workbooks, there are definitions referring to gender and sexualities. For example, definitions of gender expression and identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation, are presented alongside the “Gender bread Person” in the workbook for Form 5/Year 11 (Camilleri et al., 2018, p. 33). Next to a number of vignettes there are pictures, which mostly depict groups of young people. Some pictures are non-heteronormative. NHV comprised only of images only do not form part of the study. Some questions, which do not constitute a vignette in a strict sense, also refer to situations in non-heteronormative contexts. For example, in the workbook for Form 4/Year 10 students students are asked to discuss this question: “Why do men who have sex with other men (MSM) also need to use a condom?” (Camilleri et al., 2019b, p. 34). These do not form part of the study.

All the NHV from the 3 workbooks were extracted and compiled into a master document, containing 3 sections - 1 for each workbook. Coding was employed to identify thematic patterns in the vignettes, and also to extrapolate the underlying social scripts. Each vignette could revolve around more than one theme, and coding was useful to identify the inter-sectorial elements inherent in the narration of lived experiences. Through coding, the study could map how the portrayals of different life situations overlap and collide within a single narrative. This multi-layered approach made it easier to ensure that the analysis captures the different transitions depicted, and how these are intertwined. The philosophical rationale for adopting this analytical method is based on the thinking that life transitions do not always entail simple, “black-and-white” choices, but also complex dilemmas. The coding process (Braun & Clark, 2021) was conducted in two phases: an initial descriptive phase followed by an analytical phase to identify emergent themes. The preliminary

coding framework was developed to tag basic descriptive information for each vignette, including (i) subject (ii) characters (ii) transitions and (iii) the specific task or question posed to students. Following this descriptive phase, a more inductive, iterative coding process was initiated. The coding was carried out manually. The vignettes were reread several times to identify recurring ideas, concepts, and patterns. Initial codes were generated directly from the text of the vignettes, focusing on the underlying message or purpose. As new codes emerged, they were compared against existing ones to refine definitions and identify potential relationships. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into larger, more abstract categories, which were then consolidated into overarching themes. This process was facilitated by using a spreadsheet to organize the vignettes, codes, and their corresponding quotations. The final themes were supported by representative quotations from the vignettes. This analytical process was employed to ensure that the analysis is both systematic and transparent.

Presentation of the vignettes

In total there are 6 NHV across the 3 *Reflective Workbooks*, and another 8 vignettes do not specify whether they are heteronormative or not, allowing for multiple interpretations (Camilleri et al. 2018, Camilleri et al, 2019a, Camilleri et al. 2019b), as indicated in Table 1 below. Unspecified vignettes (UV) allow space for non-binary depictions and other variations. A number of statements accompany some of these vignettes, such as “Safe sex is an act of self-love” (Camilleri et al., 2019b, p. 30). In the Form 3/Year 9 *Reflective Workbook* there are 2 exercises which employ vignettes. In the first, the task required is to put the letters A, B or C (Abstinence, Be Faithful, Use a Condom) near the narratives provided (Camilleri et al., 2019a, p. 33). There are 2 NHV in total, out of 5 in this exercise. The first concerns Joe, who does not put pressure on his male partner to have penetrative sex, as he feels he is not ready yet (Camilleri et al., 2019a, p. 33). The vignette specifies that Joe’s friends keep on talking about the sexual experiences they had. The second vignette in the same exercise outlines the decision by Martha and Laura not to date other women, after dating each other for some time (Camilleri et al., 2019a, p. 33). In the same workbook the other vignette in the other exercise depicts a story about breakup revenge involving a boy and a girl (p. 25). Students are asked to discuss and answer a set of questions about this topic.

In the Form 4/Year 10 *Reflective Workbook* there are 3 exercises that contain NHV. In the first one, the vignettes are in the form of statements and students are asked to write down whether they are SAFE or RISKY. In 3 vignettes the gender of the partner and sexual orientation are not disclosed (Camilleri, 2019b, p. 11). There is also 1 non-heteronormative vignette out of 8 in the same exercise. It is about Jenny, who “sends a photo on her mobile showing herself and her girlfriend in an intimate moment” (Camilleri, 2019b, p. 11). All 8 vignettes in this exercise are about sharing personal information or photographs through social media. In the second exercise, there are 2 NHV and 1 is unspecified, out of 5 vignettes. The task is to work in groups of 2 or 3 and answer the questions provided by the teacher (Camilleri, 2019b, p. 19). All 3 revolve around controlling, demeaning and threatening language in the context of dating and marital relationships, including the one which is unspecified:

Dan said to his boyfriend that he wanted to go to the café on Saturday afternoon and that he wanted him to go with him. Stuart explained that he had already agreed to go shopping with his

friends on Saturday afternoon so he could not go with him. Dan was very annoyed and punched Stuart telling him “I am your boyfriend so you will come with me, or I will find another boyfriend to take to the café” (Camilleri, 2019b, p. 19).

In the third exercise students are asked to share their ideas and opinions after reading the vignette (p. 30), which is about contraception and STIs. This is the only vignette in this exercise and it does not specify whether it is heteronormative or not:

My partner had several other partners before me, because of the four years age difference between us. When we decided to have sexual intercourse, I suggested we use a condom. My partner said that he never made use of them because they caused him an allergy. It was only afterwards, when I found out that he’d given me an infection, that I realised how stupid I had been (Camilleri, 2019b, p. 30).

In the Form 5/Year 11 *Reflective Workbook* (Camilleri et al., 2018) only one exercise applies. It asks students to rate different scenarios from 1 to 10 and differentiate between responsible behaviour and irresponsible actions (p. 30). Out of a total of 7 vignettes, 1 is non-heteronormative. This vignette features Claudio (aged 28), who decided to check himself at the GU clinic, and asks his partner Mikhail to go with him. The same exercise includes 3 vignettes, which all refer to the term “partner/s”, and therefore the sexual orientation of the characters is unspecified. The following are 2 examples: (i) “Stephen (aged 17) is going through the phase where he is going out with various partners and experimenting without using any kind of protection”, (ii) “Brad (aged 12) and his partner have been together for some time. They feel that they are both now ready to have sex. They know very little about contraception or STI’s. They begin to talk about it” (Camilleri et al., 2018, p. 30). Table 1 provides a summary of the distribution of vignettes across the 3 *Reflective Workbooks* (Camilleri et al. 2018, Camilleri et al, 2019a, Camilleri et al. 2019b). Although the NHV make up the smallest number, Table 1 shows that there is a good balance between the number of HV, UV and NHV.

Table 1. Distribution of vignettes

Workbook	NHV	UV	HV	Total	Topics of NHV	Topics of UV	Topics of HV
Form 3/Year 9	2	0	4	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respect of partner’s boundaries • exclusivity 	no unspecified vignettes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being faithful • abstinence • safe sex and condom use • breakup revenge
Form 4/Year 10	3	5	5	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sharing of sexually explicit photographs • identifying abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPV • controlling behaviour • contraception and STI’s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sharing of sexually explicit photographs • controlling behaviour • psychological abuse • contraception and STI’s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sexting • sharing of sexually explicit photographs • disclosure of information about one’s intimate relationship on social media

							<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • financial abuse in intimate relationships • Sexual coercion and threats
Form 5/Year 11	1	3	3	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contraception, STI's and GU clinic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contraception • STI's • having children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contraception • co-dependency • giving support to one's spouse
Total	6	8	12	26			

Discussion

The NHV of the study are integrated thoughtfully with the rest of the vignettes. Vignettes on the topic of contraception are found across all 3 workbooks. Although safe sex is mentioned as part of the learning outcomes of the PSCD syllabus (Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015), and is stipulated in the guidelines for teachers of PSCD (Camilleri, 2013), 53% of Maltese 15-year-old girls, who are sexually active, and 28% of boys are not using a condom during sexual intercourse (Debono, 2024). Contraception use among young people in Malta has been consistently low for the past decade due to taboos surrounding this issue (Cassar, 2021), and other possible reasons, such as lack of skills or pressure by partners. What is learnt at school, does not necessarily translate into everyday actions. Some students might struggle to connect abstract concepts taught in classrooms, to real-world contexts. This gap between theory and practice can limit how effectively learning is applied outside schools.

A number of vignettes encourage “talking about” issues previously considered taboo, as part of prevention: “Although they (Brad and his partner) don’t know much about contraception or STI’s, they still talk about this topic (Camilleri et al., 2018, p. 30). In the Form 4/Year 10 workbook (Camilleri et al. 2019b), the emphasis of 3 vignettes with the same topic on self-respect and respect of others suggests that the authors could have wanted to highlight this important point about establishing and keeping boundaries to protect oneself from abuse and controlling behaviour.

The study identifies a number of possible transitions surrounding the workbooks’ topics, as indicated in Table 2. These transitions are universal and occur irrespective of sexual orientation.

Table 2. Transitions

Topics	Transitions
• respect of partner’s boundaries	• from sexual activity to abstinence
• exclusivity	• from dating others to monogamy
• sexual initiation	• from a virgin into a sexually active person
• starting a relationship	• from being single to becoming a partner in a relationship

• identifying controlling behaviour, abuse and IPV	• from being naive about abuse in intimate relationships to gaining insights on prevention that could be lifesaving
• contraception	• from risk taking behaviour to safe sex
• STIs	• from a healthy person into a person with an STI
• GU clinic	• from lacking information about contraception to accessing knowledge and health services
• breakup revenge	• from being in a 'love' relationship to facing acrimony
• sexting	• from face-to-face conversations to digital communication
• sharing of sexually explicit photographs	• from privacy to exposure
• co-dependency	• from a single person to a person in a co-dependent relationship
• sexual coercion	• from safety to danger
• having children/adoption and fostering	• from childlessness to parenthood
• financial abuse within relationships	• from trusting to becoming vulnerable and exploited

The notion of transitioning from childhood innocence to gaining awareness on sexuality and relationships' issues emerges as a common theme across all 3 workbooks. This involves a learning process that is not limited to gaining factual knowledge only, but also includes learning about the emotional states that characterise human relationships. These refer to a spectrum of emotions, from curiosity and excitement, to anxiety and feeling self-conscious around sexual attraction and behaviour that could arise (Cassar, 2013). The outcomes emanating from the described situations in the vignettes of the 3 workbooks could lead to other transitions that are not indicated in the Table. The transitions presented in Table 2 are therefore linked with each other, affecting each other according to each particular situation. For example, the experience of breakup revenge could make way for new beginnings, leading young people to gain a sense of independence and freedom after feeling constrained, or even unsafe within an unsatisfactory relationship. This transition could also signal an important step towards learning how to speak up when faced with betrayal and deceit, as shown in the vignette on breakup revenge in the *Reflective Workbook* for Form 4/Year 10 (Camilleri et al., 2019b). Transitions towards autonomy often lead young people to navigate new boundaries and negotiate aspects of their sexual lives. After a breakup young people could experience conflicting emotions that could lead to multiple transitions at once (Cassar, 2018b). Classroom discussions, which make use of vignettes as a starting point, could be effective to understand why emotionally painful situations arise in intimate relationships, and how to deal with conflicts and disagreements, especially during adolescence (Cassar, 2014).

Table 3 outlines the usefulness of NHV and summarises the analytical significance of topics outlined in Table 1:

Table 3. Usefulness of NHV

Analytic Dimension	Role of NHV	Significance for Learners
Narrative Anchoring	Places LGBTQI individuals as protagonists with agency rather than "problems" to be solved	Counteracts "minority stress" and validates diverse lived experiences
Script Deconstruction	Exposes the subtle power dynamics and "unwritten rules" of heteronormativity	Enables students to challenge exclusionary social scripts during classwork
Risk Mitigation	Provides a safe space to understand the complexities of non-linear transitions	Ensure that diversity school policies are not disconnected from daily school practice
Empowerment	Reduces the likelihood of harm or discrimination through sensitising learners	Learn that life transitions are not to be feared, but viewed as an essential part of personal growth

Some omissions are noted in the 3 workbooks. For example, the singular ‘they/their/them’ is not used. Only ‘she/he’ is mentioned. The workbooks were published before the change in terminology became more widespread. The singular ‘they/their/them’ could however be referred to used during classroom discussions and reflections. Vignettes that specifically depict the experiences of trans, bisexual, intersex persons, and particular situations such as identity exploration, questioning of sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and coming out are not included. Transitions related to coming out in Malta are not always straightforward (Cassar & Grima Sultana, 2021). When learning about the “genderbreadman” and definitions in the Form 5/Year 11 workbook (Camilleri et al., 2018, p. 33), some classroom discussions surrounding themes related to trans, bisexual, and intersex persons could however be brought up. Other terms that young people are openly using to identify themselves outside of traditional male and female gender categories include “non-binary”, “agender”, “genderqueer”, “androgynous”, “pan gender”, “demigirl/demiboy”, and “genderfluid” (Hegarty et al, 2018). NHV could be a useful tool to introduce students to terminology and concepts, that might otherwise remain unspoken, thereby expanding their vocabulary, challenging preconceived notions, and fostering a more inclusive space where young people could feel heard and understood. LGBTIQ+ and genderqueer young people have reported difficulties expressing themselves using mainstream gendered language, and finding appropriate words to relate their experiences (Barsigian et al., 2020; Bradford et al., 2019). The absence of adequate vocabulary could not only hinder students’ ability to articulate their own views and experiences, but it could also limit their capacity to comprehend and empathise with peers holding diverse experiences, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion within the learning environment. The language used to convey the messages embedded within the vignettes plays a significant role in how teachers and students understand, and engage with the narratives and concepts.

Themes about homo/bi/trans/intersexphobia, bullying and young people facing personal and social difficulties, such as fear, marginalisation, stigma and hatred, because they are considered diversely gendered (Cassar, 2021), are not tackled in the workbooks’ vignettes. This does not mean however, that these topics are not discussed in class. PSCD teachers might use different teaching resources,

other than the workbooks. There are limitations surrounding the workbooks' contents, as it cannot include "everything". Vignettes in workbooks constitute only one teaching and learning resource, and it would be unrealistic to expect that vignettes cover all the syllabus topics. The role of trained teachers and a well-designed pedagogy cannot be underestimated. Without equipped teachers with sound pedagogical skills to manage sensitive discussions and manage group dynamics (Scicluna & Bezzina, 2025, p. 66), vignettes risk being reduced to passive reading exercises or, worse, reinforcing stereotypes rather than challenging them. Teachers of PSCD are also tasked with working around challenges that might arise in class. For example, the use of the circle format could result in "behavioural issues, discomfort for shy learners, vulnerability during sharing, and the absence of desks", which hinder writing activities (Scicluna & Bezzina, 2025, p. 66).

Although it is beneficial to portray challenges of LGBTIQ+ young people in NHV, due to societal prejudice, presenting them without also showing resilience, joy, and community belonging could inadvertently internalise and reinforce the notion that their identity itself is the source of the distress, rather than the external factors of homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination. This can lead to a deficit-based view, where LGBTIQ+ persons are defined solely by their suffering. Instead, vignettes should be crafted to reflect the full, complex reality of these lives, including stories of self-acceptance, finding chosen family, and thriving, thereby affirming their identities rather than treating them as a pathology to be overcome. This shift from a problem-focused to a strengths-based approach is crucial for promoting positive mental health outcomes and reducing the internalized stigma that can result from such harmful portrayals. Additionally, the study recommends content in school textbooks/workbooks that focuses on causes of systemic privilege and societal structures that favour heterosexuality, without focusing exclusively on themes of trauma, rejection, and mental health struggles.

Another topic which could be more emphasised through workbook vignettes relates to friendships. NHV can cover topics on how friendships help to deflate marginalisation of LGBTIQ+ youth in schools. Close relationships among LGBTIQ+ youth and their friends at school were reported as having supported sexual minority youth to reflect on their identity (Leung et al., 2022). Community connections could also contribute significantly to the identity development, and resilience of LGBTIQ+ and genderqueer young people (Barsigian et al., 2020). Vignettes, which highlight issues related to community spaces that affirm LGBTIQ+ and genderqueer young people, can bring forward classroom discussions on the dynamics of their social identities and realities. Such discussions can also support LGBTIQ+ and genderqueer young people in grappling with close knit communities, which enact barriers and exclude sexual minorities (Cooney-Newton, 2022).

The study argues that the use of NHV can help create a safer space for discussing sensitive topics, allowing students to analyze hypothetical situations, consider different perspectives and relating them to their own lives or the wider community. This approach can be particularly valuable in addressing stigma and promoting empathy by normalising LGBTIQ+ experiences and fostering a more inclusive understanding within the classroom. The use of NHV in teaching requires particular pedagogical skills on the part of teachers, especially when dealing with sensitive issues, such as mental health, IPV, sexually acquired infections, and abuse (Cassar, 2019).

Conclusion

The study highlights the value of vignettes in textbooks and workbooks, which foreground LGBTIQ+ issues. It acknowledges the presence of NHV in reflective workbooks as disrupting the silences surrounding LGBTIQ+ issues in school cultures (Cassar, 2015). The study shows that the workbooks under study move away from the notion of fixed, universal adolescent identities. It identifies students' perceptions on NHV in school workbook as an area for future research. The study postulates that the use of NHV in school workbooks could potentially leave an impact on the process of identity construction during adolescence, especially since this time is associated with "lack a stable grounding" for adolescents (Furlong, 2013, p. 124). NHV can potentially promote self-examination among students, and also foster critical awareness of their personal biographies and circumstances. Through NHV students could explore how public perceptions and discourses about LGBTIQ+ youth communities could shift. Vignettes that depict LGBTIQ+ young people who are thriving, finding love, building community, and achieving their goals can offer hope and positive role models for young people who may be struggling, or are uncertain about their future. The study identifies the use of vignettes as a reflective tool, and as a supportive mechanism for students to be able to identify and unravel some misconceptions surrounding the sexualities of young people. Misconceptions could also arise in relation to social inclusion and belonging. Common understandings of "inclusion" might still marginalize or fail to fully account for the experiences and perspectives of LGBTIQ+ young people (Vicars, 2012). Through vignettes students can engage with "queering" (Vicars, 2012) taken-for-granted concepts. This could involve challenging normative assumptions, destabilising binary categories, and highlighting the fluidity and complexity of identity and social relations. The study recommends the use of NHV across various curricular subjects, in order to promote a more inclusive and representative learning environment. The study also recommends that students write or draw their own vignettes to become active participants of their learning and development. The sharing of their stories fosters self-awareness and a deeper understanding of how their subjectivities and biases influence their interactions with others, and the ways they view the world. By narrating themselves, students would be more able to develop the necessary skills to be able to engage in meaningful relationships, and become more empathetic, responsible citizens.

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Since this article is a theoretical-conceptual contribution that does not involve studies with human participants, their data, or biological materials, no further ethical clearance was required. This is also because the article makes use of secondary sources that are in the public domain.

Data Availability Statement

Data are not applicable to this paper.

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There are no competing interests.

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