



“Acceptance Also Has a Bit of Negative to It, Doesn’t It?”: Rethinking Identity Formation in *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013)

Matthys Johannes Uys¹

COMBER, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark Campus, South Africa

Abstract

Queer identity formation can range from repulsion to nurturance, identity confusion to identity synthesis, and exiting a heterosexual identity to entering a queer community. According to Cass’s Model of Identity Formation, there is a developmental progression in formulating a queer identity. To create awareness and understanding, prescribed literary works may be used in the language classroom to teach students about diverse identities. However, language classrooms in heteronormative societies are not always utilised to their full potential. Therefore, this paper argues for the inclusion of Konigsberg’s 2013 young adult queer novel, *Openly Straight*, in the language classroom, exploring Rafe Goldberg’s non-linear search for his queer identity. This study employed qualitative content analysis within a critical paradigm. The data-gathering strategy was the purposive selection of a primary literary text, and the data-analysing strategy was content analysis. The main findings suggested that (1) identity formulation was hindered when queerness did not exceed acceptance, (2) queerphobia could be challenged when celebrating queer identities as the highest point of identity formation, and (3) *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) could be a suitable resource for young adult students in heteronormative language classrooms to teach and learn about identity formation.

Keywords: Bill Konigsberg; identity formation; inclusive education; language classroom; *Openly Straight*; Viviane Cass

1. Introduction

Identity formation is a deeply personal and complex process (Rosario et al., 2011), particularly for queer individuals within heteronormative societies (Pollitt et al., 2021). Institutional discourses, social expectations, and internal struggles between belonging and authenticity often contribute to shaping this process (Mousavi et al., 2024). Accordingly, opportunities for understanding and creating awareness about queer identity¹ formation should be created. The language classroom, which focuses on different topics, themes, and language skills, could be considered an inclusive learning space regarding queer identities. Though many educational

¹ For this paper, “queer identities” is used as an accumulative, inclusive term for sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, and a-sexual) and gender identities (e.g., transgender, gender-nonbinary, and genderfluid) (Uys, 2026).

institutions are inclusive of queer identities, many pay lip service to the teaching and learning thereof in the language classroom (Uys, 2023).

This article explores identity formation through the lens of Cass’s six-stage model (i.e., a structured understanding of identity formation) and Bill Konigsberg’s 2013 young adult queer-themed novel, *Openly Straight* (i.e., the primary literary text of this study). Additionally, critical theory and queer theory as theoretical frameworks are also discussed to show how broader social power dynamics influence identity formation. Using a qualitative approach and content analysis as a data analysis strategy, the research questions for this study are:

- How does *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) represent queer identity formation in relation to Cass’s model of Identity Formation?
- How can *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) be used as a pedagogical tool to rethink identity formation and challenge heteronormativity in language classrooms?

The next section entails the literature review, which focuses on an explanation of Cass’s model of Identity Formation.

2. Cass’s model of Identity Formation

Viviane Cass published in 1979 a model of homosexual identity formation, and revolutionised the understanding of identity formation (Haseley, 2011). According to Cass (1984), there are six stages: (1) “identity confusion”, (2) “identity comparison”, (3) “identity tolerance”, (4) “identity acceptance”, (5) “identity pride”, and (6) “identity synthesis”.

Each stage is unpacked in the sections that follow:

2.1. Identity Confusion

Cass (1984:147) explains that “[i]ndividuals perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as [queer]sexual. This brings about considerable confusion and bewilderment, since previously held identities relating to sexual orientation [and gender identities] are now questioned”. Degges-White et al. (2005), Evans et al. (2010), Haseley (2011), Aglipay (2014), and Royan and Deb (2025) agree that identity confusion originates due to society’s definition of identity that differs from that of an individual who does not identify as heterosexual – rather, their feelings or behaviours classify them as queer individuals. Evans et al. (2010), Aglipay (2014), and Goodrich and Brammer (2021) further elaborate that queer individuals become aware of their differences in identity when compared to the heteronormative norm, and that it has some relevance to their lives with reference to physiological responses, behaviour, emotions, or thoughts. Accordingly, questioning, self-alienation, and curiosity are rising factors within this first stage of identity formation.

2.2 Identity Comparison

Cass (1984:151) mentions that “[h]aving accepted the potentiality of a [queer]sexual identity, the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-[queer]sexual others becomes clearer”. Cass (1984) further mentions that when an individual does not repossess a heterosexual identity, contact with other queer individuals is made in this stage to reduce the feeling of alienation. In other words, as stated by Degges-White et al. (2005), Haseley (2011), Aglipay (2014), and Goodrich and Brammer (2021), a queer individual makes a cautious commitment to further question and explore this awareness of being different, comparing their queer identities with the heterosexual majority. Aglipay (2014) continues that there will be hesitation since a queer individual realises the consequences of admitting to other individuals that their behaviours and feelings are different from the norm. Some queer individuals can accept their differences within the heteronormative norm, searching for true

belonging (Royan & Deb, 2025), whereas others can reject them, which can lead to a disconnection or an alienation from societal norms (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021; Royan & Deb, 2025), and attempt to accommodate society’s description of acceptable gender roles.

2.3 Identity Tolerance

Cass (1984:151) continues that “[w]ith increasing commitment to a [queer]sexual self-image, the individual seeks out the company of [queer]sexuals in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs. There is a selectiveness about such contacts which are frequently seen as ‘necessary’ rather than desirable”. Thus, in this stage, there is a tolerance of a queer-individual self-image, and not an acceptance. Degges-White et al. (2005), Evans et al. (2010), Haseley (2011), Goodrich and Brammer (2021), and Royan and Deb (2025) affirm that there is an establishment of a queer identity and that this stage is a point at which an individual moves closer to acceptance. Aglipay (2014) justifies that identity tolerance includes support from queer individuals and that there is a need for a queer individual to relate to a queer community to validate behaviours and feelings.

2.4 Identity Acceptance

Cass (1984:151–152) elaborates that “[i]ncreased contact with the [queer]sexual subculture encourages a more positive view of [queer]sexuality and the gradual development of a network of [queer]sexual friends. A philosophy of fitting into society, while also retaining a [queer]sexual lifestyle, is adopted and entails the continued maintenance of a passing strategy (pretending heterosexuality) at pertinent times”. Thus, in this stage, there can still be queer individuals who pretend to be heterosexual to prevent facing possibly negative reactions to queer identities from heterosexuals (Cass, 1984). Degges-White et al. (2005), Haseley (2011), Goodrich and Brammer (2021) summarise that positive contact is sought out and made with the queer community, as there is an understanding and an acceptance of being a queer individual. Evans et al. (2010) and Aglipay (2014) elaborate that the presence of other queer individuals is highlighted because they contribute to the essentiality of another queer individual’s growth. Thus, through interactions, acceptance becomes a possibility, as there is a healthier and more stable community. However, a queer individual could be selective of their society and might be forced to re-interpret and re-learn ideologies and meanings behind queer identities, because one is looking for belongingness and acceptance not only from family and friends, but the community as well.

2.5 Identity Pride

Cass (1984:152) posits that “[t]his stage is characterized by feelings of pride towards one’s [queer]sexual identity and fierce loyalty to [queer]sexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued”. Cass (1984) does explain that queer individuals do experience anger about society’s stigmatisation, which leads to confrontation with heterosexuals, purposefully, to promote the equality and validity of queer individuals. Degges-White et al. (2005), Haseley (2011), Goodrich and Brammer (2021) affirm that an individual strongly identifies with a queer identity and acknowledges it as the main identity, taking into consideration society’s views – thus, there is a complete acceptance of the queer identity. Aglipay (2014) contributes that individuals involve themselves in progressive actions and activism to emphasise deeper meanings of queer identities. Thus, there is a strong public association with the queer society, especially being aware of discrimination, demonstrating pride, and validating queer identities, which could be considered radical towards heterosexuals. In other words, as explained by Royan and Deb (2025) and Goodrich and Brammer (2021), heteronormative rules are resisted.

2.6 Identity Synthesis

Cass (1984:152–153) comments that “[p]ositive contacts with non-[queer]sexuals help create an awareness of the rigidity and inaccuracy of dividing the world into good [queer]sexuals and bad heterosexuals. Anger and pride associated with the previous stage are retained but in less emotional terms”. Therefore, a queer-individual identity is no longer considered the main identity of an individual. Rather, various sides, and not only the part that is directly linked to queer identities, are related to, because then an existence is developed in which no identity is hidden anymore. Accordingly, there is a synthesis of one’s own view of self and others’ views of self-believed; there is one identity that integrates, instead of dominating, both public and private aspects of the self (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021; Royan & Deb, 2025). This stage enhances stability and peace and completes the identity formation process. Degges-White et al. (2005) and Haseley (2011) explain that it can be challenging for many queer individuals to reach this stage, but it emphasises the recognition and significance of multiple identities to their growth. Evans et al. (2010) and Aglipay (2014) conclude that a queer individual is seen to be comfortable and secure in their stages of identity formation.

3. Theoretical framework

Two theoretical frameworks underpin this study: critical theory and queer theory.

3.1 Critical Theory

Singh (2026) states that critical theory seeks to uncover and critique leading worldviews and their essential systems of power. Fay (1987) – as cited by Creswell and Creswell (2023) – and Jansen (2021) agree that the perspectives of critical theory empower human beings and their experiences to surpass the limitations placed on them by class, gender, race, and other types of social oppression. Jansen (2021) elaborates that inequality and conflict are crucial to comprehending human relations dynamics, as societies reproduce inequalities from one generation to another. Resistance becomes pivotal to addressing injustices. Nieuwenhuis (2021) supports that critical theory views social reality as a process of ongoing construction, but suggests further that discourses of shifting fields of social power affect social reality and one’s study of it.

Accordingly, critical theory was applied in this study by questioning heterosexual societies and power structures that influence identity formation in *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013). The theory critiqued how societal norms, on the one hand, honoured heterosexuality but marginalised queer identities on the other, specifically focusing on concepts (like “tolerance” and “acceptance”) that finely reinforced inequality. By also considering social expectations, character interactions, and classroom discourse, this study showed how power is operated through institutional settings and language. This study also highlighted these structures and resistance towards them, especially by considering “celebration” as a transformative response to inequality. Thus, critical theory identified the literary text as a reproduction of inequality, challenged the said inequality, and aligned with this study’s goal of creating an opportunity to empower individuals – queer and heterosexual – by questioning and surpassing restrictive social norms.

3.2 Queer Theory

Queer theory focuses on the individual identities of queer individuals. By applying queer theory, individuals and their objectifications are restricted, seeking to improve their politics and culture, highlighting their experiences and voices (Gamson, 2000, cited by Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Sanders (2025) elaborates that critical theory is an umbrella term, with queer theory being one of its subsets, revealing the presence of fixed notions and binaries of identity.

Few-Demo et al. (2016) also explain that queer theory suggests that because there are diversity and fluidity in queer identities and behaviours over the course of life, simple binaries cannot holistically capture human nature. Queer theory deeply analyses heteronormativity, an ideology that, as defined by Oswald et al. (2005:143), “promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be”. In applying queer theory, one is allowed to question why certain bodies and their ways of doing and being, in diverse contexts, are validated while others are devalued, othered, disavowed, rendered unintelligible or otherwise invisible (Sanders, 2025).

Queer theory was applied in this study by challenging fixed, binary understandings of identity, emphasising the fluidity of queer identities, as represented in the experiences of Rafe Goldberg, the protagonist of *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013). The heteronormative social norm and its influence on Rafe’s decision to pretend to be heterosexual were questioned and examined. Queer theory further explored how queer identities were socially constructed, negotiated, and performed rather than being natural or stable. Accordingly, the complexities of queer identities were centred in this study, highlighting Rafe and his progressions from one stage of identity formation to another while also resisting rigid categorisation. Queer theory also critiqued “rejection”, “tolerance”, and “acceptance”, terms that othered queer identities, and advocated instead for inclusivity through “celebration”.

The next section focuses on the study’s methodology.

4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is an approach for studying and comprehending the meaning groups or individuals assign to a human or social problem. It involves emerging procedures and questions, typically collecting data in participants' settings, data analysis that constructs themes from particulars, and the researcher interpreting the complexity, importance, and meaning of the data in a final, flexible report (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Qualitative research approaches (e.g., discourse analysis, narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis) introduce their own beliefs about which data are acceptable in the analysis process and involve some form of coding the data to identify common relationships, patterns, and themes (Breakwell, 2023). Walliman (2022) and Singh (2026) also include observation notes, interview transcripts, literary texts, meeting minutes, and others as examples of qualitative data. However, Walliman (2022) cautions that a qualitative approach relies on human interpretation and justification, and should it not be evaluated in a distant, standard way.

The qualitative approach was applied to this study by interpreting the meaning within the primary literary text, *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), rather than measuring quantitative data and its variables. Characters, dialogue, and themes were analysed to engage with identity formation and how it was represented. An analytical process was followed, linking emerging insights from the primary text to broader theoretical concepts and frameworks, such as Cass’s model of Identity Formation, critical theory, and queer theory. The analysis prioritised subjective interpretation, studying Rafe’s experiences and their complex social dynamics. Since depth over generalisation was emphasised, the qualitative approach allowed for a contextualised understanding of identity formation.

4.2 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling involves the purposive selection of a human or non-human participant due to the characteristics they or it possesses. It is a non-probability or non-random sampling method that does not require a specific number of participants or fundamental theories. Instead,

the goal is to sample participants strategically, selecting them based on the data (that are aligned with the research questions) that can be generated. The researcher purposively includes participants or cases in the sample because they would assist in generating rich data and necessitate inclusion (Adu & Miles, 2024; Clark et al., 2021; Singh, 2026). Creswell and Creswell (2023) agree that documents, sites, visual materials, participants, or texts are sampled in qualitative research to engage in the best possible way with the research problem and research questions.

The following criteria were considered for the primary literary text’s selection (Uys, 2020):

- Is the primary text queer-themed?
- Is the primary text classified as young adult literature?
- Is the primary text age-appropriate?
- Is identity formation a prominent queer-themed issue in the primary text?

Purposive sampling occurred through the deliberate selection of *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) as the primary literary text for this study. This purposive selection ensured that the primary text generated relevant data that were aligned with the research problem and questions. Rather than selecting random texts, this study intentionally focused on *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), which could best engage with identity formation and the impact of social contexts, enhancing the relevance and depth of the analysis.

4.3 Primary Text

The primary literary text for this study was *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013). A brief synopsis of the primary text is provided next, as more information about the literary work aids in comprehending and engaging with the analysis, findings, and discussion of this study.

Rafe Goldberg, who is an openly gay young adult, transfers to Natick School, hoping to escape any labels concerning his queer identity by pretending to be heterosexual. He quickly adapts socially, forming close friendships (with Toby, Albie, and Ben). Though Rafe hides his queer identity from his friends, Mr Scarborough, one of his teachers, encourages him to reflect on himself through writing. As Rafe and Ben’s friendship becomes romantic, a fallout occurs when Rafe reveals his deception. The conflict forces Rafe to confront the possible consequences of hiding his queer identity from others, which ultimately leads him to understand and celebrate his authentic self.

4.4 Content Analysis

Content analysis is an empirical approach that is primarily concerned with determining meaningful, descriptive categories of data. It may be directive (i.e., exploring the application of pre-established categories) or inductive (i.e., exploring the categories that emanate from the data) (Hayes, 2023). Walliman (2022) and Singh (2026) elaborate that content analysis is a form of automated or manual text coding of various forms (e.g., advertisements, articles, and news items) or other media (e.g., discussions, interviews, concerts, and plays). Content analysis is also applied more qualitatively to reduce and scrutinise large amounts of data present in the media or text to provide structure and coherence. This process is referred to as thematic analysis and uses coding. Accordingly, one identifies relationships, patterns, themes, and concepts in the data, and one also reveals constructions in the communications that anticipate influencing the observer, listener, or reader in a certain way, whether overtly or covertly (Walliman, 2022; Singh, 2026). Adu and Miles (2024) substantiate that content analysis involves generating themes and/or codes based on the literature and/or initial data reviewed and the conceptual or theoretical frameworks developed, and using these themes or codes to analyse and connect the data.

The researcher of this conceptual study applied content analysis by analytically coding and interpreting themes within the primary literary text, *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), using the codes of “rejection”, “tolerance”, “acceptance”, and “celebration”. Firstly, the primary literary text was read to determine its merit and suitability for the Senior and Further Education and Training English language classroom (ages 13–18). Secondly, the text was read again with highlighting. As the search for identity was a theme that emanated from the text, a link was established to Cass’s model of identity formation (1979). Thirdly, Figure 1 is an example that illustrates the codes as they emanated from *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013:141–142):

“We’re [Natick School is] a pretty **tolerant** place,” Steve said.
Tolerant. What does **tolerant** mean?” [Mr Scarborough asked].
 “It means we **tolerate**,” Steve said, flat. “We **accept** people.”
 “Actually, **tolerance** and **acceptance** are different. To **tolerate** seems to mean that there is something negative to **tolerate**, doesn’t it? **Acceptance**, though, what’s that?”
 I [Rafe] thought about that [...] I mean, if you **accept** something, you take it for what it is. **Tolerance** is different. Less. So is **acceptance** at the top of the pyramid? Is that what everyone wants in the best of all possible worlds? **Acceptance**? [...] It didn’t feel right, somehow [...]
 “**Acceptance** also has a bit of negative to it, doesn’t it?” I finally said [...] “Well, if you need to **accept** something, that means it’s not like it should be, right? Like you **accept** something as it is.”
 [...] “And yet, colleges **accept** students who are otherwise **rejected**. **Acceptance** is an affirmation that you’re good enough” [...] “It’s hard to be different,” Scarborough said. “And perhaps the best answer is not to **tolerate** differences, not even to **accept** them. But to **celebrate** them. Maybe then those who are different would feel more loved, and less, well, **tolerated** [or **rejected**].”

Figure 1: Coding of *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013)

In this study, red negatively connotes “no” while green positively connotes “yes” – orange, being closer to red, rather negatively connotes “no” while yellow rather positively connotes “yes”. Accordingly, “rejection” was highlighted in red to indicate “no”, “tolerance” in orange to indicate “rather no”, “acceptance” in yellow to indicate “rather yes”, and “celebration” in green to indicate “yes”. Fourthly, the primary text was divided into four parts to coincide with the emanated codes: Part 1: Acceptance; Part 2: Rejection; Part 3: Tolerance; Part 4: Celebration. These parts trace the four stages Rafe Golgberg experiences as he searches for his identity. To enhance the credibility of this paper further, the researcher’s supervisors peer-debriefed the coding by reading the text and supervising several drafts of the original dissertation. Evidence density took place through the means of providing direct quotations and connecting secondary sources to the primary text. Lastly, an editor confirmed the coding, and three examiners (two national and one international) also approved the outcome of the dissertation.

Furthermore, this analysis allowed the identification of patterns in the unfolding of Rafe’s identity formation. Afterwards, the codes were linked to Cass’s six-stage model of Identity Formation, providing a structured way to interpret and engage with the data. Through content analysis and its coding, this study revealed how identity formation could be negotiated and developed within a heteronormative context.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This study involved no animal or human research, but an analysis of a literary text. The Pseudonymous University X and one of its ethics committees permitted this study to be conducted: XXX-01612-19-A2².

² To ensure anonymity, the identities of the ethics committee and university were removed.

5. Analysis

When one considers the title of the primary literary text, comical irony is identified. “Openly straight” refers to queer individuals who classify as heterosexual and need to “come out” of the heterosexual (i.e., non-queer) closet. However, when there is the assumption that all individuals are heterosexual (i.e., heteronormative societies) (Pollitt, 2021), it is redundant for heterosexual individuals to be open about their identities. However, for queer individuals, the situation is different. Since many queer individuals oppose the heteronormative norm by classifying themselves as queer, rejecting heterosexuality, they necessarily need to exit the queer closet, which could be a complicated process (Khuzwayo, 2021).

Mr Scarborough, an English teacher at Natick School, the new school Rafe Goldberg transfers to, decides to discuss “respecting and understanding differences” (Konigsberg, 2013:140) during one of his English language sessions. He wants to use the language classroom as an opportunity to converse about a complex issue, creating awareness and understanding of rejecting, tolerating, accepting, and celebrating diversity (e.g., race, queer identity formation, and so on). Mr Scarborough, here, is significant of a teacher who supports and engages with diverse individuals (Uys, 2020).

The quotation from *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) (see 4.4 Content analysis) identifies the stages of identity formation as suggested by Mr Scarborough. Figure 2 presents a limited three-stage model of identity formation, a model that Rafe and his peers initially consider. However, Figure 3 includes “celebration” as an additional stage to identity formation, a stage that surpasses “acceptance”, positively completing the process of identity formation:

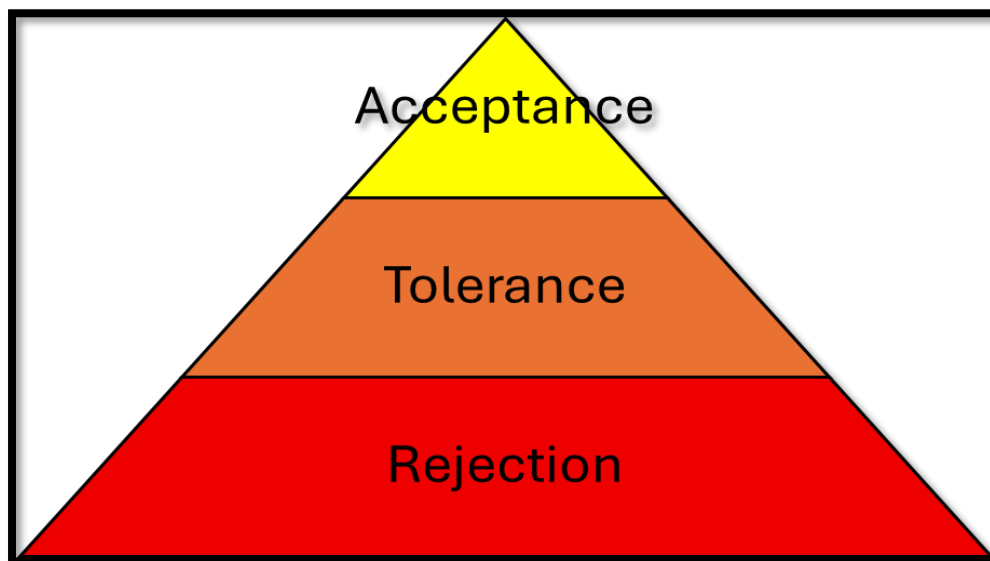


Figure 2: “Acceptance” at the top of the pyramid, as initially considered by Rafe Goldberg and his peers

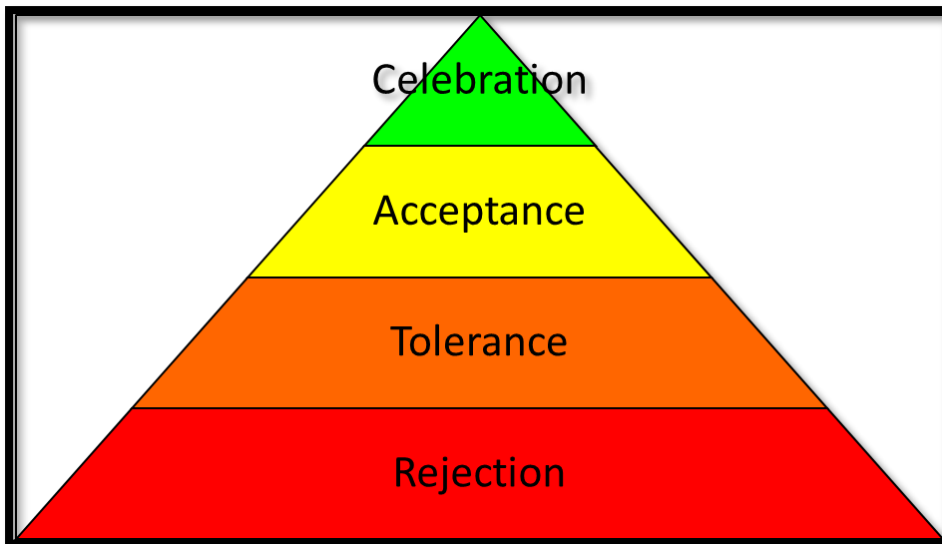


Figure 3: “Celebration” at the top of the pyramid, as suggested by Mr Scarborough

By considering the quotation and Figures 2 and 3, Mr Scarborough, when conversing about understanding and respecting differences, hints towards a four-stage model of identity formation. Rejection refers to the refusal or dismissal of an individual that is perceived as negative; tolerance exceeds rejection, but it suggests a half-hearted acceptance of an individual; acceptance suggests a resignation or approval of an individual, but there is still a negative element in the equation that yearns for change or improvement; celebration, though, indicates a full embracing of an individual for who they are. Accordingly, “rejection” is at the bottom of the pyramid, with “celebration” being included and succeeding all the rest (Uys, 2020).

Littlefield (2016) mentions that individuals, such as fictional queer characters (i.e., Rafe Goldberg), can be at different stages of identity formation. Considering Konigsberg’s four-stage model and Cass’s six-stage model of Identity Formation, there are differences and similarities that arise. Cass’s (1984) first stage, “identity confusion”, is excluded from Konigsberg’s model, as this stage signifies queer individuals who are noticing that they do not coincide with the heteronormative norm, possibly causing a form of confusion. In *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), Rafe is introduced to the reader as queer (i.e., homosexual) already. Thus, for Konigsberg’s (2013) model, there is no confusion between being heterosexual or queer – the individual in question already knows that they are queer. “Identity comparison”, Cass’s (1984) second stage, does not feature prominently in Konigsberg’s (2013) stages. Though a comparison occurs, such as Rafe comparing and contrasting heterosexuality and queersexuality, Konigsberg’s (2013) model focuses more on the individual rejecting, tolerating, or accepting their queer identity. Cass’s (1984) third stage, “identity tolerance”, and Konigsberg’s (2013) second stage, “tolerance”, are similar. In this stage, the individual is not rejecting their queer identity anymore, but tolerating it; there is still no acceptance, but there has been progression. Cass’s (1984) fourth stage, “identity acceptance”, and Konigsberg’s (2013) third stage, “acceptance”, are also similar. In this stage, the individual has fully accepted their queer identity and is engaging more with it, be it family, friends, or society at large. “Identity pride” and “identity synthesis”, Cass’s (1984) fifth and sixth stages, are linked to Konigsberg’s (2013) fourth and final stage, “celebration”. The individual has surpassed only accepting their queer identity, attaching no negative element (e.g., mere tolerance; acceptance is good enough; shame) to it, and is celebrating their full embrace with all others around them – there is a strong sense of solidarity, affirmation, respect, and stability by synthesising queer identities with other factors (e.g., society, culture, and race), resulting in a broader, balanced

identity rather than a sole defining feature. Thus, celebration is the desirable stage when compared to tolerance or acceptance, which values, secures, and integrates difference rather than labelling it as something abnormal, something that needs to be hidden or apologised for in any society. However, whereas Cass’s (1984) model does challenge heterosexuality, Konigsberg’s (2013) model focuses rather on celebrating diversity without challenging any identity – pride becomes less emotional and defensive. As a result, Konigsberg’s (2013) four stages of identity formation are similar to Cass’s six-stage model. Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) substantiate that since Cass’s six-stage model is well-referenced and well-known, Konigsberg’s four similar stages are valid to formulate Rafe’s identity³.

Littlefield (2016:36–37) remarks that Konigsberg wrote *Openly Straight* in 2013 when “[queer sexuality] is more widely accepted than ever before”. As a result, the inference can be made that Konigsberg wants to inspire his readers to celebrate their queer identities, and not to reject, tolerate, or only accept them, as the latter options can result in queer individuals feeling pestilent or unloved. Brown (2008:89) mentions that tolerance might only be a coping mechanism, allowing heterosexuals to promote “inequality, exclusion, deviance, or marginalization” due to differences. Conversely, celebration can result in queer individuals not experiencing citizenship deficit, but to be part of society and to be loved and celebrated (Nell & Shapiro, 2011).

Additionally, Rafe Goldberg unknowingly formulates his identity as he experiences Konigsberg’s (2013) four-stage model: (1) rejection, (2) tolerance, (3) acceptance, and (4) celebration. Figure 4 illustrates Konigsberg’s (2013) model as a linear process of identity formation, similar to Cass’s (1984) model, which supports identity formation to be linear (Degges-White et al., 2000). However, Konigsberg (2013) demonstrates through Rafe that the identity formation process can also be non-linear, as illustrated in Figure 5, and that there is no correct process of formulating one’s queer identity. Royan and Deb (2025) state that Cass’s model has received critique regarding its fixed sequence, which oversimplifies the ongoing and fluid nature of queer identity development.

³ Though Cass’s (1979) six-stage model of identity formation was utilised for this paper, other models could also be considered to analyse Rafe Goldberg’s search for identity in *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013). For Example, Riddle’s Homophobia Scale includes “Repulsion”, “Pity”, “Tolerance”, “Acceptance”, “Support”, “Admiration”, “Appreciation”, and “Nurturance” as stages (Wall, 1995; Rasmussen, 2013); D’Augelli’s Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development, which was also adapted at a later stage to include Transgender as an identity, include “Exiting heterosexual identity”, “Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status”, “Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity”, “Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring”, “Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status”, and “Entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community” as stages (Evans et al., 2010); McCarn and Fissinger’s model of identity development include “Awareness”, “Exploration”, “Deepening”, and “Internalisation” as stages (Simons & Beck, 2020).

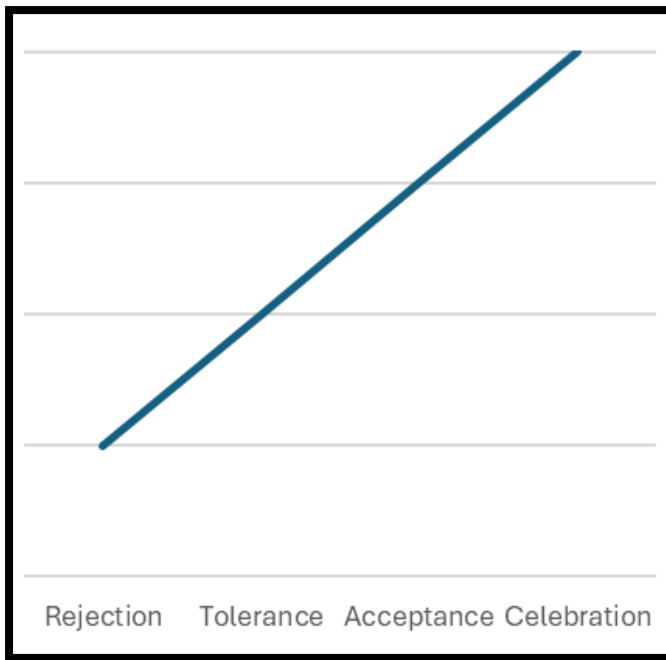


Figure 4: Konigsberg’s (2013) stages of identity formation illustrated linearly

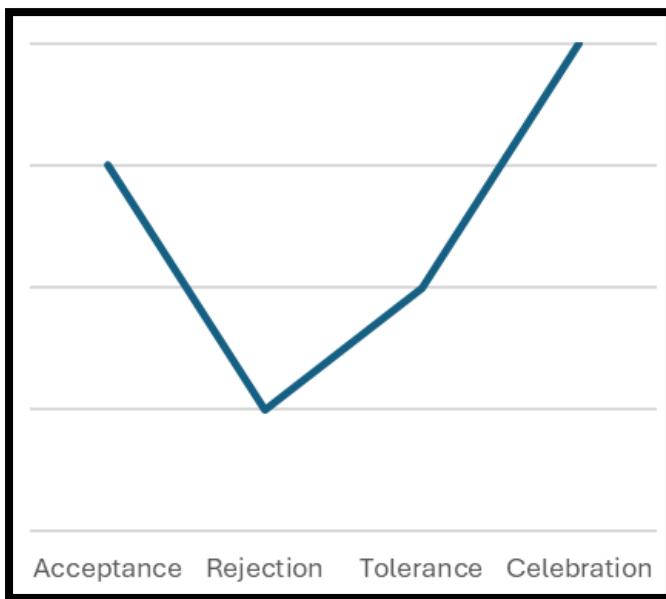


Figure 5: Rafe Golberg’s non-linear process of identity formation

Throughout the course of the novel, Rafe experiences each stage and their challenges, struggling to formulate and find comfort in his queer identity. Firstly, he accepts it:

Maybe I should tell Mom and Dad. So that was it. No major breakdown, no thoughts about whether I’d be homeless. More like, I could enjoy chocolate ice cream [...] I walked down the stairs, not scared, exactly, but surprised. Because I didn’t wake up that day and think: Today I’m going to tell Mom and Dad I’m gay (Konigsberg, 2013:78).

However, due to the circumstances in Boulder and Rangeview, his previous hometown and school, respectively, he, secondly, rejects it:

If I were asked directly, “Are you gay?” ... I’d say no ... I wouldn’t go on about being straight [...] [A] direct question would receive a deflection of some kind [...] If someone asked if I had a

girlfriend, the answer was no. If someone asked if there were some girl I liked, or if they tried to set me up with some girl at a party, the answer was “I’m focusing on getting into a good school” [...] If something came up about someone else being gay ... I’d ... totally [be] unconcerned. I’d say as little as possible about sex [...] I’d even thought about what I’d do if another gay kid told me he was gay (Konigsberg, 2013:52–53).

He finds some level of comfort when he is considered a jock at Natick, his new school, but he soon learns that the decisions one makes can have consequences, such as hurting and losing a close friend. Nevertheless, Rafe, thirdly, tolerates his queer identity after his fallout with Ben:

How do I really feel about being gay? I always thought I was okay with it. Am I, though? I mean, I stopped being open about it, so maybe I wasn’t, okay? I need to get better, because it’s not a part of me I can remove. As soon as I tried to remove the label, a lie formed. In the end, that lie created a barrier way worse than the original one [...] I created a barrier getting rid of a barrier (Konigsberg, 2013:308–309).

Lastly, Rafe learns to celebrate it, learning and engaging from the previous mistake he made of living a false persona (Littlefield, 2016; Uys, 2020):

Ben. He saw me. He saw who I was inside, and he liked it, and I liked it. I liked who he saw.

6. Findings and Discussion

Considering the analysis and the research questions of this study, the next section discusses the following three findings: (1) identity formation is hindered when queerness does not exceed acceptance; (2) queerphobia can be challenged when celebrating queer identities as the highest point of identity formation; (3) *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) can be a suitable resource for young adult students in heteronormative classrooms to teach and learn about identity formation.

6.1 Acceptance as a Limitation to Identity Formation

In *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), “acceptance” is illustrated as an important milestone concerning identity formation; however, it is not yet the final stage (Uys, 2020). Although acceptance is an improvement from outright rejection or mere tolerance, it does account for something negative in an incomplete process – authentic identity formation is elusively constrained (Cass, 1984). Aglipay (2014) agrees that these constraints originate from the underlying belief that differences require validation.

Acceptance implies that the existence of another, such as queer identities in a heteronormative society, must be approved (Aglipay, 2014; Cass, 1984; Degges-White et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2010; Haseley, 2011). During a language classroom discussion on respecting and understanding differences, Rafe identifies that acceptance refers to something or someone that can be considered abnormal (Uys, 2020). Accordingly, this identification positions queer identities as conditional and only valued when they align with a dominant expectation or power structure (Aglipay, 2014). However, a limited, fragmented, or suppressed self-understanding can be a result of such conditionality (Aglipay, 2014; Cass, 1984), and queer individuals (like Rafe) may want to reshape their identities to fulfil others’ expectations, avoiding personal authenticity instead (Uys, 2020).

Additionally, a deeper understanding of queer identities can be discouraged if one only accepts but does not celebrate – there is a lack of motivation for further engagement. Rafe's rejection of his queer identity is an example of acceptance and its fragility. Though acceptance is necessary, it is insufficient (Aglipay, 2014; Cass, 1984; Evans et al., 2010).

6.2 Celebration as a Challenge to Queerphobia

In *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), “celebration” is the fourth and final stage of identity formation, and this advanced stage can directly challenge queerphobia (Uys, 2020). Celebration actively affirms and values queer identities, unlike tolerance and acceptance, which still imply a level of discomfort or a hierarchical structure. Cass (1984) reminds one that this shift from passive acknowledgement to active affirmation disrupts queerphobia and the underlying beliefs that sustain it.

When considering queerphobia, it depends on labelling difference or diversity as abnormal or negative (Cass, 1984). While tolerance supports queerphobia, as queer identities are only endured, celebration challenges it, considering queer identities as meaningful and positive. By celebrating, the notion that queerness is inferior or marginal is undermined (Aglipay, 2014; Uys, 2020).

Understanding and awareness (i.e., visibility) are needed to challenge queerphobia. When individuals openly celebrate queer identities, they are normalised within the society at large (Aglipay, 2014; Cass, 1984; Degges-White et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2010; Haseley, 2011). Internal resilience is strengthened, fostering self-worth and confidence instead of self-doubt and shame (Cass, 1984). In *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), Rafe begins to exist authentically in his social settings to celebrate his queer identity (Uys, 2020). Thus, celebration creates belonging and solidarity in a community that focuses less, or not at all, on the diversity of queer identities. Ultimately, celebration dismantles the foundations of queerphobia and transforms queer identities into a source of strength (Aglipay, 2014; Cass, 1984; Degges-White et al., 2005; Haseley, 2011).

6.3 The inclusion of *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) as a Suitable Resource for Young Adults in Heteronormative Language Classrooms

Openly Straight (Konigsberg, 2013) may be considered a suitable resource for teaching young adult students about queer identity formation in heteronormative language classrooms. It has an accessible style, a clear narrative, relatable characters, and a layered treatment of identity formation for students to learn and explore (Uys, 2020).

The primary literary work also promotes critical engagement with language. Mr Scarborough’s discussion on “rejection”, “tolerance”, “acceptance”, and “celebration”, which could be linked to complex terms and ideas (e.g., heterosexual norm, belonging, and self-definition), demonstrates how word choice expresses underlying beliefs and values (Uys, 2020). In a language classroom, both linguistic awareness and social understanding can be enhanced by creating opportunities for students to examine diction and how it shapes perceptions of identity and difference (Leibowitz et al., 2005).

Additionally, *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) challenges heteronormative assumptions by centring a queer protagonist who openly identifies as heterosexual. This “openly straight” perspective can encourage students to question the heterosexual norm as the default identity, creating opportunities for more inclusive discussions in the language classroom. From a teaching perspective, the literary text fosters empathy, and by engaging with Rafe’s process of identity formation, students can compare and contrast themselves with him, experiencing similarities and differences (Uys, 2020).

A classroom example, that follows the Backward design to lesson planning (Uys, 2021) can be as follows: When it has been determined that *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) may be taught in the English language classroom (i.e., context), a lesson aim could be: At the end of the lesson, the learners should be able to engage critically with a queer-themed literary novel and appreciate its diversity in a heteronormative society. The SMART Task (i.e., Specific,

Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Traceable) is a hot seat role-play activity wherein Rafe is questioned – by Ben, Albie, Toby, Mr Scarborough, his parents, and so forth – about his choice of leaving Boulder to become openly straight at Natick School, and how his identity formation eventually led to celebration. Scaffolding activities include a crossword puzzle that defines the various queer identities, an empty plot structure that engages with the exposition, rising actions, climax, falling actions, and resolution of the novel, and a role-playing template to write a script (first draft and final) of the performance (which integrates speaking, writing, reading, and listening). The teaching moment is a PowerPoint Presentation on script writing. The assessment entails baseline (i.e., the crossword puzzle), formative (i.e., the plot structure and script template), and summative assessment (i.e., the performance) of groups (to be facilitated by the educator). Resources include pens, paper, a laptop, a white screen, a data projector, costumes, props, and music. The introduction consists of a story told or a YouTube video shown by the teacher about an individual being excluded for being different. The pertinent question to be asked: Why is it important to become more knowledgeable about diverse identities? Should any student feel too uncomfortable, they should not be forced to participate in the lesson. The educator will be the more knowledgeable other; thus, they need to be prepared for (emotional) questions and responses. Additional safeguards can include inviting the school psychologist (should there be one), parents, or the principal to the lesson, an open-door policy from the educator’s side, a reading of the school policy concerning bullying and disrespecting others, selecting an age-appropriate group (e.g., ages 14–18), and formulating inclusive classroom norms.

As a result, *Openly Straight* (2013) functions as both a literary and pedagogical tool for teaching and learning about queer identities in the language classroom (Uys, 2020). Maake (2024) argues that it is necessary to consider the views of queer individuals to dispute the heterosexual norm and transform spaces (e.g., language classrooms) to be more inclusive.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated through the application of Cass’s model of Identity Formation, together with the intertwining of critical theory and queer theory as theoretical frameworks, that *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) reveals how identity, whether linearly or non-linearly, is negotiated within a heteronormative environment that constrains and enables self-expression. The findings highlighted that while acceptance represents progress from rejection and tolerance, it remains a limited stage of identity formation. Contrastingly, celebration emerges as a final transformative stage that challenges queerphobia and affirms queer identities.

The use of qualitative content analysis, which was structured around the codes of rejection, tolerance, acceptance, and celebration, reflected Rafe Goldberg’s experiences concerning a queer identity and the broader stages of identity formation. Furthermore, this study highlighted the value of purposively selecting *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) as a young adult queer-themed novel, providing insight into queer identity formation and encouraging critical reflection on language, power structures, and inclusion. Ultimately, this study advocated for the integration of such literary texts in heteronormative classrooms to challenge normative assumptions, promote empathy, and support inclusive approaches to teaching and learning about diverse identities.

A limitation of this study is the limited representation of diverse queer identities in *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), a Western literary work, as well as the textual analysis of a single

text⁴. Though this paper and its analysis, findings, and discussions are inclusive of all queer identities, not all queer individuals might engage best with this literary text. Though the text can be included in non-Western contexts, as identity formation could be considered universal, other texts that include non-Western contexts and represent other diverse identities should also be analysed and considered to teach and learn about queer identity formation, cultural specificity, and intersectionality. Nevertheless, now that a theoretical foundation for *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) has been laid, another recommendation that stems from this study is to gather empirical data (such as the perspectives of students and teachers) on the literary text being included in the language classroom, creating awareness and understanding of, and ultimately, celebrating queer identities.

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⁴ Due to the limited scope of this paper, the following source is suggested for additional reading, in which *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013) is not only analysed more in-depth, but *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2004) and *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985) are also included in the literary analyses:

- Uys, M. J. (2020). A literary analysis of queer texts (Master’s dissertation, North-West University).

Moreover, the following source could also be considered, as there is a comparative analysis between the novel and the film adaptation of *Geography Club*:

- Uys, M. J. (2022). A comparative analysis of the depiction of queer characters in Hartinger’s *Geography Club* (2004) and Entin’s (2013) film adaptation. *Literator*, 43(1), a1900. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v43i1.1900>

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