Exploring Teacher Attitudes towards Queer Learners in Lesotho Schools: A Call for Inclusive Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

The Lesotho constitution prohibits any form of discrimination while Education Act of 2010 ensures education for all. Nevertheless, there is still discrimination at school based on sexual orientation against queer learners in Lesotho. This qualitative study explored the attitudes of high school teachers towards queer learners in Lesotho high schools. It sought to answer the main research question; What are the attitudes of Lesotho's high school teachers towards queer learners? It was found that teachers promote and enforce heteronormativity because they lack understanding of gender and sexual diversity. It is worth noting that mannerisms, gestures and clothing were seen as markers for individual gender identity or orientation. These findings emphasize the need for more inclusive pre-service and in-service programs which will enable teachers to be equipped with necessary skills and increase their confidence in initiating educational initiatives that foster acceptance of queer learners in schools.

Keywords: Cisgender, Cisnormativity, Gender diversity, Sexual diversity, Queer learners

INTRODUCTION

International research provide evidence that queer learners--students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ)--face challenges relating to the inclusion and support in educational system (Francis, 2023; Reloj, 2021; Truong & Kosciw, 2022; Ullman et al., 2022). Scholars have revealed that cisheteronormativity, a belief that naturalises and normalises heterosexuality and cisgender identities, is reproduced in schools through discursive practices that silence the existence of queer learners (Cantos et al., 2023; Francis, 2018; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). In the context of Lesotho, studies found that schools continue to be unsafe spaces where heteronormativity is performed and modeled (Khau, 2016; Logie et al., 2019). This is evident in Logie et al. (2019) study, where lesbian learners were asked to undress in front of their teachers and show them their underwear's, failing which they were expelled from school. Francis and Kuhl (2022) maintain that, the enforcement of gendered uniform codes in schools perpetuates misconceptions about gender and sexuality, reinforcing the gender binary and institutionalising heteronormativity. Also, Khau (2016) found that teachers' discussions of sexual issues are only in relation to heterosexuality and not any other sexual identities, this occurs because queer people are allegedly non-existent in Lesotho. This silence perpetuates exclusion and reinforces systemic marginalisation.

While substantial research provides critical insights into queer learners' experiences in school, there is a gap in understanding teacher attitudes, which are distinct but related to queer learners' experiences. This study recognises that teachers' attitudes play a significant role in creating a safe and inclusive schooling environment for queer learners. Therefore, this article delves into the attitudes of high school teachers in Lesotho towards queer learners, utilizing qualitative phenomenology as the research approach, purposive sampling for participant selection, and semi-structured interviews. Due to the scarcity of local literature, this study relies heavily on global and South African literature, situating its findings within broader debates on gender and sexuality in education.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (LGBTQ), same sex sexualities and queer are terms frequently used in this article to refer to non-heterosexual and cisgender identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The kind of attitudes teachers display on same sex sexualities are important as they dictate how they will relate with queer learners, resulting in either a supportive and inclusive space or a hostile school climate (Hall & Rodgers, 2019). Kahveci (2023) adds that, teachers' attitudes affect learners academically, socially and emotionally. Research shows that many teachers promoted heterosexuality as normal while portraying counternormative sexualities as abnormal and deviant, a view reinforced by societal beliefs that portray sexual diversity as 'unnatural and un-African' (Francis, 2018; Maake et al., 2023; Moagi et al., 2021). In this way, teacher attitudes function as mechanism of power that gives privilege upon heterosexuality and leave queer learners vulnerable to discrimination (Orellana et al., 2022). Research consistently demonstrate that teacher attitudes extend beyond individual beliefs as they unveiled through everyday school practices. Numerous sources add that teachers often reinforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity through lack of support for queer learners, silence, inability to deal with homophobic or bullying incidents, and verbal or emotional abuse of queer learners (Cederved et al., 2021; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2022; Parise, 2021). Therefore, this shows that teacher attitudes play a major role in maintaining exclusion of queer learners in schools.

Studies shows that negative attitudes toward same-sex sexualities are influenced by religious beliefs (Westwood, 2022). Studies conducted in the United States and South Africa shows that teachers who held fundamentalist religious beliefs had more negative attitudes towards same-sex sexualities (Bhana, 2022; Hall & Rodgers, 2019; Msibi, 2012; Ngcobo, 2021). This could be the case because religion is frequently used as benchmark in African countries, including Lesotho, to deny queer people their rights and freedoms to engage in same sex relationships (Amoah & Gyasi, 2016). Van Zyl et al. (2017) argue that cultural norms, particularly those affected by religion, play part in regulating what teachers feel permitted to say or teach about gender and sexual diversity. This influence is evident in schools. For instance, a study conducted in South Africa to examine how teachers position themselves on educating learners on sexual diversity in their classrooms discovered that teachers believed that no school authorities would back them in teaching learners about homosexuality due to the influence of the church (Francis, 2012). Likewise, in Lesotho, the absence of teachings about homosexuality in schools demonstrates the effect of church moral teachings (Khau, 2016). As a result, teacher attitudes are not only driven by personal beliefs but are shaped by institutional silences and constraints that discourage inclusive practices.

Studies further highlight the importance of developing LGBTQ-inclusive policies in the school curriculum in order to mitigate the negative effects of teacher attitudes (Hernandez & Torres, 2023; Russell et al., 2021). School policies that prohibit heteronormativity and cisnormativity practices and school's ethos that include queer learners play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive school where queer learners feel safe and protected (De Wet & van Wyk, 2021; Ngcobo, 2021). Anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies, in particular, are associated with reduced harassment and improved academic outcomes for queer learners (Abreu et al., 2022; Fields & Wotipka, 2022). Therefore, it is important for schools to implement LGBTQ-inclusive policies that promote a safe school environment for queer learners. Shannon-Baker (2020) maintains that, a safe school environment is where all learners are protected and supported regardless of their sexuality.

In Lesotho, in order to show commitment in creating safe inclusive school spaces, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) enacted the Education Act of 2010 to ensure equal education opportunities for all (MoET, 2018). However, Education Act of 2010 does not speak directly to queer learners (Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2020). This is consistent with Francis et al. (2019) findings, which revealed that queer learners in Lesotho are marginalized and silenced by school policies and educational systems.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

A qualitative approach located within the interpretivist paradigm was found to be appropriate for its strength in enabling researchers to understand teachers' perceptions and opinions about queer learners from their own perspective (Creswell, 2014). Unlike a quantitative approach, which gathers numerical data, the qualitative approach aims to explain or explore a social phenomenon in its context (Kumar, 2019). In addition, the qualitative approach affords the researcher the opportunity to explore and understand deeper insights into the phenomena (Oranga & Matere, 2023). The exploratory case study design was used to uncover the attitudes of teachers toward queer learners as it allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' attitudes from different angles

(Thomas, 2021). According to Neiwenhuis (2016), exploratory case study is employed when there is no single set of outcomes.

Research setting

The study was conducted in Teya-Teyaneng, an urban area in Berea district of Lesotho. Data collection took place in three high schools that were selected for their convenient geographic proximity. Interviews were conducted in participants' classrooms after hours, and the classrooms' design enabled the face-to-face interactions.

Participants

The study comprised of five participants (one male and four females) between the ages of 29 and 48 years who were purposively selected from three high schools. Purposive sampling was used in that the teachers had to adhere to the criteria of being a Life Skills Education (LSE) teacher with at least five years of teaching experience in the subject. Participants chose their own pseudonyms (see Table 1).

Table 1. The profile of participants						
School	**Participants**	**Gender**	**Age**	**Highest Qualification**	**Years Teaching LSE**	**Received LSE Training**
A	Thabo	Male	38	Bachelor of Education	12	Yes
A	Mary	Female	38	Bachelor of Education	9	Yes
B	Palesa	Female	29	Bachelor Science in Education	5	No
C	Mpho	Female	33	Bachelor of Education	7	No
C	Thandi	Female	48	Diploma in Education	10	No

Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, as they are widely used data collection technique in qualitative research (Dudovskiy, 2018). The questions were based on an interview schedule, and the answers were recorded with participants' consent. Although all participants could converse in English, they were more comfortable with their native language; therefore, interviews were conducted in both English and Sesotho to evoke the frankest responses from participants, and some parts of the interviews conducted in Sesotho were translated into English. One researcher is a Sesotho native speaker and shares culture and language with the participants. This positioning offered her the best opportunity to gain rich and thick information at all stages of data generation. However, she was also aware that her position can potentially increase interpretative bias. Therefore, reflexivity became central. Probing questions were used throughout the interview sessions to avoid shared understanding and peer debriefing was also used to ensure that interviews interpretations reflect participants' original answers. Interviews took place after school, which was a suitable time for participants, and they lasted for 20 to 30 minutes. The choice of methodology, together with reflexive awareness of researcher positioning, ensured credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Procedures

Approval was sought from the University of the Free State before conducting the study, and the ethical clearance certificate was issued. Permission was requested from Berea Education office to conduct study in the selected schools in Teya-Teyaneng Lesotho and permission was granted. Permission was also requested from the principals of the selected schools and access was granted. Informed consent forms were issued to participants to sign before participating in the study. The participants were informed about the nature of their participation, why they were chosen to participate and that they are free to withdraw from the study anytime. They were also provided with information leaflets which clearly explained the purpose of the study, duration,

the potential benefits and anticipated risks of taking part in the study, how their confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed. Participants confirmed their voluntary participation and their understanding of the information provided by signing the consent form.

Data analysis

The study adopted a thematic analysis model to analyse data. The researchers followed these six phases of data analysis as proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013); transcribing and organising data, assigning codes to the data, searching for repeated patterns or themes in the codes, and reviewing and naming themes and reporting results. The benefit of using thematic analysis is that it is very flexible; however, its flexibility can also be regarded as a limitation, since it allows a wide range of analytic options (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). However, we avoided wide analysis by always reflecting on the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Normalising heterosexual and cisgender sexualities: lack of knowledge

Majority of participants revealed that they have limited knowledge of commonly used gender and sexuality concepts. For example, Mpho described LGBTQ people as "*a community of people who are abnormal to us normal people...who do normal things.*" The use of the word 'abnormal' in Mpho's narrative to describe LGBTQ people normalizes heterosexuality and cisgender people. Similarly, Thandi referred to queer people as "*...these things we call gays and lesbians...I don't know much about them, but I have heard that there are people with both sex organs...*" The phrase "these things", not only dehumanizes queer people but it also undermines them. Also, the use of the pronouns 'us' and 'them' reflects the marginalization between heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals, and, in schooling, it causes segregation and a non-inclusive classroom. Francis (2017) argues that it is critical to break the binary of 'them' and 'us' and try to maintain the centrality and normalcy of the self in order to enable non-normative and heterosexual and cisgender people to move beyond compulsive heteronormativity.

Participants were also asked what they understand by the terms gender and sexuality, and their responses point to a basic gender dichotomy, either male or female. According to Mary, gender is "*...a state of being made female or male,*" while Thandi equated sexuality with biological sex organs. This type of perception excludes and does not recognise any other genders besides heterosexuals. According to Bartholomaeus et al. (2021), there is a presumption that there are just two gender categories, reinforcing the gender binary. Mangin (2018) argues that gender is not natural but is how one internally identifies and is a product of the interactions between the individual and society. The results indicate that participants promote and enforce compulsive heteronormativity in schools due to lack of training on gender and sexual diversity issues.

Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2020) argue that, teacher preparation on gender and sexual diversity content should not be taken lightly because teachers are responsible for promoting safe and inclusive school environments. Studies indicate that teachers who lack training on LGBTQ issues struggle to address homophobic bullying in their classrooms (Cantos et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2021). Indeed, teachers cannot redress homophobia and promote equality if they are not fully equipped with knowledge concerning gender and sexual diversity and fundamental human rights (Francis, 2017; Pieterse, 2019). As such, it becomes significant to provide training programs that will equip teachers with skills that will enable them to challenge the heteronormativity culture in schools (De Wet & Van Wyk, 2021).

Intolerance of sexual and gender diversity in schools

Regardless of the increased awareness of the existence of queer people, teacher narratives reveal intolerance of same-sex sexualities in some areas in Lesotho. For instance, Thandi narrated, "*I don't understand those people who are called 'litabane'* (A Sesotho derogatory term for queer people), *I don't like them at all because I have realised that they exaggerate everything, when they walk, you will notice that they move their waist too much.*" The above view demonstrates unequivocally that heterosexual and cisgender behaviour is socially acceptable while queer behaviour is considered exaggerated and not conforming to societal norms. As a result, ignorance and gender binary are evident. Francis (2017) support this view by stating that, most people reject how queer

people behave, especially the way they speak or/and walk, reinforcing the dominance of heteronormative and cisnormative standards. Also, Thandi's use of a derogatory Sesotho term further demonstrates how cultural language practices embed stigma, perpetuating systemic hostility toward queer learners.

Religion was also found to be a strong predictor of prejudice against queer people. Palesa's assertion that queer learners' *"hormones do not allow them to be what God created them to be"* positions heterosexuality as morally righteous. This perspective reflects Bhana's (2022) findings that teachers prioritise cisnormativity and heteronormativity based on their religious convictions. In the classroom, such beliefs reinforce and silences the existence of queer learners. Other participants spoke of their confusion regarding the origins of same-sex sexualities. Thabo questioned whether being a queer *is "...a habit, natural, or something they just choose"* and Mary questioned whether *"…is it something real because it is growing."* These narratives reveal confusion about the origins of sexual diversity, framing it as either a choice or a recent phenomenon, rendering being queer as a choice. As such this perception gives teachers power to ignore the needs of queer learners (Brown & Diale, 2017). Global literature highlights that teachers perform and reproduce gendered and sexualised knowledge in schools, making queer learners invisible (Cumming-Potvin & Martino 2018; van Leent & Spina, 2023). Remarkably, this study found that in some urban communities in Lesotho, the origins of gender and sexual diverse people remain unclear. This finding substantiates previous findings by Hlalele and Matsúmunyane (2022) which indicate that homophobia is most prevalent in Lesotho urban areas.

Mannerisms, gestures, and clothing as sexuality and gender markers

The data collected shows that many participants have preconceived notions about queer learners. According to Fasoli et al. (2017), non-verbal behaviour, such as mannerisms and gestures, is used to determine whether a person is homosexual or heterosexual. This theme provides participants' attitudes towards queer learners and determines the identifying factors for them to perceive learners to be queer. For instance, Palesa explained that *"I identify them by their behaviour. If she is a girl, she behaves like boys….and if he is a boy he behaves like girls. Lesbians like acting like men and when they speak, they deepen their voices."*

The response illustrates that there is a specific expectation of how girls and boys should behave according to their gender (Ngabaza et al., 2016). These expectations have compulsory demands that normalise heterosexuality and cisnormativity. Gay and lesbian learners are identified by behaviour, how they speak and walk. For example, a boy who behaves like girls is a gay (feminine) and a girl behaving like boys is a lesbian (masculine). Mpho extended this logic to clothing and appearance, stating that *"gays like make-up and nail polish"* and *"...like bright colours like pink and orange and lesbians like to dress like men"*. Mpho believes that a boy that uses make-up and nail polish is gay. This means that feminine men, regardless of their true sexual identity, are considered gay. That is, femininity is equivalent to gay, and such belief perpetuate gender stereotypes. For example, in Brown and Diales' (2017) study, a lesbian learner was chased out of the toilet because she had more masculine features. Huysmans et al. (2021) state that gender stereotypes contribute to gender-based discrimination and inequality and can have a long-term effect on beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

Drawing from the above responses, our results show that gender identification is directly related to appropriate clothing for females and males. Our results are consistent with Brown and Diale (2017) that clothes can serve as markers for gender and sexual identity. For instance, Brown and Diale describe an incident in which a principal was introducing student participants, and when he was supposed to introduce one lady, he asked her to introduce herself because he claimed that he was not sure of her gender because she wore male clothing.

Creating an LGBTQ-inclusive school environment: the need for school policies

Participants' responses indicated that Lesotho schools are lagging in providing safe spaces for queer learners due to a lack of LGBTQ-inclusive policies, highlighting the need for improved policies and practices to promote respect and inclusivity among these learners. Mpho illustrated, *"I can say our school is not safe for those learners (queer) because there are no policies that explicitly protect these learners. Also, the Constitution doesn't say anything about them."* Mpho's response highlight the importance of a policy, however it reflects limited policy awareness. Even though queer learners are not explicitly mentioned in the Lesotho constitution, the Bill of Rights do offer protection for queer learners. Contrary to Mpho's response, Thandi

believed that her school is an inclusive space for queer learners because there is a policy that offers protection to all learners, indicating formal policy presence. However, it is not clear whether the policy works effectively to the benefit of the queer learners, raising questions about policy enactment. She stated, *"our school is a safe space for queer because we have a policy that emphasizes that every learner despite his/her status or sexuality has a right to learn and to be in a school campus and anyone who is found harassing learners either by words or actions will be punished."*

Shannon-Baker (2020) emphasizes the importance of safe school policies that prohibit heteronormative practices, which needs effective enactment rather than just its existence. Therefore, policies should be LGBTQ inclusive to promote a safe learning environment. It appears that most participants support the idea of developing LGBTQ-inclusive school policies; however, some participants have different opinions. Mary indicated, *"I can say schools should make their own policies that affirm and support queer learners, but I doubt it would change anything so I think participants should start respecting and treating these learners like others."* Palesa dismissed the need altogether, *"to be honest, I don't think they need a special policy; they should be treated equally like other learners."*

Mary and Palesa believe that queer learners in schools should be treated equally, without preferential treatment. However, Palesa dismisses the challenges queer learners face in schools by indicating that queer learners do not need a special policy. Such responses highlight gaps in both policy awareness and enactment, as they ignore the protective function of policies for queer learners (Francis, 2022). The Constitution of Lesotho as a supreme law emphasizes equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their sexuality. However, in Lesotho, schools are homophobic, and the school curriculum often make queer learners invisible (Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2020). Section 18(2) of the constitution states that no law should discriminate, affirming formal protection (Constitution of Lesotho, 1993). Therefore, addressing harassment and discrimination in school policies is crucial to ensure equal treatment for all learners, promoting equality and inclusivity in the school context (De Wet & Van Wyk, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study explored the attitudes of high school teachers in Lesotho toward queer learners, illuminating on prevalent norms, stereotypes, and the absence of inclusive policies. The findings revealed that, heterosexuality and cisnormativity are normalized in schools, this is due to the perception that queer learners are abnormal, reinforcing a compulsive heteronormative culture. Therefore, this study proposes that the Ministry of Education and Training strengthen teacher education and policy frameworks in Lesotho. Specifically, this study underscores the importance of including gender and sexual diversity content in both in-service and pre-service training programs in order to develop well-equipped teachers who can foster inclusive classrooms. According to Haitembu (2023), gender and sexual diversity content empower teachers with the knowledge and confidence to deliver educational initiatives that promote the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity among learners. At the policy level, the findings emphasize the need for the adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive school policies and the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity content into school curriculum to protect queer learners and promote equality. Although our main focus was on three high schools situated in the urban region of Teya-Teyaneng Lesotho, researchers acknowledged that there is a high possibility that results will differ across diverse regions of Lesotho. Therefore, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of attitudes of high school teachers toward queer learners, future scholars should explore rural school contexts.

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