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‘I’m used to it now’: experiences of homophobia among queer youth in South African township schools

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This paper explores how sexually marginalised black high-school students from conservative schooling contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, experience schooling. It draws on queer theories through life narratives in presenting findings from a small-scale interventionist project designed by the author. The project involved 14 participants comprising teachers, school learners and pre-service teachers. The study found that queer youth have negative experiences of schooling which range from punitive actions expressed through derogatory language to vicious reactionary hate, often expressed through violence and often perpetrated by teachers. This paper also found resistances from queer learners in portraying a positive self-image for themselves as a mechanism for coping with homophobia. As a way of looking forward, it locates teachers at the centre of bringing about change for the queer learners and argues for a re-education of teachers in order to tackle homophobia in schools.

Keywords: heteronormativity; homophobia; queer theory; difference and diversity; sexualities and education; narratives

This paper addresses a neglected area in educational research, particularly in the South African context. Studies detailing the experiences of queer learners in South Africa have been very few compared with a growing body of knowledge from countries such as the USA and the UK. Deeply entrenched ideas of patriarchy together with ignorance have rendered queer learners in South Africa invisible. This invisibility is mediated by race; the experiences of black queer learners have remained largely undocumented, with very few scholars daring to research what is perceived to be a dangerous terrain. This paper is, therefore, a direct response to this silence. It uses narratives from learners and teachers who participated in a MAC AIDS-funded interventionist project known as the We All Count Educational Project (WECEP), geared towards challenging homophobia in South African township schools, in order to represent the experiences of South African queer learners. This paper argues, based on the preliminary findings of the project, that a meaningful change in addressing homophobia in South African township schools can only be achieved through teacher-focused and context-specific interventions. It uses Grace and Benson’s (2000) queer life narrative research so as to ‘build a knowledge base where description, interpretation, and analysis lead to critical dialogue and “resist-stances”’ (89).

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First, this paper seeks to answer a broad question as to how South African queer township learners (as well as those perceived to be queer) experience schooling. These are learners whom Morrell (2002) characterises as living ‘at a knife’s edge’ due to the violence that gets perpetrated around and against them. Townships in South Africa still largely remain poor and black, with violent masculinities regulating sexuality (Selikow, Zulu, and Cedra 2002). These masculinities exclusively support and uphold compulsory heterosexuality. Second, this paper seeks to deconstruct some of the long-standing assumptions about homosexuality in African contexts by telling narratives on the experiences of queer learners in South Africa. Unlike the dominant narratives from African leaders which seek to silence the lives and existence of queer people in Africa by rendering them invisible (see Epprecht 2004; Msibi 2009), this paper shares the stories of those most affected by heterosexism and homophobia in South African schools. By using queer theory, it counters dominant African narratives which construct queer individuals as simply powerless, disgraced and in need of empowerment. It seeks to demonstrate ways in which these learners resist and challenge homophobia. Youdell (2010, 88) notes that

queer is about interrogating how discourses of sex and sexuality are implicated in the process of subjectivation that constitute subjects who are sexed and sexualised in particular ways... A central project of queer in this framework is resisting these processes through practices that unsettle the meanings of these discourses and deploy other discourses that have been subjugated or disallowed.

This paper, therefore, sees queer learners as being implicated in the discourses of identity construction and looks at ways in which these learners resist and challenge such discourses in the school setting.

**Terminology: who are queer learners?**

Defining who queer individuals are is indeed a very difficult exercise. This is largely because ‘queer’ seeks to radically shift away from fixed notions of identification which position people’s sexuality on the basis of sexual practices or some perceived or constructed gender identification. This paper positions gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people under the ‘category’ of queer so as to escape labels of identification that tend to fix individuals. The use of queer is an attempt not to essentialise identification. This is in line with queer theory which sees identification as shifting and fluid. The use of queer also acknowledges the complexity of identification. For instance, the experiences listed here are of learners who self-identify as gay or lesbian. While most of the learners are already ‘out’ in their communities and schools, others are not. Those who are not ‘out’ are largely involved with both male and female partners; some are not even engaged in relationships but understand their own sexual identification as gay or lesbian. The fixed political ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ labels, therefore, do not fit all the participants in the study as their sense of identification ranges between sexual practices and their own sense of sexual identification or both. I, therefore, intentionally refrain from using ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ as there essentially is no one way of fitting into these labels. The use of queer simply acknowledges that the participants are sexual beings, whose sexuality is fluid and multiple depending on space, time and context. Morris (2000) puts this more succinctly. She notes that ‘queer announces more than “lesbian”, “gay”, or “bisexual”. Queer refers to anyone who
feels marginalised by mainstream visions of sexuality’ (21). In short, this paper is not concerned about defining sexual categories. These have little meaning as gender identification itself is a social construction.

While this paper is framed on fluidity, the findings reported in the latter part of the paper may not appear to be keeping with this frame. This is intentional. Instead of highlighting the multiple ways in which the participants in the study ‘perform’ their sexualities, this paper focuses on how the participants have experienced homophobia and the ways in which they subvert and collude with discursive constructions of sexuality. The findings may, therefore, appear to be holding on to fixed notions of identification. This is not the case. My intention is to present the participants in the ways they see themselves. People, for instance, do not think of themselves, and are not seen by others, as fluid beings, but rather their actions and behaviours may support fluid conceptions of sexuality. Sexuality is often viewed as representing the self, instead of being about what one does. These are the limitations of queer theory in that it does not fully take into account the structural restrictions that limit agency. Youdell (2010, 88) highlights this point well when she notes that

We might assert bodies and pleasures and refuse the binaries of penis/vagina, man/woman, hetero/homo, and yet prevailing discourse presses these upon us, like it or not. We might struggle to refuse these subjectivities, but subject-hood is dependent on our intelligibility and so we might have to take them up; we might find them put on us; and we might be attached to them politically, socially, relationally, psychically, orgasmically.

As Youdell suggests, and as we are about to see in the ensuing sections, while the participants of this study did not see themselves operating outside discourse, they employed fixed ways of identification and represented themselves as such. The use of queer theory in this study, therefore, may appear like an imposition on the participants who are caught up in a world of structure and subjecthood. While clearly understanding that ‘queer’ is not itself a form of identification, this paper intentionally also uses queer to bring all forms of alternative sexual expressions together – expressions that would otherwise not be captured through the fixed labels of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’.

Review of literature

There is overwhelming evidence in the literature of the negative experiences that queer learners are faced with in schools across the globe (Greene 1986; Nichols 1999; Renold 2000; Athanases and Larrabee 2003; Graziano 2004; Sears 2005; Richardson 2006; Nixon 2010). Mac an Ghaill (1994) notes that the negative experiences experienced by queer learners range from verbal abuse to physical violence. Martin and Hetrick (1988) further note that the challenges faced by queer learners are social, emotional and also cognitive. Gross, Aurand, and Addessa (1988), cited in Rivers (2000), found that 50% of gay learners report having experienced threats or having been personally harmed in US high schools. Similarly, Pilkington and D’Augelli (1995) found that of the 194 queer youth surveyed, 30% of young queer men and 35% of young queer women had been harassed in schools, with many living in fear of violence or sexual harassment. Equally, several scholars (Ramafedi, Farrow, and Deisher 1991; Rivers 2000; Russell and Joyner 2001) have found that queer learners are at greater risk for suicide, school dropout and alcohol abuse than their ‘straight’ peers. More or less the same data were discovered in the UK in a study that involved 416 young queer
individuals (Trenchard and Warren 1984). The UK results showed that queer learners are not only bullied in schools, but also verbally harassed and even physically harmed. While much has been achieved in combating homophobia in UK schools since this work, such as repealing Section 28, studies suggest that homophobia and heterosexism still continue in UK schools today (Nixon 2010).

Among the key mechanisms used to discriminate against queer people is language. Smith (1998) has reported the extent to which language can be used to discriminate against queer individuals. He writes that

> Everyday practices of ‘fag-baiting’, such as poking fun, teasing, name calling, scrawling graffiti on lockers, insulting and harassing someone, produce the ‘fag’ as a social object. The language intends a course of action isolating the gay student and inciting to physical violence. Verbal abuse both is and initiates attack. (310)

Verbal abuse appears to be a prevailing theme across all studies detailing the experiences of queer learners. What is particularly problematic is that this abuse comes from both students and teachers. Smith (1998) notes that teachers are not only complicit in their silence when queer learners receive this abuse, but also equally active participants contributing to the stigmatisation, ostracisation and discrimination of queer learners.

When one focuses on the negative experiences that queer learners are exposed to in schools, it becomes very easy to view this group as a helpless, powerless group that is victimised in schools and in society. However, I wish to caution against such a view as it simply serves to reinforce stereotypes that our work wishes to shatter – it removes agency from queer learners. There is, for instance, literature that portrays queer learners as highly resistant and positive. Denborough (1996), citing Foucault and Kritzman, for example, reminds us that sexuality is a means of exercising power and that where there is power, there is bound to be resistance. Similarly, Mac an Ghaill (1994) shows that even with the negativity, queer learners are able to resist and also find ways of navigating themselves within the repressive schooling environments by subverting the negativity into positivity. This, therefore, constructs queer learners as actors in their own environments and not just as helpless, powerless victims.

Given this evidence of the experiences of queer learners around the globe, what are the experiences of such learners in developing contexts such as South Africa? While South Africa has adopted one of the most progressive constitutions in the world by according full rights to queer people, it remains true that a great disconnect between policy and reality exists. First, it is important to note here that very little exists in the form of literature that seeks to explain the experiences of queer learners in South Africa. Of those studies that exist (see Richardson 2006), little has been written on black queer learners from township contexts. Richardson (2006) explains this as being largely due to issues of access. Townships are deemed dangerous places by researchers, and additionally queer learners remain largely hidden due to the fear of being exposed.

On a positive note, the freedoms that have come with a progressive constitution have meant a greater number of learners claiming a gay identity from an earlier age. Reid and Dirsuweit (2002) note that the democratic dispensation has allowed for greater visibility of queer people. However, even with this visibility, experiences of queer youth, and those of queer people more generally, remain bleak (Reddy 2001; Reid and Dirsuweit 2002). Walker (2005, 227) attributes this to hegemonic masculinities and what she refers to as ‘constitutional sexuality’. She argues, writing about
gender-based violence, that the more liberal version of the post-1994 constitution fails to speak directly to masculinities of the past. Supporting this claim, she writes that ‘Those masculinities, steeped in violence and authoritarianisms, are anathema to the “gender equality” prescribed by the Constitution and the battery of policies and laws, which have been written in its wake’ (2005, 227). Walker is not alone in terms of this thinking. Morrell (2003) has shown that the history of British colonialism together with the repressive apartheid structures has produced particular forms of masculinity which are steeped in violence. Thus, incidents of violence in South Africa continue to be among the highest in the world, with African men being largely seen as the perpetrators. Posel (2005) refers to this violence as the ‘scandal for manhood’. Such violence is often directed at women, but people who engage in alternative sexualities are also not excluded. The continuing ‘curative rape’ of lesbian women, for example, is an example of such violence (see Msibi 2009). Homophobia and sexism are, therefore, connected; it is often men who portray violent forms of homophobic expressions. Writing from a US context, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) demonstrate this link. They note that

As an organising principle of heterosexuality, homophobia – the terror that others will see one as gay, as a failed man – underlies a significant amount of men’s behaviour, including their relationship with other men, women and violence. One could say homophobia is the hate that makes men straight. (1446)

If experiences of South African queer people are generally bleak, what do we know about the schooling experiences of queer youth?

There is very limited literature on the experiences of queer learners in South African township schools. However, much has been written on gender and sexuality in South African township schools. Studying what we know in terms of gender can reveal much about the experiences of queer youth in such schools. This is the discussion that I now move to.

Owing to the history of apartheid, South African schools are still very much divided along racial lines. White and black middle-class children generally attend well-resourced ‘former Model C’ schools, while black working-class children generally attend impoverished township and rural schools. Mampane and Bouwer (2011) note that many learners in townships require both protection and resilience as a result of the high levels of crime and violence experienced in these schools. They suggest that this is due to the violence in the general society which finds expression in schools and is seen as a legitimate way of resolving disputes. Often this violence is gendered, with girls and gender-transgressive learners being at the receiving end. Wilson (n.d.), writing for UNESCO, notes that ‘assault, rape and sexual violence are “endemic” in South African [township] schools’ (4). Such violence is both implicit and explicit. These sentiments are further supported by Bhana and Pattman (2009, 70), who note that

Girls face significant restrictions around sexuality with an emphasis on promoting modest behaviour, protecting virginity and avoiding sexual relationships… Young South African male adults assert their power in varied ways including violence, sexual assault and rape and the pursuit of multiple partners.

Schools are, therefore, generally unsafe spaces for girls (Bhana 2005; Leach and Humphreys 2007; Bhana and Pattman 2009). As noted above, townships themselves are generally violent places, where gender-based violence is pervasive. Connell (1995)
attributes this to poverty and marginalisation which exist in these contexts, causing men to use violence and coercion to assert their authority. Additionally, violence in these contexts is also deeply embedded in notions of culture and religion. Bhana, de Lange, and Mitchelle (2009, 49) write that ‘dominant cultural norms create an environment where the engagement in violent and coercive sexual relations is encouraged for “real men”’. In terms of sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality is, therefore, promoted, with homosexual behaviour often seen as an illegitimate expression of desire (Mitchell and Smith 2003; Francis and Msibi 2011). Richardson (2008, 67) notes that many learners ‘attend schools which are heterosexist, supportive of homophobic harassment, or have teachers whose biased feelings and attitudes are often communicated in subtle ways’.

Additionally, Butler and Astbury (2005) note that queer learners in South Africa experience discrimination, rejection, isolation, non-tolerance, marginalisation and harassment from peers, teachers and school administrators. These experiences are said to differ according to race. Polders and Wells (2004) found that white youth, apart from sexual abuse, generally experienced higher levels of physical and verbal abuse than their black counterparts. Richardson (2006, 136) explains this as largely due to the fact that

\[ \text{gay white boys are more likely than black boys to behave in “masculine” ways; they pose a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Black gay youth, he contends, tend to be more readily accepted by others because they conform to the stereotypical belief that gays want to be “like girls”}. \]

I argue that such conclusions are essentially flawed and questionable for reasons related to argumentation and evidence. First, it is not clear why behaving in masculine ways leads to physical abuse. It also is not clear as to why white boys would behave in masculine ways compared with other races. Finally, Richardson does not provide us with any empirical data to support his claims. Apart from these issues, the claims are problematic for reasons related to gender identification and its discursive construction. Richardson assumes the ‘gay’ to be an identifiable object due to assumed effeminate mannerisms. Such a view creates a simplistic view of African youth sexuality which does not take into account complexities in identification. I argue that while this view may hold for some African queer youth, it certainly does not hold for many others who do get victimised and physically harmed for being effeminate. Richardson paints black queer youth with one brush. Many African youth do behave in ‘masculine’ ways. I include this discussion here particularly to highlight the need for more accurate and empirical work focusing on queer youth in township contexts. As can be seen from the discussion above, the more this work is ignored, the easier it is to make generalisations.

**Theoretical framework**

As noted above, this paper uses queer life narratives in highlighting the experiences of queer learners in township schools, an approach supported by Grace and Benson (2000). Unlike the approach of Grace and Benson which focuses on autobiographical accounts, this work focuses on narratives expressed by those targeted through heterosexism as well as by those who support them in order to understand how queer youth experience homophobia in developing schooling contexts such as South African
township schools. Queer life narratives centre on the idea of ‘resist-stancing’ — an approach that describes ‘direct actions informed and enacted in the intersection of the personal, the political and pedagogical’ so as to connect acts of ‘telling, theorizing, dialoguing and resist-stancing to develop a critical learning process designed to contest exclusionary hetero-normative social and cultural practices’ (Grace and Benson 2000, 89).

This approach illuminates the lives of queer individuals as actors in their social space and challenges the powerless and helpless discourse often constructed of queer people. It works within the framework of queer theory which sees forms of identification as fluid, multiple and positional, depending on context and space (Gamson and Moon 2004), and thus challenges assumptions about gender, identity and sexuality (Grace and Benson 2000). This paper adopts Stein and Plummer’s (1994) definition of queer theory. They argue that

Queer theory is a 1) conceptualisation of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides; 2) the problematisation of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing. (1994, 182)

Based on the above definition, therefore, this paper will not essentialise identities and experiences, nor will it hope to generalise. While this paper does showcase the homophobic experiences of queer youth, it also demonstrates the resist-stances that these youth assume in challenging homophobia. This is the key theoretical contribution of the paper. This paper will also draw on intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class to highlight the complexities of identification. I intentionally avoid the term ‘identity’ but turn to ‘identification’ in order to escape perceiving certain forms of identification as fixed and stable. Rather, I hold that the ways in which people identify themselves vary in complex and unstable ways (Pinar 2003). The queer life narrative approach adopted in this paper will, therefore, seek to tell the stories of those marginalised through politics of gender, sexual orientation and race while also highlighting their resist-stances. As Jennings (1994, 13) notes, ‘only through telling our stories can we shatter the myths and expose the lies that allow bigots to portray us as a threatening “other”’.

Methodology
The findings reported in this paper come from the analysis of an interventionist project geared towards the improvement of queer learners’ experiences in schools. There were 14 participants in this project. Eight of the participants were learners from schools (between the age of 15 and 18), four were university students (between the age of 18 and 22; one of the university students was in his final year and was already teaching part time) and two were teachers (in their late 40s). Interestingly, the project started with four teacher-participants, but currently has two, as the two male teachers decided to withdraw out of fear of being identified as gay. The participants were of different genders (seven males and seven females). The participants also involved a wide range of sexualities. The learners consisted of gay male identifying individuals (3), lesbian identifying individuals (3), questioning male identifying individual (1) and ‘straight’ identifying male individual (1). The university students, on the other hand, consisted of two lesbian women, one gay man and one questioning male. Both the teachers were heterosexual allies. All the participants were black and taught,
learnt or are currently learning in township schools around the Durban area of South Africa. The experiences highlighted here are of all the participants in the project, including university students. However, given the fact that the focus of this paper is secondary schooling, the selected discussions from university students represent only their secondary schooling experiences.

The greatest challenge of working with queer learners, particularly black queer learners from township contexts, is access: both ethically and logistically. Teachers, therefore, became central in selecting school learners. I had a close relationship with the teachers as I had worked with them as a student in a community outreach organisation known as the Community Development Association, based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The teachers had approached me about the possibility of running workshops addressing homophobia, as queer learners who had been victimised in their schools were on the rise. The teachers were known allies in their schools as they often assisted and supported these learners. The participants in this sense were, therefore, conveniently selected using teachers as instruments. However, it is important to stress that the teachers did not need to go out looking for ‘an identifiable’ homosexual behaviour among learners, but rather they simply referred to the project the learners who had consulted them about their challenges. These learners then in turn informed friends about the project, some of whom then decided to participate. ‘Straight’ learners who also had been concerned about the high levels of homophobia were also included.

Invitation letters were written to schools requesting learners to participate in a project dealing with issues of sexuality. In order to gain access to learners, it was not specified in the letters that matters to be discussed dealt specifically with homophobia. This was not done under false pretence as the project covered a breadth of issues on sexuality including HIV and AIDS, gender and homosexuality, among others. The schools then forwarded consent forms, which I together with two student-assistants had drafted to the parents. The parents signed these consent forms, thereby granting permission for participation to the learners.

This project, as indicated above, was interventionist. Five workshops of 4 h each during weekends were scheduled for the training and discussion in August 2009 to October 2009. The participants were exposed to a range of training from various guests who discussed about sexuality, sexual identification, gender and power. The participants were also trained on visual methodologies and photography as they were all given disposable cameras to capture their experiences. The pictures from the disposable cameras have been collected and compiled into a DVD. A further three sessions of over 2 h each were organised with teachers to discuss curriculum issues in 2009 and 2010. This will not be reported in this paper. Both the DVD and curriculum produced will be used in conscientising schools about homophobia. The focus of the findings of this study will be on the five workshops which were all recorded with the permission of the participants. The participants spoke in both English and iSiZulu; some of the data were, therefore, translated from isiZulu to English. The next section details the findings.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the intervention project are based on sentiments expressed by school learners, university students and teachers in the sessions. They show that queer learners generally have negative experiences of schooling. These experiences are discussed below.
Language

As with other studies across the globe, language was found to be one of the key ways in which discrimination against queer learners is perpetrated and maintained in South African township schools. Male learners reported that words like ‘isitabane’, ‘moffie’ and ‘ongqingili’, which are all derogatory isiZulu and Afrikaans words with a meaning similar to ‘faggot’, were being used in schools to refer to them. Others noted that other learners saw them as effeminate and wanting to be like girls, often referring to them as ‘osis-bhuti’. This is an isiZulu word which literally means sister-brothers, depicting a mixture of male and female. Mandla, a student in the project, noted that

They call me names all the time. I’m used to being called usis-bhuti now. It doesn’t bother me anymore. They think I’m a girl because I hang around with girls. I am usis-bhuti because I’m not like them [other boys].

Girls noted similar abuse, although not to the same extent as boys. Girls noted that teachers often tell them ‘to stop being tomboys’ (Nomsa). Such cautionary statements not only are meant to stop learners from claiming queer identification, but also feed into the regime of heterosexism (Smith 1998) by rendering homosexuality as abnormal. It is important to note here that being a ‘tomboy’ is not only about what is considered appropriate feminine behaviour, but also about how such behaviour is linked with homosexuality. Being a ‘tomboy’ is seen as one of the steps in the process of becoming queer. Reddy and Dunne (2007, 162) explain this reaction by teachers through Butler’s heterosexuality matrix. They note that ‘gender is systematically spoken through heterosexuality, and this is assumed in expressions of “real” forms of masculinity and femininity’.

Language is a powerful tool in which homophobia and heterosexism are entrenched. Such an entrenchment is often coercive and is maintained through hegemony and collusion (Morrow and Torres 1995). This is referred to as internalisation. Bell (1997) citing Tong writes that ‘hegemony [and internalization] describes how a dominant group can project its particular way of seeing social reality so successfully that its view is accepted as common sense, as part of the natural order, even by those disempowered by it’. This is most evident in how Mandla accepts the label of being ‘usis-bhuti’. He has heard this homophobic talk so often that he begins to claim it as if it defines him. Anderson (1994) notes that this in part is due to the fact that ‘faggot is so much part of student culture that it often goes unnoticed — or at least unchallenged’ (152).

The forms of verbal abuse noted above are dangerous not only for their inherent hate, but also for their possibilities. As Smith notes, ‘The sequence organized within the ideology of the fag goes from naming that identifies the “fag” through verbal abuse and ostracism to harassment in which verbal attacks are combined with petty violence and finally outright violence’ (320). This is evident in the ensuing findings.

Fear

One of the ways in which heterosexism is maintained is through fear: such fear becomes pervasive and irrational, thus ensuring that the status quo is maintained. In this project, the fear of being infected by the homosexual was most evident through the stories that the participants relayed. Teachers were seen as being central in spreading the idea that homosexuality was contagious, and therefore ‘straight’ learners were seen as being in
danger of being infected by queer learners. Nomusa, a girl participant in the project, noted that

I was at school and Mrs Nhleko called me to the staffroom. She started shouting at me and was telling me to stop acting like a boy. She said I need to stop this lesbian thing because I will start making other learners like me... 

Similarly, other learners were not exempted from this fear. Gcina, another girl participant in the project, noted that

Other learners don’t like us walking with them. Boys don’t like it when we walk with their girlfriends, they say we are going to take their girlfriends away. But then when me and Zinhle are walking together, they always ask us whether we are going to do to each other.

While the participants do not explicitly name fear or contagion, it is clear from the quotes given above that fear drives the teachers and learners in expressing their sentiments. Mrs Nhleko, for example, is fearful that Nomusa will make other learners lesbian. This fear of infection is, of course, not new. Early studies on homosexuality also carried the same connotation of viewing ‘the homosexual’ as diseased and having the potential of infecting other people. Waller (1932) notes that ‘nothing seems more certain than that homosexuality is contagious’ (147). Nomusa’s statement suggests that teachers, the very people who are meant to educate learners against this false information, actually believe that queer people can infect or convert others. The idea that Waller identified 78 years ago still holds weight in these contexts.

Such beliefs actually fuel the marginalisation and isolation of queer learners in schools. Almost all the participants in the study noted that teachers and indeed learners were very concerned about who the queer children were walking with. This was largely due to the fear that they would infect other learners by converting them to be queer, as evident in Gcina’s comments. Clearly, it is fear that drives the boys to feel threatened when their girlfriends walk with the lesbian girls. They fear that the lesbian girls will convert their girlfriends, which will result in them having no girls to date. The effect is that those identified as queer end up being isolated and not being able to make friends with other learners in school. Gcina noted in the discussion that it was not only that she wanted Zinhle as her friend, but also that other learners felt threatened by them.

Learners who walked with queer learners also risked being called names as they were perceived as gay. This worked to isolate queer learners. Musa, the ‘straight’ male learner in the project, noted that

I get called a ‘stabane’ too because I hang around gay guys. For me they are also my friends. I don’t see a problem with them, but other people think I’m also gay because I hang around gay people. This gets me angry because I know that I am not gay.

While clearly Musa’s experiences are designed to humiliate, hurt and marginalise him, such statements are built on, and are meant to create, fear: if you walk with queer people we will exclude you and treat you like we treat them. Similarly, because of the fear of being perceived as gay, queer learners get little support from administrators and teachers. Mbuso, a gay participant in the study, noted that
Teachers don’t support gays. They like shouting at us and tell us that it’s these rights that are making us like we are. The other day, someone called me a ‘stabane’ in class and Mr Msomi just laughed with the other kids. I felt like crying.

These sentiments were supported by the teachers in the project. Mr Kubheka, the student teacher/part-time teacher, noted that

I’m tired of being assigned gay children. Whenever Mdu (a gay learner participant) comes into the office (staff room), other teachers just look at me and say your person is here . . . talk quickly to him so that he can get out here.

Similarly, Mrs Dlomo noted the same sentiments:

I’m used to it now. Whenever these children come to the staffroom the other teachers just look at me. I’m the one expected to help them. I’m sure if I was not married they would also think that I’m gay.

The challenges that queer learners face in schools simply due to fear are crippling and make schooling painful for the learners concerned. If these learners are not afforded support from peers and teachers, where else can they get support from? How else can school be more meaningful for them? Schooling for queer learners in contexts such as these is oppressive. This is not to suggest in any way that queer learners have no agency, but rather that the structural mechanisms at play are so restrictive that agency can only do so much. The authority and power that teachers yield simply become restrictive, therefore prescriptive and regulatory in terms of acceptable sexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality is enforced through fear. The vitriolic responses by teachers towards queer learners are meant to keep learners from being queer, therefore policing and regulating sexuality.

Another observation in terms of the fear and paranoia around maintaining heterosexuality is the manner in which rape was used as a way to detract learners, particularly lesbian learners, from claiming a lesbian identity. Teachers were said to show concern for lesbian children as being in danger of being raped while at the same time strategically trying to sway the learners from claiming a lesbian identity. Mrs Mkhize noted that

Teachers are scared that these kids are going to be raped if they don’t stop being lesbians. We all know how bad these rapes are. Teachers often tell learners to stop being lesbians because if they don’t, they will be raped.

Here concern is mixed with what may be experienced as a threat about the dangers of a ‘lesbian’ identity – rape is not the only concern, but being ‘lesbian’ also. As the comment indicates, the intention is for the learners to fit into the dominant ideology, that of a heterosexual young woman – if they stop being lesbians, they will not get raped. This is a scare tactic driven by fear.

The fear that I have discussed in this section demonstrates the extent of homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Fear renders homosexuality invisible in the schools that the participants attend. This fear can also be seen as a tactic to bully queer learners into submission and ‘straight’ learners into some form of repulsion against the queer. It is part of the institutional and systemic training that we all receive to ensure that heterosexuality is left unchallenged.
**Intersections (gender roles, violence and culture and religion)**

Homophobia is a weapon for sexism (Pharr 1997). Epstein (1997) notes that ‘sexism in schools needs to be understood through the lens of heterosexism’ (106). This is because it is through gender roles that assumptions about what men and women should and should not do are made. Renold (2006) suggests that it is the hierarchical and oppositional organisation of sexuality that works to consolidate discourses of homophobia and (hetero)sexism. Pharr (1997) also notes that homophobia and sexism are direct manifestations of patriarchy. In this study, this was evident in the way in which female teachers tried to sway lesbian girls from queer identification. Nomusa noted that

This week Mrs Ndaba called us to the staffroom. She asked us [Zinhle and Nomusa] why we liked to wear pants to school. We told her that we were comfortable with wearing pants. She told us that girls were not meant to wear pants. She said that it was these pants that were making us think that we were boys. She was shouting at us. We were scared. She said she would give us money to buy skirts next week.

In conservative South African contexts, particularly in Zulu settings, it is still seen as wrong for women to wear pants as these are ‘meant for men’. This practice is mostly upheld in conservative churches and cultural celebrations. The fact that teachers would demand that girls wear skirts instead of pants may appear at first absurd, given the fact that the school rules permit the wearing of pants by girls, yet it is this absurdity that maintains both sexism and homophobia. For the teacher mentioned above, it is not the role of girls to wear pants. Being lesbian is, therefore, interpreted as wanting to be like a boy. This is what drives the teacher to offer to buy skirts for the girls. For her, if the girls stop wearing pants, they will stop being lesbian. While this teacher participates in the maintenance of sexism, she is also being homophobic. It is important to stress here that Zinhle and Nomusa are not the only girls in the school who wear pants, but they are the only two who are ‘suspected’ of being lesbians. The teacher does not offer the skirts to all the girls who wear pants at school, but rather to Zinhle and Nomusa as their wearing pants poses a threat to heterosexuality.

Another way that homophobia is used to maintain sexism in place is violence (Pharr 1997). Violence is used to enforce and regulate sexualities and in turn works to maintain patriarchy and heteronormativity in place. The findings of this project include the pattern of abuse of queer learners at the hands of those who are meant to protect them – the teachers. Violence ranged in this project from shouting at (language) to physical harm, with boys being the most affected. The boys noted that male teachers often shout at them, shove them, beat them and even threaten to expel them. Bheki, a gay participant in the study, highlighted this violence

I am used to it now . . . like this week. Mr Mncube dragged me by my neck and told me to stop bothering them in the staffroom. He had done this to me before. He likes pushing me and shouting at me in front of other teachers whenever I go to the staffroom. He always says he doesn’t like ‘izitabane’. Other teachers just laugh and do nothing.

A point of anxiety when it comes to this violence is that it happens in front of other teachers and they all ‘just laugh and do nothing [about it]’. Silence in situations such as these means consent, particularly as teachers are guarded with the responsibility of looking after children and not abusing them. It is collusion with the discrimination of queer learners. An important point to stress here is that it is the gender-transgressive boys who experience this violence as they invert ‘normal’ gender roles. Violence is a
powerful tool of maintaining patriarchy and a vicious sexist and homophobic mechanism. This violence, of course, is not surprising considering the fact that corporal punishment is still used to punish learners in many of these schools, even though it is prohibited by the Schools Act of 1996 (see Morrell 2001).

Another important point that the participants expressed was that of the tension that exists between homosexuality and religion and/or culture. Butler and Astbury (2005) note this point in their previous work on homosexuality in South Africa. They note that ‘Anti-gay sentiment is compounded in South Africa by a strong patriarchal Christian ethic that views same-sex sexual encounters as sinful and wrong. In this context, reaction[s] against homosexual rights are seen, for many, as upholding religious beliefs and therefore something to be proud of and actively encouraged’ (5). This was also most evident in the sentiments expressed by the ally teachers. Mrs Dlomo noted that

Our culture does not approve of this and also our religion. It is very difficult for us who support gay and lesbian children as we are seen as challenging our cultures and God.

Her sentiments are supported by Mr Kubheka who noted that

In South Africa it is difficult to talk about gender issues, how much more when it comes to gay and lesbian issues. The Bible doesn’t support it. Parents and teachers find it very hard to talk about sexuality. We must not forget that teachers are parents too. It’s just difficult.

Religion and culture act as a barrier that challenges even the most supportive of teachers. Both teachers explained that they continue to support queer learners because they believe it is their duty to protect all their learners. Furthermore, the limitations and restrictions placed by culture and religion are also strongly felt by queer learners in these contexts as they very often perceive themselves as sinful and unworthy. It is important that I note the compulsory nature of identities in this context. In township contexts, certain elements of identity become compulsory, with deviance heavily punished. Religion, gender roles, culture and expectations on race become compulsory, with specific behaviours expected from both men and women. The demands placed by this compulsion make it challenging to deviate from the ‘norm’. Interestingly, as Hunter (2005) shows, Zulu culture is often perceived in fixed and stable terms. This, of course, is not the reality as Zulu culture has changed and has always been contested in the everyday life.

There are strong intersections that exist between different forms of identification and discrimination to keep sexism and homophobia in place. The ideals around gender roles, for example, are often communicated through culture and religion and, therefore, assumed to be stable and true. Challenging these gender roles in anyway, as Mrs Dlomo noted, is almost like challenging the authority of God (in terms of religion) and ancestors (in terms of tradition). Furthermore, as demonstrated above, the experiences of queer boys while taking forms similar to those of queer girls are different. They are caught up in deep notions of gender and, therefore, manifest themselves differently. The combination of class, race, gender and sexual orientation for the queer learners in this project makes it twice as hard for them to exist and openly claim a gay identity. This is why the queer learners noted that although they had mostly come out in their schools, many other learners have remained quiet, in fear of coming out.
Lack of understanding

The last finding I wish to discuss, and perhaps one which has the biggest implications for education at all levels, is that communicated by almost all the participants in the discussions. The participants noted that it was not so much that the teachers intentionally wanted to be homophobic, but rather that there was a lot of misinformation and lack of information about what homosexuality is about. Queer participants noted that they very often get approached by teachers and other learners asking them to explain what it means to be gay and also how it happens. The participants are seen as ‘experts’ (Mondli, a participant in the study) in understanding themselves. Mrs Mkhize, speaking on behalf of her colleagues, noted that

It’s not that teachers want to be nasty. You can’t blame them. They don’t understand how it happens for girls to find other girls attractive. They just think that the children are going through a stage and if they are discouraged, they will stop and become like normal children.

While not in any way meaning to support the homophobic rhetoric of assuming that queer children are going through a certain stage as expressed by the teachers that Mrs Mkhize refers to, I do nevertheless wish to highlight the importance of Mrs Mkhize’s point. It is often misinformation that drives homophobia. Issues of sexuality particularly among black working-class South Africans are taboo. This makes discussions about homosexuality quite difficult, even with a school curriculum that supports homosexuality.

Resist-stances, hope and possibilities

In this paper, I have presented a negative image of the experiences of queer learners in South African schools. The reader may be surprised at this, especially given my use of queer theory. As indicated elsewhere in the paper, my adoption of queer theory essentially is premised on three factors. The first factor is the use of queer life narratives. Through the use of this framework, the taken-for-granted attitude about alternative sexualities is unearthed. The second factor is the idea of resist-stancing. Through the use of this framework, queer subjectivities are seen as actors in their social spaces: they simply do not remain acted upon. The third factor is the fact that queer theory has allowed for the narratives of learners who engage in alternative sexualities without necessarily having to define the complexities of the categories of identification.

While I acknowledge that simply writing these findings in the ways that I have done above largely goes against queer theory in that this essentialises identities and tends to rely on conceptual dualisms (Stein and Plummer 1994), such an approach is useful in highlighting the limitations of queer theory. By presenting the findings in this way, it becomes clear that while queer theory is useful in challenging fixed notions about sexuality, it nevertheless fails to sufficiently speak of situations of authoritarianism often found in these contexts: the participants are products of the social structure and, therefore, present themselves in contradictory ways. The unrelenting nature of the homophobia does not mean that the youth do not find ways of assertion and resistance. This happens despite the universalising effects of the discourse. Youdell (2010, 89) explains that ‘this is a contradiction that underscores our need for recognition and our attachment to particular identifications as well as the mobile ground on which tactics or resistance are played out and lived out’. Acknowledging agency and fluidity does not mean
neglecting constructions of reality for those implicated in our work. It is true, as I will note here, that queer learners indeed resist and that there is some support offered by teachers in schools — examples being the two teachers who participated in the project. However, I would question the tendency to locate resistances, hopes and possibilities without sufficiently acknowledging the struggles that exist for queer learners. I now briefly explore the resistances.

The learners in my study challenged the ideas I had about queer learners in South African schools. Given all the struggles noted above, one would expect passive, powerless, learners with no hope. This was not the case at all. The learners expressed great pride in themselves and their abilities. This pride largely had to do with self-acceptance. They all reported having initially rejected queer identification. Bheki, for example, and several others, had even gone as far as engaging in substance abuse in order to cope with the victimisation from school. However, this substance abuse ended when he came to terms with the fact that he liked other boys. The participants all mentioned, for example, that given a choice they would change nothing about who they were. This meant a certain pride in their identification: most had found profound ways to invert the discrimination to their advantage by portraying a positive outlook of queer people. Mandla noted that

I am gay and proud and am not going anywhere. It’s either they accept me or deal with it. I’m not worried at all. Most guys in my class are failing, but I’m passing above them. Gay people are clever and have money.

Mdu communicated similar feelings

They are used to me now. I am not going anywhere. I walk and talk the way I want. I used to get very upset when I would pass other boys and they would call me sisi (sister), now I just laugh and greet back. I ask them how are you doing sweet heart. They usually don’t respond.

While the essentialist view of seeing all gay people as clever and rich, a perception that has been fuelled by images of gay people in the South African media, and somehow conforming to stereotypical ‘girly’ connotations may be problematic, it nevertheless has helped both Mandla and Mdu in creating a better self-image about themselves in a highly repressive environment. It inverts the oppression and often leaves those who aim to demean these learners speechless and troubled.

Mandla and Mdu were not the only learners who had a good self-image of gay people. Almost all the learners noted that they had reached a point of not caring about the discrimination. They noted that the friends they had and the great support from some teachers were enough for them to survive. It is worth noting here that all the learners noted that supportive teachers made life better for them in schools. This seems to suggest that in instances where learners have a supportive teacher, they are more likely to successfully complete schooling. This, therefore, points to directing the approaches towards challenging homophobia in schools on teachers, a point I now move on to in considering interventions that would address the unacceptable situations reported above.

**Interventions: looking on**

The findings of this study indicate that teachers are actors either caught up in or challenging homophobia. Few teachers, on the one hand, have been found to be violent,
supportive of homophobic language and gender stereotypes and misinformed about homosexuality. On the other hand, however, few teachers are shown to be supportive and can make the experiences of queer learners worthwhile. I wish to argue, therefore, as noted earlier that the improvement of queer learners’ experiences in schools can only be achieved through teacher-focused and context-specific interventions. Such interventions would need to take into account issues of internalisation and intersections particularly between gender and sexuality and religion and/or culture.

It is a well-known fact that homophobia exists in schools. Such existence occurs in a way that is predictable and systematically damaging for all concerned (Butler and Astbury 2005). Furthermore, the confusion about sexual orientation goes to all the confusions about sexuality and gender roles in schools. By focusing on teachers, we not only ensure that homophobia and sexism are disrupted, but also ensure that new opportunities for growth and learning occur. While it is true that township schools in South Africa are generally unsafe spaces for all learners, it is equally true that queer learners have an increased vulnerability due to their sexualities – teachers can, therefore, be instrumental in providing this safety through support and encouragement for these learners. Disruptions of homophobia need to be expected of all teachers. It should be understood that by challenging homophobia in schools, teachers are not doing queer learners a favour, but rather are expected by their role as professionals to do this.

The silence around homophobia needs to stop. This, I argue, can only be done through a re-education of teachers, those still studying and those already in the field. For those teachers already in the field, more strategic programmes such as the one intended in by the ‘We All Count Educational Project’ or the ‘No Outsiders’ project in the UK need to be initiated. With knowledge comes power. Similarly, institutions of higher learning will need to include in their teaching all aspects of diversity. Addressing the silence around these issues through re-education of teachers will be a powerful tool in changing not only their own attitudes, but also the attitudes of learners in schools.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented findings of an interventionist project geared towards challenging homophobia in South African schools. It has argued using a theory of queer life narratives and social justice for more teacher-focused and context-specific interventions in challenging homophobia. This was supported by data which showed that queer learners in South African schools generally have negative schooling experiences, often with teachers as perpetrators. The data also showed powerful intersections between various forms of identifications, which in turn suggested non-uniformity in the experiences of the learners under discussion. In addition to the intersectional experiences of queer learners through social identities, this paper has shown a powerful interplay between religion, culture and gender in enforcing homophobia and sexism. Homophobia was thus presented as a weapon for sexism. It has also shown that misinformation and lack of understanding pertaining to homosexuality are key elements driving homophobia in township schools in South Africa. Finally, it has demonstrated the resilience that queer youth have through inversion of discrimination and portraying positive self-images. The findings presented in this paper suggest a need for raising greater awareness in schools and building up greater support for queer youth. Re-educating teachers on queer issues can, therefore, provide a greater platform towards achieving this. Through re-education, teachers become change agents in their schools. It is my
belief that homophobia in South Africa can be addressed and that more work on this issue in schools needs to be undertaken.

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Notes
1. Refers to people who are curious or are still unsure about their sexual or gender identification. In essence, these are people who are still ‘questioning’ themselves.
2. This involves getting teachers to understand the manifestations of homophobia in schools and thereafter take action against it as a result of the understanding gained.
3. I would like to thank a dear friend and mentor here, Crispin Hemson, for bringing this point to my attention.
4. Family members who have passed on (ancestors) are regarded as having profound powers in influencing the lives of those who live on, according to African traditional beliefs. It is believed that ancestors should not be angered as angering them will bring bad luck.

References


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