

# Educators' perceptions of homophobic victimisation of learners at private secondary schools

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## Abstract

Heteronormativity is a foundational source of human oppression, resulting in heterosexism and homophobic attitudes, thus creating a hostile climate for non-heterosexual people. Despite a constitution that prohibits discrimination against anyone on the grounds of sexual orientation, homophobic victimisation of learners at secondary schools still occurs. The objective of this research project was to investigate educators' perceptions of homophobic victimisation against homosexual learners at private secondary schools. We adopted a phenomenological approach. The research design was qualitative and of an exploratory, descriptive, and contextual nature. We gathered data by means of an open-ended, structured questionnaire and, with the assistance of an independent coder, we employed Tesch's eight-step method of data analysis. We identified six themes: culture of acceptance; the need for policies; understanding of homosexuality; perception of homosexual learners; social difficulties and acts of verbal, physical, and emotional victimisation; and the learners' feelings. These themes were organised under three categories, namely, school context, educators' perceptions, and learners' difficulties.

## Keywords

Discrimination, educators' perceptions, homophobic victimisation, homosexual, learners, private secondary schools

## Introduction

Homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity form the foundation of many injustices to those learners who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersexed, and queer (LGBTIQ). For quite

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a large percentage of the LGBTIQ learner segment, school can be a difficult place to learn and mature. Among secondary school learners, about 10% identify as gay or lesbian while bisexuality may account for over one-third of adolescents' sexual disposition (Sears, 2005). This article specifically focuses on homosexual learners at private secondary schools.

Homophobia refers to irrational fear, abhorrence, and dislike of homosexuality and an intolerance of any sexual difference from the established norm (Ritter & Turndrup, 2002). It may include the fear of one's own homosexuality (Murray, 2001). Plummer (1999) defines the term 'homophobia' as a repository of beliefs, values, and behaviour related to concepts like 'not self', 'difference', and 'otherness'.

To address the problem of the narrow focus on individuals rather than on the context of the social and cultural systems that encourage homophobia, the term 'heterosexism' seeks to describe larger, more inclusive, and underlying issues in our social and cultural landscape. In conjunction with homophobia, the term 'heterosexism' emphasises the similarities between the oppression of LGBTIQ people and women and a patriarchal social structure (Herek, 1990). The perception that heterosexuality represents normative behaviour is linked to gender-role beliefs, endorsement of male gender norms, religious fundamentalism, and hostile sexism (Nagoshi et al., 2008). According to Clarke, Ellis, Peel, and Riggs (2010), heterosexism is a form of prejudice primarily directed towards all non-heterosexual people, while Athanases and Larrabee (2003) describe heterosexism as a socially embedded paradigm where heterosexuality is perceived as normal and superior to other sexual orientations.

Although the term 'heterosexism' acknowledges the marginalisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people as a social issue rather than an individual one (Clarke et al., 2010), the term 'heteronormativity' more emphatically refers to the social and cultural dimensions. Heteronormativity, therefore, normalises heterosexuality and provides the larger context of homophobia and heterosexism at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Yep, 2003). Heteronormativity is a foundational source of human oppression, an omnipresent framework for bias and daily acts of violence against individuals and groups who do not conform to the mythical norm of heterosexuality. Heteronormative thinking assumes that heterosexual experience is synonymous with human experience. As a result, it regards all other forms of human sexual expression as pathological, deviant, invisible, unintelligible, or written out of existence (Cramer, 2002).

Such arguments frame the continuing debate over the suitability of the term homophobia in the literature, with various authors suggesting alternative labels. For example, Logan (1996) proposes that the term 'homoprejudice' may provide a rationale for the pathologisation of and discrimination against homosexual people, as well as the negative valuing, stereotyping, and discriminatory treatment of individuals whose appearance or sexual preferences do not conform to the prevailing social expectations. Herek (2000), in turn, considers the phrase 'sexual prejudice' as more apt to describe the broader context of social and psychological research about prejudice. Plummer (1999) explores a lengthy list of alternatives, concluding that all terms offer inadequate descriptors for a complex phenomenon. He, however, proposes retaining the term 'homophobia' because other terms attempt to denote aspects of homophobia while fragmenting the body of knowledge currently associated with the term. Also, given the short history of the term 'homophobia', the body of literature associated with the phenomenon is relatively small and no generally accepted alternative exists. Moreover, since the 1970s, the meaning of homophobia has broadened to include a wide range of negative and aggressive emotions, attitudes, and behaviour towards homosexual people (Haaga, 1991), as well as the internalised attitudes of sexually and gender different persons. In conclusion, Bowers, Minichiello, and Plummer (2005) postulate that homophobia still is a useful repository for understanding experiences of prejudice and trauma that LGBT people express.

There is no doubt that victims of homophobia are likely to experience major adverse effects concerning their health and general well-being (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008; Hatzenbuehler, 2009). It does not matter how we define the formative – and often traumatic – phenomenon; experiences of homophobia have long-term implications for individuals' adjustment and functioning in the contexts of their family, school, church, and community (Bowers et al., 2005). Hirschfeld (2001) maintains that most educators and administrators are raised and schooled in a society that considers homosexuality a sickness, and LGBT issues remain largely taboo in school communities. Despite anti-bullying programmes in American classrooms, schools are not safe and affirming places for a significant number of learners. A school environment that fails to embrace its LGBT learners sustains a breeding ground for bias, stigma, discrimination, teasing, harassment, verbal abuse, and even physical violence (Martin-Storey & Crosnoe, 2012). A study of LGBT secondary school learners by Kosciw, Greytak, and Diaz (2009) examines how locational, community-level, and school district-level variables are related to a hostile school climate for these learners. Results demonstrate that LGBT youth in rural communities and communities with lower adult educational attainment may face particularly hostile school climates. Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, and Sandfort (2013) conducted a systematic review of psychosocial and health outcomes associated with sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in relation to peer victimisation during adolescence. They found fairly strong evidence of a diminished sense of school belonging, higher levels of depressive symptoms, suicidality, disruptions in educational trajectories, traumatic stress, as well as alcohol and substance use. Although parental attitudes also play an important role (D'Augelli et al., 2005), the failure of schools to adopt a pro-active approach in order to support LGBT youth is a major cause of psychological problems, including trauma symptoms (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

Ferfolja (2007) explores how some schooling cultures in New South Wales, Australia, control and silence non-heterosexuality through a number of institutional processes that cause homophobia and heterosexism to flourish. Despite an apparent broader societal tolerance of non-heterosexuality and legislation that condemns anti-homosexual discrimination at educational institutions in Australia, homophobic prejudice – often in the form of silence, omission, and assumption – prevails. In addition, Jones (2012) reports that as Australian LGBTIQ learners have increasingly come out over the past decade, their experience of bullying has significantly increased. In 2010, 61% of young people reported verbal abuse due to homophobia, 18% of young people reported physical abuse as a result of homophobia, and 69% reported other forms of homophobia, including exclusion, cyber-bullying, and rumours. In general, 80% experienced some form of abuse at school. It seems that these learners are bullied more now than ever before, an epidemic reflected in research from around the world (Jones, 2012).

In school settings where anti-LGBTIQ bigotry goes unchallenged, an often overlooked reality amidst the tide of homophobic bullying is the significant constraints on all learners. Homophobia and sexism confine learners to rigid gender-role norms and expectations by inhibiting many from exploring and expressing their creative, athletic, and intellectual aptitudes. An environment like this one presents narrow perceptions of humanity, stunting the minds and psychosexual development of learners. Such an educational atmosphere may be the breeding ground of the fear and ignorance that exacerbate teasing during the early grades and of violent acts by the time learners reach high school (Jones, 2012). Significantly, statistics show that White male teenagers commit the majority of hate crimes related to homophobia (Levin & McDevitt, 1993). In a nationwide study of lesbian and gay hate crimes in the United States, 97% of hate crime offenders were male (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2001).

A positive school climate and a decline of homophobic victimisation may moderate the differences between sexual orientation and negative outcomes. Schools have the ability to decrease the

negative outcomes for LGBTIQ learners by creating a positive climate and reducing homophobic teasing, harassment, and bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). A study by Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) involving a large cohort of LGBTIQ high school learners, however, yielded only moderate correlations between non-discrimination policies, inclusive programmes, and anti-LGBTIQ harassment. Significantly, inclusive programmes are more closely associated with the prevalence and tolerance of harassment at schools than the mere existence of non-harassment policies. This finding indicates that not only should there be a policy, but that policy needs to be accompanied and implemented by programmes.

## **Context and aim of the study**

Against the tide of homophobia that seems to be sweeping the African continent (Msibi, 2011), post-apartheid South Africa had been the first country in the world that explicitly incorporated lesbian and gay rights in the Bill of Rights of the post-apartheid constitution (Gunkel, 2009). According to Betteridge and van Dijk (2007), Section 9 of the new South African Constitution (entitled 'Equality') states, 'The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth'. Sooka (2010) maintains that the transformation of social justice in South Africa should lead to reducing inequalities that are based on sexual orientation. The reality, however, is that entrenched patriarchy and heteronormativity are valid and fixed in many African societies (Msibi, 2011), while South Africa remains widely conservative in its treatment of homosexuals.

The relevant context of the South African education system is determined by the South African Schools Act of 1996 that recognises two categories of schools: public (state-controlled) and independent (private). Historically, however, a third category exists, namely former Model C schools that are public schools which are administrated and partially funded by a governing body of parents and alumni.

Public schools are completely dependent on the government for funding and materials. The standards and facilities may vary considerably, depending on the effective management and the general well-being of the area. Most of the former Model C schools are now racially integrated and offer outstanding services. Private education is more expensive than public or former Model C education; therefore, it generally offers a fairly high standard of education. Most private schools also boast smaller class sizes. The question remains whether private education includes a positive school climate for homosexual learners.

Against the backdrop of policies in South Africa that guarantee – but in reality fail to deliver – equality on the basis of sexual orientation, Bhana (2014) describes the ways in which school managers negotiate and contest the rights of gay and lesbian learners at their schools. That research study draws on an approach that recognises relations of heterosexual domination and subordination, as well as the material and social realities that produce such relations. The political emphasis on rights has positive effects on wrestling with the homosexual agenda at schools. Yet, discrimination, sexual denial, and religious intolerance combined with racialized and cultural practices are still imposing severe restrictions on learners' sexual rights.

Mostert (2008) conducted a study at a private school to explore and describe the perceptions of aggression of 30 Grade 11 learners (19 males and 11 females) towards learners who were perceived to be homosexual. Focus group interviews were used to obtain data. Mostert's (2008) study reveals three key attitudes: acceptance, ambivalent feelings, and non-acceptance of homosexual learners. This study also indicates a high prevalence of homophobic victimisation among learners. The results indicate that perpetrators experience internal feelings of discomfort, anger, irritation, fear,

hatred, and disgust towards victims. The externalised feelings of these perpetrators manifest in both verbal and physical forms of aggression. The former includes rumours, bad jokes, name-calling, teasing, and mockery. The latter includes ganging up against the victims, bullying, and hitting (Mostert, 2008; Mostert, Myburgh, & Poggenpoel, 2012).

In the South African context, there is little to no research in relation to educators' perceptions about homophobic victimisation among learners at private secondary schools. It is, therefore, essential to address this gap in the existing literature by investigating educators' perceptions about the homophobic victimisation of learners at private secondary schools. In light of this, Mostert's (2012) study, on which this article is based, investigates the current perceptions of educators in order to gain knowledge about their understanding of homophobic victimisation among learners at private secondary schools. Following the example of D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2006), and more particularly, due to logistical and time constraints that limited the access to the educators, the focus of this study was on same-sex sexuality of learners.

## Method

### *Design*

The research design of this study was qualitative and of an exploratory, descriptive, and contextual nature. The study employed a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is not concerned with the causes of an experience, but rather with the nature of that experience and the respondents' conscious thoughts about the experience (Brewer, 2007). In qualitative research, it is important to 'discover and understand how people make sense of what happens in their lives' (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000), and this study aimed at investigating the current perceptions of educators with regard to homophobic victimisation of homosexual learners at their private secondary schools.

An open-ended structured questionnaire to gain insight into educators' perceptions of homophobic victimisation satisfied the exploratory nature of the research. The researchers thoroughly described the respondents' perceptions within the context of two private secondary schools and considered those perceptions in relation to their context, that is, the specific educational setting. The primary research question of this study was: 'What are educators' perceptions of homophobic victimisation of homosexual learners at private secondary schools?'

### *Sample and sampling*

The sample for this study comprised educators from two English-speaking private secondary schools in an upper middle class urban area of Johannesburg, Gauteng. We used non-probability, purposeful sampling to select respondents for this study (Strauss & Myburgh, 2007). This sampling approach was applied, since the respondents were conveniently available and representative of the desired respondents needed for this research study. The target population for this research consisted of 103 educators between the ages of 23 and 75 years at two private, co-educational, secondary schools. At School A, 21 of the 27 invited educators participated. At School B, only 22 of the 76 invited educators volunteered to participate in the research study. Consequently, 43 educators from the target population participated in the research study. Table 1 summarises the demographic information about the respondents.

The demographic information indicates that this research study is limited to specific perceptions and consequently the results cannot be generalised to a diverse South African schooling landscape.

**Table 1.** Demographic overview.

Demographic categories		School A	School B
Gender	Male	9	7
	Female	12	15
Race	Asian	2	2
	Black	1	0
	Coloured	0	2
	White	18	18
Sexual orientation	Asexual	1	0
	Heterosexual	19	21
	Homosexual	0	1
Religion	Not indicated	1	0
	Atheist	1	1
	Christian	13	11
	Eclectic	0	1
	Hindu	2	2
	Jewish	2	7
	Keylontic Science	1	0
Home language	Secular Humanist	1	0
	Spiritual (no specific denomination)	1	0
	Afrikaans	9	3
	Bilingual (Afrikaans and English)	2	0
	English	9	18
	Hebrew	0	1
Age	isiZulu	1	0
	Range	23–64 years	25–63 years
Teaching experience	Duration	2–41 years	3–40 years
Qualification	Level of education	Tertiary	Tertiary

### Data collection

We obtained data by using an open-ended, structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained the following questions:

1. What is educators' personal understanding of homosexuality?
2. What do educators think of homosexual learners at school?
3. Do educators feel that school culture accepts homosexual learners?
4. What do educators think school policies should say about homosexual learners?
5. What difficulties do educators think homosexual learners might face at school?
6. Are educators aware of occasions when homosexual learners have been treated differently because of their sexual orientation?
7. Are educators aware of acts of aggression towards homosexual learners?
8. Which types of aggressive acts towards homosexual learners occur at the school?
9. What do educators think school policies should say about aggressive acts towards homosexual learners?
10. Do educators feel that their school is dealing adequately with victimisation of homosexual learners?

The researchers had a pre-arranged information session with the educators during a staff meeting. We spent approximately 30 minutes informing them about the research. Educators were invited to complete an open-ended, structured questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to all the educators in the staffroom, and the researcher asked them to complete the questionnaires in their free time during a period of 7 days. The questionnaire was to be completed anonymously, but provided space for demographic data, that is, the letter assigned to the school, information on gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, home language, age, years in teaching, and level of education. The researcher informed the educators of the value of educators' perceptions about homophobic victimisation of homosexual learners at private secondary schools. At the end of the staff meeting, the educators had an opportunity to ask questions and to raise concerns that they might have had. No questions or concerns arose. After the meeting, we left a private sealed box placed in an allocated area of the school premises where respondents could post their questionnaires. The box was collected after 1 week.

### *Data analysis*

In this study, we used a structured process to conduct a thematic content analysis as described by Tesch in Creswell (2003). An independent coder analysed the data in order to provide greater objectivity with regard to qualitative findings.

### *Ethical considerations*

We obtained permission for the research from the Ethics Committee of the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand. The principal of each school received an individual information letter that provided details about the exact nature of the study and how the researcher was to conduct the study, while ensuring confidentiality of the school and the anonymity of the participating educators. We also explained to the respondents that involvement in the study was voluntary. Respondents signed informed consent forms.

## **Discussion of results**

We identified six themes, and the themes were organised under three categories, namely school context, educators' perceptions, and learners' difficulties. The six themes and three categories are presented in Table 2.

### *Category 1: school context*

Although society includes homosexual people, there are schools that perform their educational duties on the premise that all learners are heterosexual (Lucas, 2004). The respondents' responses in this study confirmed this point of view. The school societies in this study were representative of a general heterosexual society. One of the respondents said, '...unfortunately, the school culture is a microcosm of society and I think gay children are seen as a threat and "different"...'.

The first category refers to the school context and comprises two themes: first, a culture of acceptance of homosexual learners, and second, the possible need for schools to draft policies pertaining to homosexuality.

Although school educators who responded to the questionnaire appear to be generally accepting of homosexuality, it would seem that learners were particularly judgmental of their peers' sexual orientation, as this comment showed: 'teachers generally do but often learners do not accept those

**Table 2.** Categories and themes.

Category	Themes
1. School context	i. Culture of acceptance ii. The need for policies
2. Educators' perceptions	iii. Understanding of homosexuality iv. Perception of homosexual learners
3. Learners' difficulties	v. Social difficulties and acts of verbal, physical, and emotional victimisation vi. The learners' feelings

that are different to them'. Educators do notice discrimination against homosexual learners on the part of heterosexual male learners. This is evident in the words of one educator: 'Some degree of discrimination exists among male, heterosexual learners towards the idea of homosexuality'. Poteat (2008) suggests that homophobic banter is more likely to occur in aggressive, homophobic peer groups.

Most of the respondents argued that all educators and learners should accept homosexuality. According to the responses gathered, policies should include the promotion of equity and tolerance for all learners, the prevention of discrimination, and the protection of learners' rights in relation to the freedom to accept one's sexual orientation and not be harmed as a result of that acceptance. There was a strong perception that 'aggression cannot be tolerated but should not be met with further aggression. If tolerance is promoted, aggression can be handled through counselling'.

Meyer (2008) states that printed policies are an important factor in organisations' abilities to manage the issue of gendered harassment effectively; policies should thus include psychological and academic support for homosexual learners, education on homosexuality, and the management of homophobic victimisation. Some educators were clear in their views: 'I think that policies should make provision for these learners and address issues that learners face on a daily basis', while another stated that the policy should 'assist in mental, psychological and academic, social and sport development as stable understanding and accepted learners with rights to stable relationships with partners of their own choice'. This may illustrate the need for a specific policy on homosexuality in order to prevent discrimination relating to learners' sexual orientation in order for every individual, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, to be treated equally.

One educator, however, indicated, 'I don't think it should single out anybody. Just like Black, White, Christian, or Muslims should not have specific policies about them. To single out people is never a good thing'. Another stated, 'I don't think there should be any special policy for them. They should be treated equally'. It appears that the educators have different views about the need for a policy that explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Some of them appear to support this idea, yet other educators are opposed to a specific sexual orientation policy or policy clause. This suggests that some educators may be anxious about exceptionalism (making a special case for homophobia). A question arises whether this point of view represents a subtle form of homophobia, or whether it is sensible to simply talk about discrimination in general? Even though bullying may be linked to homophobia, little has been done to establish the relation between these two areas of research (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). In this regard, Jones (2012) argues that while there is no doubt that generalised bullying policies have their place in schools, homophobic bullying differs from other bullying for a number of reasons, and therefore, requires a specific focus in educational policy. The pervasiveness of homophobia makes it more difficult for people who are working with young people to deal with homophobia differently from other forms of bullying. It makes it even more difficult for LGBTIQ young people to access support. Jones



(2012) adds that heterosexual families care for most of these young people, making feelings of alienation and isolation more absolute.

### *Category 2: educators' perceptions*

The second category comprises educators' perceptions about homosexuality. It has two related themes. The first of these themes relates to educators' understanding of the term 'homosexuality'. According to Clarke et al. (2010), homosexuality is a term that is generally used to refer to the phenomenon of same-sex attraction. Educators' views on this matter include the perception of homosexuality as a physical attraction to, or preference for, the same sex. One educator declared that 'it is either two males or two females [who] are in a sexual relationship', while another stated that homosexuality involves 'same sex physical and emotional interactions and dependence in relationships', and a third stated that 'it is an attraction often leading to a sexual relationship between two'.

The responses also raise the debate whether sexuality is a genetic/biological predisposition or whether individuals choose their own sexuality. An educator encapsulated the question with the following statement: 'It is a preference by individuals in the way they want to live and what sexuality they want to be. I personally think that most homosexuals are born the way they are. It is in their genes'.

The second theme relates to educators' perceptions of homosexual learners. In this regard, the responses indicate that homosexual learners are often seen as no different to heterosexuals, and that learners' sexual orientation is irrelevant: 'I don't think differently about them than I do about heterosexual learners – they are all children'. The respondents generally felt that such learners should have the right to express themselves freely and to learn, regardless of their sexual orientation. In the following statement, 'I believe they have a right towards their sexual orientation just as heterosexual-orientated learners have a right to their sexual orientation', one of the educators argued that homosexual learners have a right to express their sexual orientation. This stands in contrast to Norman and Galvin's (2006) research findings that many learners and parents are ignorant in respect of understanding homosexuality.

It was further evident from the respondents' responses that homosexual learners should be respected and accepted, and accorded exactly the same rights as heterosexual learners: 'They should be treated no different from other learners or/and offered ongoing support by the school'. Again, the opinion that homosexual learners should not be treated differently from other learners is debatable. On face value, this point of view makes sense, since it treats all learners as equally valuable. On the other hand, when homophobia remains neither acknowledged nor addressed in policy and programmes, it is likely to be very damaging to young people. It is important to emphasise and address an awareness of this impact on learners in the context of the educational environment.

### *Category 3: learners' difficulties*

The third category pertains to the learners and the difficulties that homosexual learners experience, as seen from the perspective of the educators who responded to the questionnaire. This category comprises two themes; both themes focus on the treatment of homosexual learners.

The first theme emphasises the social difficulties that homosexual learners experience. These difficulties include discrimination, stereotyping, stigmatisation, peer victimisation, humiliation, isolation, and a need to belong. An educator's remarks included some of these issues: 'not being accepted, victimised, abused from others'. Homophobic acts were mentioned in terms of its verbal,

physical, or emotional nature. According to Nel and Judge (2008), results from a study conducted in Gauteng show a high rate of homophobic discrimination. One educator confirmed that learners ‘might be bullied, teased, isolated – they might feel “rejected”’, while another educator expressed the challenges learners may experience as including ‘acceptance from other learners, finding partners, fitting in, making friends’.

Most respondents were unaware of acts of homophobic victimisation among learners at their schools. Those respondents who were aware of such acts had witnessed bullying and intimidation, such as teasing, mocking, ridiculing, and gay bashing. One participant commented, ‘Personally, I’m not aware of anything but I’m sure it happens on a regular basis’, while another stated, ‘Yes, they are ridiculed and marginalised’, and a third noted that ‘Yes, taunts and cyber-bullying is fairly common in schools’.

The second and final theme reveals educators’ perspectives about the feelings of homosexual learners. According to Chan (2009), homophobic bullying at schools may result in trauma for the victims, both at present and in the future. In this regard, the responding educators mentioned emotional distress, identity struggles, and a poor self-concept, for example, ‘Lack of acceptance, teasing if mannerism not socially acceptable, stress due to being different to the “norm”’, and ‘pressure to conform to pre-established stereotypes. Struggles with identity, fears to come out of the closet. General confusion, anxiety, pain, possibly liberation freedom, and confidence if they have accepted who they are and are not ashamed of it’.

## Limitations of study

This research was limited to specific perceptions, those of educators at two private secondary schools in an upper middle class suburban context, and consequently the results cannot be generalised to the diversity of South African school settings. Most literature consulted provides an understanding of the research issue from an international perspective due to the limited South African literature that is available. Only 43 of 103 educators volunteered to participate in the research. The participation rate (42%) limits the trustworthiness of the results of the research study, due to participation being less than half of the sample of 103 teachers. Respondents were self-selected in the sense that those educators who chose to respond could have been more favourably disposed in terms of the research topic, whereas the ones who chose not to respond might have had more negative attitudes, but were reluctant to reveal those attitudes.

An indication of the number or percentage of respondents who expressed a particular view or attitude might have strengthened the findings, but the limited number of respondents precluded a quantitative analysis. In the main, we did not critically examine the educators’ comments, but rather took them at face value. In addition, it is possible that the educators had time to discuss the research questions with one another. Those possible discussions raise the likelihood that they answered in a ‘politically correct’ manner due to the influence of other respondents.

The questionnaire focussed on educators’ perceptions of prejudice against and victimisation of homosexual learners. This limited focus excludes comprehensive and inclusive results about LGBTIQ people and communities. If respondents interpreted the word ‘homosexual’ to mean male homosexuality, the results would also exclude lesbian and bisexual learners.

## Recommendations

An accepting school environment can only be achieved when educators understand the nature of sexual orientation development and provide the necessary support and a safe environment where all learners – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – can flourish, grow, and reach

their full potential. Such a safe educational environment needs to be created at all schools, including public, private, and religion-based schools. Homophobic attitudes and bullying create a hostile climate for anyone who is different, including – but not limited to – transgender and intersex learners. Schools that fail to address this miss an opportunity to build an inclusive school culture and to challenge discrimination, prejudice, and ‘othering’ in general. Further research in this area can also contribute to debates about national identity, citizenship, and social cohesion.

It is imperative that all educators should be trained and supported to work with all youth on ways to provide support to those learners who experience homophobic victimisation. Educators should make it emphatically clear that harassment of and discrimination against homosexual learners are not acceptable in their classrooms. Educators, irrespective of their sexual orientation, should serve as role models who are open to and accepting of differences while supporting the potential of all learners to mature into responsible, happy, and productive adults.

Principals, head educators, Life Orientation educators, librarians, school counsellors, and other staff members should receive training and support with regard to disciplinary and curriculum provisions related to sexual diversity and gender identity. Training about sexuality and gender should be contextualised with due consideration of a human rights framework and should include the full spectrum of issues pertaining to LGBTIQ learners.

Although much South African research has explored prejudice based on race and ethnicity, little attention has been devoted to bias rooted in attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. This lack of attention is indicative of the practices that surround these issues and the tendency of many researchers to view anti-LGBTIQ biases as acceptable forms of prejudice. In particular, we need more research about LGBTIQ youth in rural communities and communities with lower adult educational attainment. As Martin-Storey and Crosnoe (2012) pointed out, these learners may experience particularly hostile school climates.

Building ethical schools is a complex and arduous task. It is perhaps most essential to begin by considering schools as moral entities (Hirschfeld, 2001). The attempts to address this issue need to include regional and international perceptions and attitudes. Msibi (2011) provides an account of how homosexual practices have mistakenly been conflated with the Western-originated identity category of the ‘global gay’. He gives an account of the existence of pre-colonial homosexual practices and argues that homosexual behaviour cannot be considered ‘un-African’. He proposes the need for an African-centred approach to challenge the homophobic tendencies that are on the rise in some African countries. This recommendation of including regional perspectives and voices is particularly relevant for the task of creating a global agenda for addressing inequalities and discrimination based on gender identity and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Since they challenge mainstream perceptions of normality, the distressing everyday realities that minority learners encounter in respect of their sexuality and gender identity form the background of this article. In the school context, there are varied thoughts on the culture of accepting homosexual learners at schools and about the institutions’ handling of homophobic victimisation. Educators feel that aggressive acts towards homosexual learners should not be tolerated and should be dealt with in the same way as other forms of discrimination. Those educators who are not in favour of a specific school policy anticipate that such a policy would only exacerbate the issue. Some educators perceive homosexuality as a genetic predisposition, while others believe it is a physical attraction or preference to the same sex that results from personal choice.

Educators express the opinion that learners have the right and freedom to embrace their sexual orientation. Homosexual learners do experience social difficulties in their educational setting. These learners are victims of discrimination, stereotyping, stigmatisation, and peer victimisation. As a result, these learners experience emotional distress, identity struggles, and poor self-concepts.

Most educators, however, are not aware of the occurrence of acts of homophobic victimisation among learners at their schools. Those educators who are aware of such acts indicate that these acts are of a verbal and physical nature. Preventing discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual and gender identity requires leadership from state, public sector, and school-level educational bodies, but also from the educators who are models for our youth and who guide them to develop their full potential.

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