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To cite this article: Segun Emmanuel Adewoye & Ah Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2026) Roadblocks to combatting LGBT-based school bullying in South African schools: a phenomenological study, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 31:1, 18-30, DOI: [10.1080/13632752.2025.2536987](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2025.2536987)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2025.2536987>



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Published online: 24 Jul 2025.



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Roadblocks to combatting LGBT-based school bullying in South African schools: a phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

Despite the intervention framework, educational policies, and efforts aimed at providing a supportive environment and improving the social climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) learners in South African schools, LGBT-based school bullying continues to persist. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the roadblocks to combating LGBT based school bullying in South Africa. Ten participants were purposively selected to participate in this study. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews, which were also audio-recorded. The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this study showed that teachers' inadequate support, reluctance to accept LGBT status, religious beliefs, inadequate LGBT bullying case reports, and use of the same facilities as heterosexual learners were the main factors that limit schools to combat LGBT-based school bullying. It is recommended that schools create a forum for learners to report homophobic bullying, which in turn creates more opportunities for intervention and allows swift action when cases of bullying are reported. A school-based support team needs to ensure that schools have symbols, stickers, flags, and posters depicting acceptance and respect for LGBT learners so that all LGBT learners can feel safe and enjoy being at school.

KEYWORDS

Homophobic bullying; LGBT; discrimination; sexual minorities; well-being

Introduction

The phenomenon of school bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity has increased rapidly. Homophobic bullying is a type of bullying characterised by prejudice against individuals who are or suspected to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (Moyano and Sánchez-Fuentes 2020). According to Mayeza (2023), bullying against LGBT learners is pervasive in South African schools and contributes to a toxic learning environment. The learning environment at school significantly impacts learners' general health and well-being (Adewoye 2022). On the other hand, because of their perceived gender identity or sexual expression, LGBT learners experience high rates of bullying, stigma, and discrimination at school, which makes them feel insecure (D. A. Francis and Kuhl 2020).

The UNESCO (2016) observed that LGBT-based bullying amongst learners is driven by the stigma and biases emanating from cultural beliefs about gender roles, masculinity, and femininity. According to cultural research by Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Ganga-Limando (2014), LGBT learners are frequently perceived as cursed or bewitched when their sexual expression deviates from accepted social norms. That is to say that indoctrination of the qualities and responsibilities of each gender causes those who still follow suit to look down on those who associate themselves with

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LGBT. Consequently, this has resulted in episodes of bullying cases, including, but not limited to, discrimination, humiliation, and physical assault of LGBT individuals (Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Ganga-Limando 2014).

Another important component of bullying based on LGBT identity is the effect of the mass media. According to a qualitative study by Mishna et al. (2019), the media is a significant institution that shapes public perceptions about LGBT youth. The findings of the study showed that the media tolerates homophobic bullying and violence against young people who identify as sexual minorities, which strengthens heteronormativity. Although homosexuality, including LGBT, is no longer prohibited in many countries, including South Africa (Reygan 2016), misconceptions, stigma, misjudgements, and misunderstandings of these genders still exist among people.

Globally, there is a high proportion of LGBT learners who experience school-based bullying (Crothers et al. 2017). A review by Jugović and Bezinović (2019) indicated that LGBT people experience victimisation more frequently than heterosexual people. Earnshaw et al. (2018) reported that homophobic bullying occurs more frequently than traditional bullying, with a prevalence ranging from 22% to 87%. Furthermore, according to a 2015 national survey by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 85% of LGBT learners reported having been the victim of verbal bullying in the classroom (i.e., hurtful verbal or written communications like name-calling), 88% of them had been the victim of social or relational bullying (i.e., actions meant to damage relationships and reputations like gossip), 60% had been the victim of sexual harassment (i.e., unwanted touching) and 34.7% had been the victim of physical bullying (i.e., using physical force like hitting) in the previous year.

Not many studies have been done about LGBT-based bullying in South African schools, but the few that have been done suggest that homophobic bullying is a common occurrence (Mayeza 2023). For example, in a nationwide survey carried out by OUT LGBT Wellbeing (2016), a sample of 638 LGBT learners participated in the study. The study revealed that 55% of the learners encountered verbal abuse; 35% were threatened with physical harm; 21% had objects thrown at them; 20% had their personal property damaged or destroyed; and 18% had been kicked, punched, or beaten.

In South Africa, there are progressive laws that safeguard the rights of sexual minority groups. For instance, the democratic dispensation of the post-apartheid South African society is constituted on the ideals of human rights, equality, freedoms, and the legal protection of queer and transgender rights. However, reports of discrimination, horrifying acts of violence (such as bullying, gay bashing, rape, and murder), hate crimes, and homophobia against people of the same sex continue to be common in South Africa despite the inclusive and rights-based 1996 South African Constitution (Francis, 2022; Francis & McEwen, 2024). Francis and McEwen (2024), for instance, note that many South African schoolchildren of different gender identities and sexual orientations experience homophobia, hatred, and discrimination at school. They contend that conservative religious (Christian) beliefs and ideologies that promote forced heterosexuality are the root cause of this anti-gay educational environment.

LGBT-based school bullying has been associated with several short- and long-term consequences for the general well-being, psychological functioning, and mental health of LGBT adolescents (D. A. Francis and Kuhl 2020; Mayeza and Vincent 2019). According to Camodeca, Baiocco, and Posa (2019), LGBT adolescents who are victims of homophobic bullying victimisation are at higher risk of developing, internalising and externalising symptoms that include school absenteeism, concentration difficulties, decreased self-confidence, aggression, depression, drug and substance abuse, hostility, low self-esteem, anxiety, and even suicidal attempts. Furthermore, research findings of Abreu and Kenny (2018) indicated that victims of LGBT-based school bullying exhibited feelings of isolation, loneliness, peer rejection, feelings of sadness, fearfulness, social withdrawal, emotional exhaustion, somatic symptoms, shame, worry, and mood fluctuations as major impacts of their bullying experiences.

Given mounting evidence that the psychosocial impact of homophobic bullying on LGBT victims is profound (McEwen, 2022; Okanlawon, 2021), the protection of LGBT learners through various legislative frameworks, policies, and guidelines by the South African Department of Basic Education became imperative. Hence, the National Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed guidelines on the prevention of and response to homophobic bullying in schools (DBE 2018). For instance, the School Safety Framework developed by DBE highlights the potential role that schools may play in ending the cycle of stigmatisation and discrimination that LGBT learners in South Africa face. The framework provided simple and clear steps that teachers and learners can take to challenge homophobic bullying in schools.

Some of the steps highlighted in the framework developed by the DBE to curb homophobic bullying in school include focusing class time on bullying prevention, where the aim is to change norms around bullying, increasing adult supervision in bullying hot spots, providing ongoing training to school administrators, teaching and non-teaching staff as well as other school role-players on how to prevent bullying (DBE 2018). Sixty thousand copies of *Safer Schools for All: Challenging Homophobic Bullying* were sent to schools as part of the strategy to make learning environments safer and more welcoming for all learners, teachers, and administrators (Reygan 2016). By placing homophobic bullying within the context of gender-based violence, the resource aimed to support the academic potential and overall well-being of LGBT learners in safe and inclusive schools (Reygan 2016).

Despite these intervention frameworks, educational policies, and efforts aimed at providing a supportive environment and improving the social climate for LGBT learners in South African schools, LGBT-based school bullying continues to persist (D. Francis 2017). One reason for the underlying endless discrimination and stigmatisation of learners who identify as LGBT may be the fact that the South African constitution did not document laws that directly focus on sexual minority groups (Igual 2019).

Social stigma theory can be used to explain the root cause of discrimination against young people who identify as sexual minorities. According to Goffman's (1963) Social Stigma Theory (SST), stigma is defined as a negative social attitude or disapproval towards a person or group of persons based on characteristics, behaviours, or conditions that are perceived as different or undesirable. A stigmatised person may experience worry, a damaged reputation, and long-term negative consequences as a result of stigma (Nyasulu, 2020). Earnshaw et al. (2018) asserted that factors that lead to stigma-based bullying originate at the societal level, down to the interpersonal level, and finally to the individual level. In other words, stigma-based bullying is not the result of an arbitrary personal motivation; rather, it is a byproduct of a societal viewpoint intended to instil a particular ideology in its citizens, which is the wheel that revolves from ancient times to the present age.

This theory is pertinent to this study due to the fact that LGBT-based school bullying is a social phenomenon that is impacted by the indoctrination of traits and obligations that society views as typical for a particular gender, which leads to heterosexism and students' disapproval of LGB relationships. For instance, members of most communities in South Africa believe that a man must marry a woman who will eventually have children to ensure the continuation and preservation of his clan. They believe that a male who identifies as LGBT is violating this social theory because men are incapable of bearing children, which will likely lead to the extinction of that specific clan. Therefore, when someone displays gay characteristics, society assumes that they are no longer a man and should not be respected.

They are crudely reminded of this on a regular basis, which is also mimicked in the school environment. This leads to attacks, name-calling, social exclusion, and other forms of bullying, such as circulating false information about LGBT learners. This could cause self-doubt and self-hatred for a stigmatised person to the point where they become worried, depressed, quit school, and even think about taking their own life.

Considering this background, this study examined the roadblocks to combating LGBT-based school bullying in South Africa. The risks surrounding negative school environments

for LGBT learners underlie the necessity to unravel the factors that limit schools to combat LGBT-based school bullying in South Africa. Ultimately, reducing homophobic bullying and improving school climate might contribute to greater individual well-being, improved academic achievement, and greater educational attainment among the learners most affected by these forms of stigmatisation and discrimination (D. A. Francis and Kuhl 2020; Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020). In line with the purpose of this study, the specific research question for this study is:

What are the roadblocks to combating LGBT-based school bullying in South Africa?

Methodology

Research approach, paradigmatic perspective, and design

For this research study, we employed a qualitative research methodology in accordance with Creswell (2021). According to Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020), a research study that aims to derive its conclusions from participant viewpoints should employ a qualitative technique. We chose this strategy to provide comprehensive stories, unearth various viewpoints, and provide in-depth opinions from the participants. Our choice of an interpretivism paradigm, which is inevitably directed towards understanding the world from the perspective of people's lived experiences, was influenced by the philosophical premise that guides our research (Pervin and Mokhtar 2022).

Since the goal of this study was to analyse the phenomenon of LGBT-based school bullying to consider factors that limit schools' ability to combat the threat of homophobic bullying, we opted for a phenomenological research design. Due to the complexity of this phenomenon and the need for fresh perspectives, we agreed with Creswell (2021) that a phenomenological approach should be employed when analysing a phenomenon as the participants describe it.

Procedure

We used a convenience sampling technique to choose the research site - two mainstream schools in Mamelodi, Gauteng, South Africa — where we could choose our participants. We reasoned that the participants' homes were close to the schools, which would encourage them to attend the interview sessions. Access was the greatest challenge of working with LGBT learners logistically. Teachers, therefore, became instrumental in selecting participants. We had a close relationship with the teachers as we had previously worked with them in a community outreach aimed at addressing homophobia in schools. The participants in this sense were, therefore, conveniently selected using teachers as instruments.

Notwithstanding, it is necessary to state that the teachers did not need to go out looking for 'an identifiable' homosexual behaviour among participants. However, they instead referred to the lists of learners who had consulted them about their homophobic challenges. These learners then, in turn, informed others in their group, some of whom then decided to participate.

After receiving the necessary ethical approval and permission, we set up a meeting with the potential participants to go over the study and obtain their agreement in writing. We went over the goals of the study and the advantages of participating in them. Before the interviews began, we gave the participants a detailed document that explained the purpose of the study, the format of the interviews, and the kinds of questions they may anticipate. As a result, we were able to build a rapport with the participants. Furthermore, we guaranteed them that we would employ pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of their personal information, which would not be disclosed to third parties. Before agreeing to engage in the research, we made sure the participants clearly understood what was involved.

Participants and sampling strategies

A non-random purposive sampling technique was utilised to elicit data that served the purpose of this study. This technique allowed us to identify and hand-pick samples that possessed rich knowledge or experience regarding LGBT-based school bullying (Creswell 2021). For a learner to be included according to our criteria, the learner had to be attending the school that was the research site, had to be an adolescent ranging in age from 14 to 16 years, had to identify as LGBT, and had to be in Grade 9 or 10. Ten participants were chosen for this study based on their responses to a series of interview questions. They included five senior phase teachers, three female learners who identified as lesbians, and two male learners who identified as gay from two secondary schools. We conducted one-on-one, in-depth interviews with the 10 purposefully sampled participants.

Instrumentation

As noted by Yin (2016), an interview is a crucial method of gathering data for a qualitative phenomenological investigation. As a result, we conducted in-person, semi-structured interviews with each participant to learn more about their viewpoints and experiences. With consent from each participant, we recorded the one-on-one interviews. The objective for utilising the interviews was to elicit detailed and authentic data based on participants' perceptions and experiences about LGBT-based school bullying (Liamputtong 2019) in a relaxed and unhostile atmosphere and without being influenced by others. Moreover, the interview enabled probing for more detailed enunciations to avoid researchers' assumptions and preconceptions.

Data analysis and interpretation

The transcriptions of the audio recordings of the interviews and our notes comprised the qualitative data that we analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The purpose of inductive theme analysis, which is a commonly used kind of qualitative research analysis, is to find, investigate, and document patterns in data (Braun and Clarke 2006). We coded the data to identify and provide significant patterns. This involved a) familiarising oneself with the data, b) creating preliminary codes, c) looking for themes, d) going over the themes, e) characterising and labelling the themes, and f) compiling the findings. To cross-validate the emerging themes, three different and independent coders were used. This process is believed to increase the validity of the themes identified and lower subjectivity. After each interview, two coders met to discuss notes and compare their findings. Differences that emerged were handled by a third coder, who looked over the undecided response and selected an appropriate category without knowing what the other independent coders had chosen.

Trustworthiness of the study

Through member checking — a process that involved asking participants for input on the data, our interpretation of it, and the study's conclusions — we were able to ascertain the study's credibility (Creswell 2021). By giving them the chance to ask questions, we gave all the participants the chance to get any questions they had regarding the research procedure answered. To further ensure the credibility of the research findings, we prolonged the engagement with participants and triangulated data sources. Space triangulation was also used to overcome parochialism (Yin 2016). Also, transcribed data was emailed to the participants for verification (Creswell 2021). Lastly, we ensured that our own religious, cultural, and personal opinions did not influence any of the conclusions reached during the interviews. The validity and reliability of the interview questions used during the research were ascertained by experts in the field (psychologists).

Ethical consideration

Prior to contacting potential participants, the authors' institution granted ethics approval for the research. The participants received an explanation of the purpose and scope of the study. They were aware that the involvement was entirely optional. The participants and their guardians gave their informed assent and consent, and they also agreed that the interviews could be recorded. The informed consent and assent forms were provided in English and Sesotho, as both languages were predominant among participants of this study.

Findings

The five themes that emerged from the data were used to present the findings. These themes revealed the factors that constrain schools from combating LGBT-based bullying among senior-phase learners, as expressed by participants.

Theme 1: inadequate teacher support

Most of the learners revealed that teachers' unwillingness to support them when cases of homophobic bullying are reported has caused victimisation to persist. Teachers are entrusted with the responsibility of being the primary protectors and conflict-resolution mechanisms amongst all learners in the school environment. However, it appears this protection is unilateral because it only applies to the heterosexual group. Hence, victimised LGBT learners suffered all the consequences of having their claims ignored, which included continuous intimidation and harassment. When asked to indicate if teachers provide enough support for victims of homophobic bullying based on their experiences, some of the participants stated:

No one really cares about us. For instance, a learner said to me that 'I have a snake', and I reported that learner to the teachers, and some teachers asked if 'I really have it'. I was expecting the teachers to punish or give them warnings; rather, they said I should go back to class. Because nothing was done, those learners did not stop to say I have a snake. (LP4)

Another participant had this to say:

Sometimes, we do report, but even at that, most teachers take it for a joke and never punish or call the learners who bully us to order. (LP1)

According to the LGBT participants, most heterosexual learners use hate speech, harassment, name-calling, and sometimes physical violence against them. When they report it, they hardly ever get support from educators, administrators, or security personnel.

In school, everywhere you go, somebody is saying something to you. You can go to lunch; somebody has something to say. You go to the bathroom; somebody has something to say. It's like everywhere I go, somebody has something to say because of the way I talk and walk, the way I look, the way I act, and no teacher is ready to intervene whenever I complain. (LP8)

Teachers' responses to victims' reports, as indicated in the above narrations, indicated teachers' unwillingness to intervene on behalf of LGBT bullying victims. Participants demonstrated dissatisfaction with the way teachers trivialise the severity of their complaints about homophobic bullying. According to them, teachers do not take the necessary steps to follow up on LGBT-based bullying cases reported by LGBT learners. Despite derogatory comments made by heterosexual learners towards LGBT learners, teachers felt reluctant to apply disciplinary measures to caution perpetrators; instead, they found amusement in it. Due to the inadequate support and protection, teachers and school personnel unknowingly inspire never-ending episodes of LGBT-based school bullying since there seems to be no deterrent

against homophobic bullying, and perpetrators do not consider their behaviour unacceptable.

Theme 2: low general acceptance of homosexuality

Teachers indicated that most school stakeholders do not acknowledge LGBT as a status, which results in the school community's low general acceptance of homosexuality. McShane and Farren (2023) observed that the dearth of discourse amongst school stakeholders about LGBT-related matters indicates stakeholders' passive behaviour. Most participants support this observation:

We experienced obstacles in our efforts to stop homophobic bullying, one of which is our unwillingness to acknowledge that some of our learners identify as LGBT members. We find it difficult to discuss it because we think doing so will encourage learners to practise being gay or lesbian practitioners. (TP7)

Another participant clarified that:

Learners who identify as male are treated as such at school, while learners who identify as female are treated as such. Sadly, LGBT learners are not taken into consideration for their special qualities. (TP5)

Similarly, the sixth participant noted that:

Truthfully, the school does not significantly pay attention to homophobic bullying, maybe because LGBT is not morally accepted. Maybe this is why schools do not play a remarkable role in protecting them from being bullied by learners. (TP6)

Participants confirmed that teachers refrain from talking about LGBT-related issues in class because of the fear that educators might be encouraging learners to identify with these historically marginalised genders out of curiosity, which could increase the proportion of LGBT learners attending their schools. The school administrators viewed LGBT learners as belonging to a minority group and treated them as such. The school system's deliberate silence on bullying of LGBT learners serves as evidence of this. Consequently, schools might continue to remain a breeding ground for LGBT-based bullying because school administrators' silence on homophobic bullying sends a message that LGBT is not acknowledged.

Theme 3: religious belief

The need to adapt and be consistent with certain religious views posed another factor that hinders schools from combating homophobic bullying in schools. Some of the teachers declared that their religious convictions forbid them from defending genders that society thought to have been cursed, dating back hundreds of years. According to Street (2016), these attitudes subtly condone discrimination and harassment of LGBT learners. This assertion is evidenced in the narration of most participants, who stated thus:

Most teachers here attend churches, and they believe that Sodom was destroyed by Jesus because of immorality, including LGBT issues. Their religion forbids them from supporting something that Jesus himself regarded as sinful and set out to eradicate. They strongly believed that something that they preach against at church cannot be supported by them. (TP10)

There is a popular belief amongst schoolteachers that the practice of LGBT is Satanic, and most of the teachers, especially the older ones, were not ready to rethink LGBT issues. One of the participants complained thus:

When I bring up any topic pertaining to LGBT with the schoolteachers, they still believe that it is Satanism and don't think it is significant. (TP9)

It appears that teachers' unwavering consistency with Christianity informed their non-interference in LGBT-based bullying. The majority of them appear to be vehemently opposed to homosexuality because they embrace a biblical interpretation that claims Jesus destroyed Sodom because it was the epicentre of immoral behaviour, including same-sex relationships. Hence, they relate LGBT practice with Satanism. In conflict with the SACE code of conduct that teachers should uphold and promote basic human rights as embodied in the South African Constitution, most of the teachers tend to put their religion first instead of standing up for victimised LGBT learners because their religion forbids same-sex relationships.

Theme 4: inadequate LGBT bullying cases reported

Most victims of LGBT bullying choose not to report cases of homophobic bullying they experienced to school officials because they perceived that interventions were most unlikely to occur. Due to the normative quality of these behaviours, the participants indicated that they would rarely report the bullying they experienced. Victims who hitherto reported cases of bullying indicated that teachers did not attempt to address the bullying. One of the participants narrated her experience thus:

I was physically assaulted. Sometimes they intimidate me verbally. When I report to teachers, they don't take it seriously. Since then, I don't report bullying to the teachers anymore because they can be judgmental and choose not to intervene. (LP2)

On the other hand, the teachers played a blame game by shifting the blame onto the victims, who hardly report incidents of homophobic bullying. Below are some of the participants' statements:

TP7: We do hear rumours that lesbian or gay learners were involved in a fight before or after school. These learners typically do not approach us to report incidents that they have suffered. As a result, we find it difficult to handle rumours.

TP5: Despite our best efforts to question them, learners rarely provide us with a complete account of what has happened to them or what has been posted about them. It is challenging for teachers to become involved in such matters because we don't have details of what really happened when some learners don't even report the case.

TP10: LGBT learners experienced bullying at school frequently, but they chose not to report the bullying for fear of stigmatisation or more bullying if they disclosed their gender identity. As a result, they felt compelled to keep their bullying experiences to themselves.

The participants reiterated how learners were always reluctant to disclose bullying at school that was based on their gender identity, which led to teachers not taking any action to stop the bullying. Most of the teachers noted that LGBT learners are considerably more difficult to question. Hence, it is challenging for them to intervene in cases they are unsure about. However, LGBT learners believed that teachers' judgement makes them afraid to disclose bullying incidents in detail for fear of being subjected to unending rumours and attitudes that show bias and prejudice on the part of the teachers towards them. Ngcobo (2021) found that LGBT learners lack confidence in telling teachers the truth regarding LGBT-related bullying because they worry about being criticised.

Theme 5: Use of the same facilities with heterosexual learners

The absence of some facilities designated for LGBT learners, as is the case for heterosexuals in school, evidently induced LGBT learners' feelings of being in a non-inclusive and unsafe environment, raising insecurities about their identities. Participants revealed that sharing bathrooms with heterosexual learners exposes LGBT learners to more extensive bullying. One of the participants stated thus:

The problem is that we share the same toilets with straight boys, who constantly make comments like, 'You're gay, you shouldn't be using the same toilet with us because we are men, and you should be wearing a skirt. (LP3)

Some other participants revealed discriminatory remarks made by heterosexual learners when they were out to relieve themselves during break times. They expressed their feelings towards being feminised by heterosexual male learners. The first participant narrated his experience thus:

Most of the times, they teased me at the toilet and call me faggot. Sometimes they would not allow me to get in the toilet claiming that the toilet is not for cocksuckers. (LP1)

In addition to the verbal assault they experienced on the playground, participants in this study also identified school restrooms as possible bullying hotspots for LGBT students, as expressed by a participant below:

When I was going into the boys' toilets, I was verbally assaulted. Most of the boys were being nasty to me, saying that if I needed a toilet, I should use a separate toilet. (LP3)

Sharing the same bathrooms with heterosexuals seems to be among schools' limitations in managing homophobic bullying in schools because school bathrooms are one of the most popular hotspots for LGBT-based bullying, especially amongst gay learners. This is persistent because of their regular physical interaction, which causes heterosexual learners to make disparaging remarks about LGBT learners. Because of this, the school finds it difficult to deal with bullying based on sexual orientation because it might not be able to offer restrooms designated just for LGBT learners immediately.

Discussion

Homophobic bullying is a serious concern for parents, learners, and school officials. Although there has been an increased intervention framework, educational policies, and efforts aimed at providing a supportive environment and improving the social climate for LGBT learners in South African schools, LGBT-based school bullying continues to persist. The main barriers to addressing LGBT-based school bullying identified in this study are teachers' inadequate support, reluctance to accept LGBT status, religious beliefs, inadequate LGBT bullying case reports, and the use of the same facilities as heterosexual learners.

The responses by educators to homophobic bullying are crucial in either fostering or mitigating bullying. Inaction on the part of teachers is not only a missed opportunity to intervene on behalf of LGBT bullying victims but a statement that it's okay to keep bullying them. The findings of this study revealed that most teachers were unwilling to intervene in LGBT-based school bullying; hence, LGBT-based bullying persists in schools. This finding resonates with the report of Hong et al. (2016) that homophobic bullying is pervasive in schools where teachers and school personnel are unwilling to intervene in bullying situations, even though they are aware of its existence. Conversely, LGBT learners in schools where teachers are involved reported a lower rate of victimisation (Snapp et al. 2015).

Amongst factors that limit schools in combating homophobic bullying, as indicated by the findings of this study, is low general acceptance of homosexuality. Although there are existing legislations in South Africa that prohibit all forms of discrimination and stigmatisation against members of the LGBT community, general acceptance of homosexuality by the larger community is still low (Abaver and Ciske 2018). The increasing rate of homophobic bullying in South African schools could be explained as being in response to the low general acceptance of homosexuality in South African communities with which the learners, teachers, and school personnel are conversant, and that are mimicked in school contexts (Olaseni and Adewoye 2023).

Religious beliefs emerged as another roadblock that constitutes a limitation to addressing homophobic bullying in South African schools. Historically, religious doctrine condemned sexual and gender minorities' identities (Ream and Rodríguez 2014), with continuous messages that promote condemnation and intolerance of LGBT practices (Longo, Walls, and Wisneski 2013). In line with this, most of the teachers reported that their religious beliefs prohibit them from protecting

and supporting LGBT practices. Consequently, these beliefs covertly allow homophobic bullying to persist. This finding is consistent with the report of Higa et al. (2014) that negative religious beliefs and teachings about LGBT practices can contribute to homophobic bullying.

Closely related to findings on traditional bullying, findings of this study also revealed that the victimisation of LGBT learners goes unreported in the school, leaving victims at risk of experiencing internalising symptoms. Providing accessible and confidential avenues for reporting homophobic bullying, along with a comprehensive support system for victims, is essential to combat homophobic bullying (Abreu and Kenny 2018). However, one key reason victims may not report homophobic bullying is fear of further harassment or discrimination (D. Francis 2017). This fear often stems from a lack of support or understanding from teachers and school personnel, which can leave victims isolated and vulnerable. This finding aligns with the findings of Earnshaw et al. (2019), who reported that LGBT-based school bullying victims may feel that reporting bullying cases could lead to increased hostility or backlash from peers or even teachers who hold prejudiced views.

Lastly, the use of the same facilities, such as changing rooms, toilets, and bathrooms, by individuals who identify as LGBT alongside heterosexual individuals was identified in this study as one of the roadblocks to combating homophobic bullying. This finding is in line with the report of Murchison et al. (2019), who stated that LGBT students have identified school toilets as the least safe spaces within schools and a hotspot for homophobic bullying. This perception often stems from deep-rooted prejudices, misconceptions or discomfort related to gender and sexual orientation. Most individuals harbour misconceptions or stereotypes about LGBT individuals, believing that their presence in shared facilities poses a threat or is inappropriate. This led to heightened anxiety and hostility towards LGBT learners. By actively addressing these underlying issues and promoting a culture of acceptance and respect, the risk of homophobic bullying associated with using shared facilities can be significantly reduced.

Limitations of the study

One potential constraint of this research study was that there were relatively few participants in the study. Therefore, the findings may not be widely generalisable and moreover, the findings of this study depend predominantly on self-reported data. However, the aim of this research was not to generalise the finding but to explore and unravel the roadblocks to combating LGBT-based school bullying in South Africa.

Another challenge that was experienced in this study was the difficulty in persuading more learners who are members of LGBT and teachers to participate in the study. This could be because they were afraid that their identity might be revealed considering the sensitive nature of homophobic bullying in school. However, we tried to overcome this challenge and got a few numbers of participants by promising participants that their personal information remained a secret.

Conclusion and recommendations

The school environment is expected to be a safe place where efficient learning and teaching for learners can take place irrespective of learners' gender disposition (D. Francis 2017). However, this may not be the case for learners who are emotionally and physically troubled because of victimisation based on their sexual identities (Olaseni and Adewoye 2023). In addition, learners may be denied active participation in general school life because of increased absenteeism, which could be ascribed to intimidation or discrimination because of their sexual identities (Olaseni and Adewoye 2023).

Despite the progressive South African constitution (Department of Justice 1996) and the White Paper 6 policy document (Department of Education 2001), which support the protection of people with same-sex identities, this study found that South African schools continue to face systemic difficulties in responding to homophobic bullying behaviour directed towards LGBT learners. The findings of this study indicated that these challenges originated from inadequate teacher support,

religious belief, low general acceptance of homosexuality, and the use of the same facilities as heterosexual learners.

Given the findings of this study, a few recommendations are made. Firstly, it is essential to create environments where victims of homophobic bullying feel safe and supported to report bullying. Schools need to promote inclusivity actively, educate about diversity and respect, and enforce policies that protect all individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In line with this, schools should create a forum for learners to report homophobic bullying to create more opportunities for intervention and take swift action when cases of bullying are reported. Such intervention should focus on empowering specific and designated teachers to receive and handle cases of homophobic bullying, to detect, manage, or support victims of homophobic bullying better.

It is important for a school-based support team to ensure that the schools have symbols, stickers, flags, and posters depicting acceptance and respect for LGBT learners so that all LGBT learners can feel safe and enjoy being at school. Lastly, extracurricular programmes that underscore the importance of diversity should be provided in school. Such extracurricular programmes can include learner-led anti-bullying clubs that will emphasise and promote virtues such as empathy, compassion and respect for others, social intelligence, love and kindness, irrespective of gender disposition.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate all those who participated in this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was sponsored by the South African Medical Research Council [SAMRC] Self-initiated Research (SIR) funding, under grant number RC: 83500. The views expressed in this research are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder.

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