

**GENDER NORMATIVITY IN EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS ON TEACHER-
LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN KING CETSHWAYO DISTRICT RURAL
SCHOOLS**

By

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DECLARATION

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Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at the University of South Africa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



SIGNATURE

27 February 2026

DATE

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Lydia Moyo, who has supported me through thick and thin and sacrificed her own life to ensure that I live to become who I am today. I also dedicate it to my late uncle, Pelias Moyo, who paved the way and showed his academic expectations and intentions for me. I dedicate this dissertation to my children and the entire Chawa Rozvi Moyondizvo clan, for always setting a higher bar for me by looking up to me. I vow to continue trying my best and to be an excellent example to you and many.

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- To my children, I wish you all the best in life, and I pray that you will all be highly successful in your academic endeavours.
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study explored gender normativity and its implications for teacher-learner relationships in rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District of the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of gender. This research employed Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the intersectionality theoretical framework to examine how teachers' perceptions of gender were shaped and how these perceptions influenced their expectations for gender performance and their daily interactions with gender-nonconforming learners in rural school settings. The study found that teachers' relationships with gender-nonconforming learners were strained due to traditional stereotypical gender performance expectations and the negative reactions of most teachers to scenarios involving gender nonconformity. The study makes recommendations aimed at changing teachers' perceptions of gender to promote positive teacher-learner relationships within school environments and to enhance the creation of safe learning spaces that accommodate all learners, regardless of their gender differences.

Keywords/concepts: sex, gender identity, sexual identity, gender normativity, heteronormativity, gender roles, femininity, masculinity, gender norms, gender diversity, gender nonconformity, teacher-learner relationships, gender performance, rural areas

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
CSTL	Care and Support for Teaching and Learning
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa
USA	United States of America

CHAPTER 1:

A STUDY ON HOW GENDER-NORMATIVE IDEOLOGIES AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Globally, gender normativity in schools disrupts the social rights of gender-nonconforming learners on school premises, which affects inclusivity in educational spaces (Francis 2024; Francis & Monakali 2021; Haitembu 2023; Horton 2022; Mdlolo 2017; Naeimi & Kjaran 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2016; Zaggi 2022). Studies have found that in most countries, including South Africa, learners are expected to express themselves in traditional gender-normative ways. This is problematic because some schools struggle to provide a safe, loving, and welcoming gender-inclusive social environment, which makes life difficult for gender-nonconforming learners (Francis 2021; 2024). A UNESCO (2016) study revealed that gender- and sexually diverse learners who do not conform to normative gender performance expectations encounter discrimination, rejection, and verbal abuse while at school. The rejection, discrimination, victimisation, and non-affirmation that gender-nonconforming learners experience at the hands of school authorities and peers can lead to some dropping out of school, contemplating suicide, being forced to hide their gender identities, and losing hope for their future (Bottoman 2021; Francis & Monakali 2021; McBride & Neary 2021; UNESCO 2016). The literature suggests that gender-nonconforming learners are often directly or indirectly deprived of their right to quality and equal education due to the gender-normative ideologies enforced in schools. As such, this study sought to explore gender normativity and its implications for teacher-learner relationships in King Cetshwayo District rural schools in the KwaZulu-Natal province in the Republic of South Africa.

The research targeted rural communities because, according to the literature, gender normativity is most intense in South African rural areas due to normative societal beliefs about masculinity and femininity (Msibi 2012; Singh & Naidoo 2017). Furthermore, the rural areas of the King Cetshwayo District are known to be conservative due to their geographic location, which makes it challenging for service providers to access them (One Voice South Africa 2018). This research is important

as it sought to raise awareness of gender normativity in the targeted rural schools. This awareness may contribute to the development of intervention programmes that are designed to reduce or dismantle gender normativity and its negative impacts on teacher-learner relationships in order to create conducive learning spaces for all, including gender-nonconforming learners. It is crucial to implement intervention strategies that address gender issues in rural schools to enhance positive teacher-learner relationships and to foster gender inclusivity.

Positive teacher-learner social relationships are beneficial as they foster the well-being of learners by providing a stress-free, safe environment where they can highlight their strengths and feel free to perform to the best of their abilities (Ansari, Hofkens & Pianta 2020; Gardee 2019; Lan & Moscardino 2019; Mertika, Mitskidou & Stalikas 2020; Rasuli, Makhdoomzada & Haidari 2023; Zhang 2022). According to the main effect model, social relationships establish an environment in which individuals develop health-protective behaviours and habits, while also experiencing a sense of belonging that protects them from the imbalances that lead to psychological distress (Cohen 2004). Toxic social relationships between teachers and learners may lead to the development of social distress that fosters risky social behaviours and academic underachievement among learners (Ansari *et al* 2020). This study is necessary because understanding teachers' perceptions of gender normativity, daily experiences, and expectations is crucial in determining the implications of gender-normative ideologies for teacher-learner relationships in rural schools. It serves as an important element in exploring the various types of environments that teachers create for learners in these settings.

Mdlolo (2017) argues that it is important to have narrative data that focus on teachers' perspectives regarding gender-inclusive strategies. Teachers are key players in executing any form of inclusive education (Walton & Engelbrecht 2022:12). Exploring teachers' perceptions of gender normativity and raising awareness to change negative perceptions towards gender nonconformity can help to improve teacher-learner relationships and transform schools into gender-inclusive spaces that facilitate every learner's holistic development. Teachers' perceptions of gender influence daily gender discourses and teacher-learner interactions (Mdlolo 2017). Relationships are based on interaction patterns; this research therefore aimed to understand daily gender discourses in rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District by analysing teachers'

perceptions and experiences of gender. This analysis sought to explore how teachers interact with learners and to gain insight into the types of relationships that exist between teachers and learners, particularly those who are gender nonconforming.

Research conducted by Francis *et al* (2019) in five Southern African countries, namely Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Eswatini, affirms that data on gender-inclusive learning environments are scarce and limited in these countries. Ullman (2017:286) states that, while it is well-established that gender stereotyping harms the majority of young people, relatively little empirical research has sought to understand the social and psychological mechanisms by which teachers' attitudes towards gender expression, concepts of gender essentialism, or gender construction and fluidity affect the school-based well-being of young people who identify as gender and sexually diverse. This study's findings therefore contribute empirical data to the existing literature on gender and inclusive education. The study relied on teachers' views and understanding of gender normativity because teacher-learner interactions and relationships are primarily influenced by teachers' social belief systems and practices (Mdlolo 2017:101).

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to ensure inclusive, equal, and quality education for all by 2030, is a global priority (Adipat & Chotikapanich 2022). Combatting gender discrimination in and through education is one method aimed at achieving equal and quality education in different countries (UNESCO 2015). South Africa is one of the leading African countries that has established legislation and frameworks to guide and protect learners against all forms of discrimination, including gender and sexuality (Walton & Engelbrecht 2022:10). The Rural Education Draft Policy, which was later converted into the National Framework for Rural Education, seeks to prohibit discrimination based on gender and sexual diversity in schools (South African Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2017). This rural education policy is primarily informed by the principles enshrined in the South African Constitution of 1996, the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005), the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000). South Africa has also signed international developmental agreements that advocate for the elimination of unlawful discrimination

in and through schools, such as the Framework of Action (UNESCO 2015) and the SDGs (South African DBE 2017). However, despite all the legislation and policies developed to protect gender- and sexually diverse individuals, gender-nonconforming learners, particularly in rural areas, continue to experience severe discrimination in educational spaces (Francis 2024; UNESCO 2016). According to the South African DBE (2017), several rural schools in South Africa are still characterised by a high number of school dropouts, with gender discrimination contributing to disruptions in educational continuity in these areas. This study aimed to raise awareness of gender normativity and its implications to potentially improve how teachers relate to gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools.

Gender normativity refers to the process of normalising, reinforcing, and adhering to societal expectations and standards regarding how individuals should behave in accordance with the gender they were assigned at birth (Walker 2018). It is intimately related to masculinity and femininity (Josephson 2019; Walker 2018). Principles of masculinity and femininity assign specific gender expressions and roles to men and women. Characteristics associated with masculinity include strength, power, assertiveness, and toughness, while characteristics associated with femininity include tenderness, softness, tolerance, submissiveness, and being nurturing and empathic (Pearlson 2016:34-35). Masculine and feminine roles entail specific expectations regarding how men and women should be physically identified, to the extent that some communities and cultures allocate dress codes to specific genders (Francis 2017; Horton 2022; Msibi 2012; Naeimi & Kjaran 2022; Zaggi 2022). For example, in conservative rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, some religious and cultural traditions consider it inappropriate for women to wear trousers (Msibi 2012:526). These traditions are based on gender-normative ideologies, as they adhere to the stereotypical dress codes traditionally stipulated by African societies for men and women.

Where gender normativity is prevalent, heteronormativity is enforced (Walker 2018). Heteronormativity is the belief that a single binary sexual orientation (heterosexuality) is considered “normal”, which means that every individual, according to this traditional belief system, should be heterosexual, with no other possibilities (Msibi & Jagessar 2015:65). This implies that all individuals identified as “males” at birth should acquire masculinity to express their gender as men and should only be sexually attracted to

the opposite sex (females), while all individuals identified as females at birth should acquire femininity, express themselves as women, and only be sexually attracted to the opposite sex (males) (Zaggi 2022:141). This suggests that the heteronormative ideological system discourages the interchange of the conventional roles assigned to men and women.

Research indicates that the problem of gender normativity in schools is encountered by many nations, including the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Iran, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Namibia, Eswatini, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, to name just a few (Horton 2022; Francis 2017; Francis *et al* 2019; Naeimi & Kjaran 2022; Zaggi 2022). In the UK, Horton's (2022) study highlights that gender-nonconforming learners are victimised, discriminated against, rejected, and experience non-affirmation from teachers, peers, and other school authorities due to gender normativity. Similarly, a study conducted in Australia by Ullman (2017), which examined students' reports regarding teachers' attitudes towards diverse gender expressions, found that 70% of the participants attested that teachers were "hardly ever positive" about gender nonconformity. Instead, the study depicted social stresses and a culture of classroom invisibility for gender-nonconforming learners (Ullman 2017:285). Echoing findings from European countries, a study in Iran reported that schools are expected not to recognise other forms of gender and sexuality as legitimate, as they are required to implement the official project of Islamification, which presents heteronormativity and gender normativity as models of sexuality and gender performance (Naeimi & Kjaran 2022:243). In this context, teachers who work in Islamic schools are expected to normalise normative and heterosexual behaviour as mandated by the state and school authorities without exception.

In Africa, schools are reported to be complex settings that offer little to no support to young people regarding gender and sexuality due to entrenched gender-normative and heteronormative ideologies (Francis *et al* 2019; Haitembu 2023; Mdlolo 2017; Msibi 2012; Zaggi 2022). Zaggi (2022) conducted a study in Nigerian secondary schools and discovered that cultural conceptions of gender performance dominated the social environment, with gender-normative identifications being fixed and considered natural during teacher-learner interactions. Francis *et al* (2019) found that normative ideologies are still reinforced in schools, which leads to the marginalisation of gender and sexual minorities. A qualitative study in the KwaZulu-Natal province,

South Africa, conducted by Msibi (2012), revealed that teachers enforce heteronormativity in schools, which causes problems and hinders inclusivity, as queer learners encounter negative experiences such as abuse, hate, discouragement, and isolation. Francis (2017) reviewed 27 articles from various scholars, and the findings indicated that LGBTQ+ learners faced physical and emotional abuse because their sexual orientations did not conform to the “normal” category defined by traditional stereotypical principles of gender. Furthermore, Francis (2021) conducted additional qualitative research in the Free State province of South Africa and found that some teachers discriminated against, mocked, and embarrassed queer learners due to their failure to accept gender diversity in schools. This literature provides evidence that there have been no significant changes; gender-normative ideologies are insidiously persistent and continue to create problems in educational institutions, particularly for gender-nonconforming learners and staff. This study sought to develop and implement interventions that could dismantle gender normativity in schools and foster positive relationships between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Gender normativity hinders tolerance and acceptance of gender-nonconforming individuals in social institutions and is the root cause of discrimination based on gender and sexual diversity (Smuts, Maake & Reijer 2024). In educational institutions, the gender-normative ideologies of school authorities shape expectations of gender performance. In this context, learners are compelled to conform to the gender binary of either boy or girl, based on the specific gender and sexual orientation assigned to them at birth (Mdlolo 2017). Consequently, gender-nonconforming learners face discrimination, rejection, and abuse, which deprives them of their social right to express their gender identity on school premises. Some teachers uphold and impose gender-normative ideologies on learners (Zaggi 2022). As a result, gender-nonconforming learners find their existence in school social spaces unbearable, which negatively affects their academic and social development. This situation disrupts the ultimate global goal of ensuring equal and quality education for all, as outlined in the United Nations’ (UN) SDG 4.

It is a global goal to tackle discrimination based on gender and sexual diversity in educational institutions (UNESCO 2016). SDG 4 advocates for equal and quality

education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. The literature indicates that gender-nonconforming learners continue to be excluded in some schools, with gender-normative ideologies identified as the primary cause of gender bias and discrimination within school premises. This study emphasises the urgency of investigating gender normativity in schools to raise awareness and contribute to the development of effective intervention programmes aimed at dismantling gender-normative ideologies in society. Individual perceptions rooted in traditional gender-normative ideologies hinder the effective implementation of anti-discrimination legislation, policies, and frameworks in schools (Francis *et al* 2019:31). Understanding teachers' perceptions of gender may help to promote and enhance the development, enforcement and implementation of gender policies within rural schools. Against this backdrop, this research aimed to work towards changing negative gender perceptions by focusing on rural schools due to their perceived conservative nature. Gender-normative ideologies are upheld in rural areas because of the persistence of traditional cultural beliefs (Msibi 2012; Singh & Naidoo 2017).

The literature indicates that research on perceptions of gender-normative ideologies and the experiences of gender- and sexually diverse learners in South African schools has predominantly been conducted in townships and urban schools (Francis 2021; Msibi 2012). It is imperative to conduct research that focuses on gender inclusion in rural schools (Haitembu 2023). Furthermore, most existing research has concentrated on the experiences of sexually and gender-diverse learners, rather than on teachers' perceptions and behaviours towards these learners (Francis 2021; Msibi 2012). There is no doubt that learners' experiences are vital in matters of gender inclusion, as they are the ones who endure discrimination and exclusion based on gender and sexual identity; they therefore have a deeper understanding of the oppression than the teachers do. However, we must also consider teachers' perceptions if we want to understand the issues that contribute to intolerance towards gender nonconformity. Identifying negative gender perceptions that need to be changed is essential for transforming schools into inclusive social institutions. Teachers should be advocates for social justice within school premises and act as agents of change in society (Reygan 2019). Research should focus on soliciting teachers' ideologies regarding factors that hinder gender inclusivity in schools to raise awareness that helps to dismantle these ideologies that lead to gender stereotyping and discrimination in

school environments (Haitembu 2023). This research aimed to address the aforementioned gap in the literature by interviewing teachers who work in King Cetshwayo District rural primary and secondary schools to explore their perceptions of gender normativity and how these perceptions affect their daily interaction patterns with learners.

1.4 RESEARCH RATIONALE

This study is important because it supports global and South African progressive legislation aimed at transforming schools into inclusive learning environments that acknowledge gender and sexual diversity to promote equal access to quality education for all, as stipulated by SDG 4, and seeks to support efforts towards ensuring that learners are not only protected by law but also by transforming teachers' attitudes and views towards gender-normative and heteronormative ideologies (Francis *et al* 2019). Changing teachers' attitudes regarding gender norms is essential for enhancing the implementation of legislation that protects learners from gender discrimination and bias. This study advocates for positive teacher-learner relationships that facilitate the creation of safe school environments that guarantee social justice for all learners. It sheds light on the prevalence of gender normativity in rural schools and its implications for teacher-learner relationships. Additionally, it provides an understanding of the factors that shape teachers' perceptions of gender normativity and outlines how learners are expected to perform gender in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.

The findings of this study are valuable for developing intervention strategies that may help to transform rural schools into conducive, friendly, and gender-sensitive environments that promote inclusive education and provide equal success and opportunities for all learners, regardless of their gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, this study is significant because its findings contribute to the existing empirical data on gender diversity and inclusive education, which are limited in most African countries.

1.5 RESEARCH PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

1.5.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine gender normativity in rural schools through the narratives of teachers who live and work in the rural communities of King Cetshwayo District. The study aimed to explore the teachers' perceptions and experiences of gender normativity and to determine the implications for teacher-learner relationships. Additionally, the study intended to raise awareness and make recommendations that will help to improve relationships between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners in order to enhance the creation of safe school environments that provide equal and quality education for all.

1.5.2 Research objectives

To achieve the abovementioned purpose, the research focused on the following specific objectives:

- To explore teachers' perceptions of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.
- To explore teachers' experiences of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.
- To investigate how teachers respond to gender nonconformity on school premises in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.
- To explore the influence of gender normativity on teacher-learner interactions in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.

1.5.3 Research questions

To gain a better understanding of the studied phenomenon, the following primary research question was formulated: **How do teachers' perceptions of gender normativity inform teacher-learner relationships in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?** This study sought to answer this research question by exploring how teachers' perceptions of gender normativity influence daily interactions in rural school settings. The evolution of teachers' perceptions of gender normativity and gender performance expectations in these school premises was the focus of this study. To

effectively answer the research question, the following four secondary questions were formulated:

- What are the teachers' perceptions of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- What are the teachers' experiences of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- How do teachers respond to gender nonconformity on school premises in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- How does gender normativity inform the way teachers and learners interact in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

1.6 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

The following key concepts are used throughout the dissertation:

1.6.1 Gender

Gender is a bodily visible performance of social roles and socially constructed behaviours and expressions by men and women, or boys and girls (Butler 1990). These performances are influenced by the cultural framework of society and are validated and accepted by fellow members of that society. The repetition of gender acts and gestures through discursive means in society facilitates the development of gender in an individual (Butler 1990). Gender identity is an individual's deeply held internal sense of gender, which may be the same as or different from the sex assigned to them at birth (Wren 2019:211). As a social construct, gender identity varies from society to society and can change over time. Gender identity is flexible and not fixed (Oldham, Lindsey & Niehuis 2017:468).

1.6.2 Gender normativity

Gender normativity refers to the belief that normative and heteronormative behaviour, societally prescribed norms, and stereotypical gender roles are "normal" and should therefore be reinforced and adhered to (Josephson 2019). Under these circumstances, gender presentations are expected to align with societal heteronormative gender expectations (Pompper 2017:6).

1.6.3 Gender roles

Gender roles are society's prescriptions of how men and women should perform gender in their communities and the broader society (Lindsey 2021:7). According to Msibi (2012:527), gender roles are often assumed to be stable and true because they are embedded in culture and religion.

1.6.4 Gender norms

Gender norms are social rules that outline which behaviours are acceptable and appropriate for men and women in a specific group or society (Pierotti, Lake & Lewis 2018:543). They are created and passed down through social interaction, embedded in both official and informal institutions, and ingrained in the mind (Cislaghi & Heise 2019:415-416).

1.6.5 Gender diversity

Gender diversity refers to a wide range of gender identities and expressions that do not fit into traditional gender categories (Wren 2019:212). Gender-diverse people are those whose gender expressions do not align with societal or cultural heteronormative gender expectations (Healey 2014:58).

1.6.6 Gender nonconforming

"Gender nonconforming" is a term that is used to refer to individuals whose behaviour, actions, or ideologies do not conform to prescribed gender norms (Ally & Phala 2017; Miller 2016:303; Xu, Feng & Rahman 2024). Martin-Storey (2016) views gender nonconformity as the "extent to which individuals fail to conform to societal prescriptions concerning appearance, feelings, or behaviours". Gender-nonconforming individuals are often stigmatised due to a societal belief system that is deeply entrenched in traditional and cultural ideologies of masculinity and femininity (Martin-Storey 2016).

1.6.7 Teacher

Lal (2016:9) defines a teacher as someone who delivers an educational programme, evaluates students' involvement in instruction, and provides steady and significant

leadership within the educational programme. Compton *et al* (2019) stipulate that a professional teacher must be a reflective practitioner who is tolerant, empathetic, non-judgemental, a good listener, and a collaborator. The teachers who participated in this study were permanently employed by the South African Department of Education (DoE) and taught in rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District.

1.6.8 Learner

According to the South African DBE (2010:64), a learner is an individual who attends an early childhood development centre, school, or adult basic education and training centre. This research uses the term “learners” to refer to students who were enrolled in the rural schools studied at the time the research was conducted.

1.6.9 Teacher-learner relationships

Ganguly (2022:863) defines teacher-learner relationships as the interactions between teachers and learners in a classroom and views two-way trust and respect as the most important elements of positive teacher-learner relationships. The nature of the relationships between teachers and learners plays a significant role in learners’ development and teachers’ job fulfilment (Gardee 2019; Soldaat 2019; Rasuli *et al* 2023; Rytivaara & Frelin 2017; Zhang 2022). Lan and Moscardino (2019) emphasise the importance of positive teacher-learner relationships in improving learning enjoyment and social adjustment.

1.7 METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study employed an interpretivist epistemological paradigm and a qualitative research method to produce knowledge through exploring and comprehending the research participants’ perceptions and experiences of gender normativity. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 teachers from King Cetshwayo District rural primary and secondary schools. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, and interviews were conducted face to face in private areas chosen primarily by the participants. Some interviews took place in the participants’ workplaces, some in their homes, while others opted to be interviewed in the researcher’s home. The questions were formulated in English, and all the teachers were comfortable being interviewed in that language.

The interviews had an average duration of one hour and 15 minutes. Open-ended questions were posed to elicit information from the participants. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. The participants voluntarily provided informed consent to take part in the study, and the principles of privacy and confidentiality, autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence were taken into account throughout the research process.

1.8 CHAPTER OUTLINE

This dissertation consists of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the study by providing an overview of the research. The background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research objectives, and research questions are outlined. The chapter also summarises the research design and methodological choices and provides a synopsis of the dissertation's chapters.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of global literature on the concept of gender normativity and its implications for society and school environments. The concept of gender normativity and how it is produced, reproduced, and maintained are discussed. The family, school, and media are identified as the main agents of gender-normative ideologies' socialisation. The problems experienced by gender-nonconforming individuals in society are also highlighted in this chapter. Global North and Global South literature on gender normativity in schools is reviewed, as well as the types of teacher-learner relationships and the importance of positive teacher-learner relationships. Lastly, the chapter reviews South African policies that promote gender-nonconforming learners in schools.

Chapter 3 provides an outline of the theoretical framework that underpinned the study. Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory and the intersectionality theoretical framework were employed in this study. The foundations of these theories are discussed, as well as how they were used to facilitate an understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the study's research design and methods used to collect and analyse data. The study comprised qualitative research that used an interpretivist epistemological paradigm, which is fully explained in this chapter. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to collect data, and a thematic approach was used to analyse data.

Chapter 5 presents the first part of the research findings and a discussion thereof. This chapter focuses on the participants' views, perceptions, and experiences of gender and gender normativity. How the participants' perceptions of gender are shaped is unearthed through a discussion of the developed themes. The themes that are presented in this chapter include rural school teachers' conceptions of gender, constructions of gender in rural spaces, and teachers' responses to gender nonconformity in rural schools. Themes 1, 2, and 3 of this study are discussed and analysed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 further presents the research findings, with a focus on how rural school teachers' perceptions of gender affect their daily interactions and relationships with learners. The themes outlined in this chapter include teachers' gendered expectations in rural schools, effects of gender normativity on daily teacher-learner interactions, and effects of gender normativity on teacher-learner relationships in rural schools.

Chapter 7 serves as the concluding chapter that summarises and highlights the key findings of the research. The researcher's recommendations for future research and concluding remarks are also presented in this final chapter.

1.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter began by presenting the study's introduction and background. This was followed by a discussion of the problem statement, which established that gender normativity impedes inclusive education by prohibiting safe school environments for gender-nonconforming learners. The rationale for the study was outlined, and the aim of the study was also revealed. The research objectives and questions were formulated in a manner that enabled a critical investigation of the topic under study. The methodological underpinnings of the study were also discussed. This chapter concluded with a brief outline of the subsequent chapters.

The following chapter reviews international and South African literature on the evolution and manifestations of gender normativity in society and school environments.

CHAPTER 2:

GENDER NATIVITY AND TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter briefly outlined the background of the study and highlighted the importance of this research. Problems caused by gender nativity in schools were also summarised. Gender nativity hinders the provision of gender-inclusive learning spaces in many countries, both in Africa and internationally (Francis 2021; Horton 2022; Mdlolo 2017; Msibi 2012; Naeimi & Kjaran 2022; Ullman 2017; Zaggi 2022). This chapter reviews global literature on gender nativity and societal expectations, gender socialisation, and the maintenance of gender-normative ideologies, the concept of gender performance, gender nativity in the Global North and Global South, the types of teacher-learner relationships, and the importance of positive teacher-learner relationships in schools. The chapter ends by reviewing literature on South African policies that promote the rights of gender-nonconforming learners and a comprehensive conclusion of the chapter.

2.2 GENDER NATIVITY AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

Gender nativity is a process whereby members of society are expected to perform prescribed gender norms and roles that are primarily based on ideologies of masculinity and femininity (Josephson 2019). The literature asserts that gender nativity is still prevalent in many heteronormative societies, where gender-normative behaviour is normalised and reinforced (Akala 2018; Cinar 2015; Lindsey 2021; Lyons 2015; Mdlolo 2017; Pompper 2017; Zaggi 2022). In these societies, members are expected to live according to normative gender expectations, which dictate that males should adopt masculinity, while females should adopt femininity. According to Zaggi (2022:141), this cultural perspective holds that young people's gender and sexual identities are inextricably linked to the sex they were assigned at birth, either as a boy or a girl. This implies that girls should be feminine and boys should be masculine in their expression of gender. Gender nativity is the gender counterpart of heteronormativity, which posits that human sexuality is heterosexual by default (Josephson 2019). Heteronormative sexual identities and gender categories

are imposed on individuals, and those who fail to conform or who challenge these societal gender norms may face disapproval from society (Cinar 2015:53; Lyons 2015:2). Individuals are therefore compelled to conform due to societal expectations. For example, an individual assigned male at birth is socialised and expected to display masculine characteristics such as being physically strong, assertive, a natural leader, and a disciplinarian (Lindsey 2021:5). Society expects this male individual to be physically and sexually attracted to a female, marry when deemed appropriate by societal standards, and become the head of the family and the breadwinner who makes decisions for the household (Akala 2018:234). Failing to adhere to the established societal gender order and expectations may result in commotion, rejection, and disapproval from other members of society (Lyons 2015). However, expecting members of society to conform to traditional gender-normative ideologies and enforcing heteronormative practices in contemporary society, where gender is evolving into a broader spectrum, is problematic and has consequences for gender-nonconforming individuals, particularly as they interact within various social institutions, including schools (Francis 2021; Sendén, Renström & Lindqvist 2021).

2.3 GENDER SOCIALISATION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF GENDER-NORMATIVE IDEOLOGIES

Gender socialisation refers to the process by which individuals learn gender norms and roles from those around them through day-to-day interactions and observations (Schlyff 2022). The main institutions identified in the literature as significant in gender socialisation and the maintenance of gender-normative ideologies are the media, family, school, and peer groups (Averett 2016; Hoang 2019; Mayeza 2016; Mills-Koonce, Rehder & McCurdy 2018; Seif 2017; Sibanda 2020; Thorfinnsdottir & Jensen 2017; Van der Vleuten, Steinmetz & Van de Werfhorst 2019). Averett (2016) argues that, during the primary stages of identity development, these institutional influences introduce and reproduce knowledge surrounding social norms related to normative ideologies. The following subsection unpacks the agents of gender socialisation and explains how they contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of gender-normative ideologies in society.

2.3.1 The role of family in reproducing and maintaining gender-normative ideologies in society

International and local literature indicates that the family is one of the most powerful agents of gender socialisation (Averett 2016; Carter 2014; Ning & Karubi 2018; Hoang 2019; Kyazike 2016; Mills-Koonce *et al* 2018; Sibanda 2020). Carter (2014:244) argues that families begin to socialise gender roles in delivery rooms, on the day a child is born, when they allocate specific clothes and colours based on traditional gender categorisations of being male or female. In the United States of America (USA), Mills-Koonce *et al* (2018) stipulate that the family plays a central role in the socialisation of gender and sexuality because parents mediate children's exposure to various cultural debates. In line with the stipulations of Carter (2014) and Mills-Koonce *et al* (2018), Hoang (2019), a scholar in China, postulates that parents model and teach their children how to live from an early age; how a girl or boy should behave is mainly determined by them. Parents may impose behaviours regarding how to walk, dress, and act like a girl or a boy, thereby passing gender-normative ideologies on to their children (Hoang 2019:144).

Family gender socialisation is intense in Asia and Africa, where family dynamics, culture, and religion foster traditional gender categorisations of masculinity and femininity. Ning and Karubi (2018) conducted a qualitative study on Malaysian women to examine the impact of gender socialisation on Malaysian families and found that religion and culture played a significant role in establishing the nature of gender socialisation. The participants learned to accept gender roles and norms as common sense through daily practices, social etiquette, and their parents' behaviours, which were heavily influenced by gender-normative ideologies (Ning & Karubi 2018). In Uganda, families instil gender roles in children from infancy through customs and manners that are reinforced by fables, riddles, proverbs, and music (Kyazike 2016). According to Kyazike (2016), mothers teach feminine roles to girls in preparation for making them good wives, while fathers train boys to become good fathers by teaching them masculine roles. Similarly, in South Africa, the family is an institution where gender roles and relationships are delineated and imposed on children (Sibanda 2020). In most traditional African families, girls are taught household chores such as cooking and fetching water, while boys are taught to fend for and protect their families (Sibanda 2020:23). The literature suggests that some parents may impose gender-

normative behaviour through their parenting practices. Traditional parents expect their children to display gender-normative behaviours as part of their cultural upbringing and anticipate that they will fulfil their gender roles without compromise (Averett 2016; Sibanda 2020). In this way, children learn gender-normative ideologies from their families and implement these ideologies as they become members of different social institutions as they grow up.

The training of gender norms and roles by the family prepares children for adulthood, which means that in traditional families, individuals are expected to maintain the learned social gender roles and norms throughout their lives. Averett (2016) stipulates that the perpetuation of heteronormative ideologies when raising children may leave those children with only the option to be heterosexual or to believe in heteronormativity as they grow up. Similarly, Hoang (2019:144) argues that the enforcement of family values may also be central to the maintenance of heteronormativity and gender-normative ideologies. For example, when parents expect their child to marry and have biological children, heteronormativity is maintained through expected family gender roles in this way (Hoang 2019:144). Families therefore play a significant role in gender socialisation and enhance the continuation and maintenance of gender-normative ideologies.

2.3.2 The role of schools in reproducing and maintaining gender-normative ideologies in society

Both international and local literature stipulate that the school curriculum, teachers' attitudes, gender expectations, and peer interactions foster gender-normative ideologies (Evripidou 2020; Hoang 2019; Kennedy 2024; Rhyan 2016; Sibanda 2020). Sibanda (2020:33) stipulates that as children interact with their teachers and peers at school, educational schemas, general behaviour, and associations with gender are established, which explains why children usually behave according to their assigned gender. Evripidou (2020:1020) suggests that there can be visible or hidden gender norms that are considered normal for either males or females in a school setting, and the practice or enforcement of these norms sustains gender-normative ideologies that exclude non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality. Rhyan (2016) conducted ethnographic research in an American school, observing a second-grade classroom, and found that gender-normative practices and interactions occur daily.

Rhyan (2016) observed that heteronormative attractions, normative behaviours, language, and rituals are normalised and reproduced. Rhyan (2016) observed learners reinforcing the conventional status of masculinity and femininity in the classroom. In one scenario, a learner jokingly told a girl and a boy to “kiss the bride”. In this instance, the students normalised the idea that an intimate couple should consist of a male and a female, while simultaneously reinforcing the perception of male-male intimate relationships as abnormal, forbidden, and scorned (Rhyan 2016:77). The study noted that learners disapproved of same-sex intimate relationships, even during their playful jokes in the classroom. The students displayed heteronormative gender expectations for boys and girls in this second-grade class (Rhyan 2016).

Similarly, Evripidou (2020) found that heteronormativity was sustained in various ways during a qualitative study in which he interviewed 18 gay alumni who were born and raised in Cypriot Greek society. The aim was to understand their experiences in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes during their secondary school attendance. All the participants displayed signs of discomfort and attested that gender-normative discourses, attitudes, and beliefs were prevalent in their EFL classes. Heteronormative behaviour was considered “acceptable and normal”, while language around gender and sexual diversity was predominantly avoided by the teachers (Evripidou 2020). Teachers reinforced normative ideologies by presenting topics and learning content that were aligned with heteronormative beliefs. In this way, heteronormativity was regarded as supreme, while gender and sexual diversity were discouraged or ignored (Evripidou 2020:1025). Correspondingly, Hoang (2019) examined how heteronormativity, gender, and sexual oppression manifested in the secondary school system in China and found that topics discussed during sex education favoured heteronormativity, while stigmatising sexual and gender minority identities.

Sexual and gender minority identities were associated with sexual diseases, and the curriculum was strongly influenced by Christianity, which was based on heteronormative ideologies (Hoang 2019:146). Teachers strongly discouraged gender-nonconforming and sexually diverse learners and referred them to school counselling services, where the counsellors also made efforts to convince these nonconforming learners to adhere to heteronormative gender expectations (Hoang

2019). Additionally, Hoang (2019) found that peers compelled one another to conform to heterosexuality by denigrating and equating being gay with being feminine. Hoang's (2019) findings revealed that masculinity was associated with respect and regarded as "normal" by peers. The participants felt pressured to conform to masculinity because the disciplining and enforcement of conformity among non-heterosexual genders occurred through blatant homophobic and heterosexist actions. Peer bullying and the boycotting of those who "came out" as non-heterosexual were prevalent, and some participants felt compelled to limit the expression of their gender or sexuality through conformity.

Hoang (2019) maintains that teenagers often feel pressured to follow gendered trends in order to fit in with their peer groups. Van der Vleuten *et al* (2019) argue that when members of a peer group normalise gender normativity, they may reinforce gender-stereotypical behaviour and penalise nonconformity during their interactions. This literature suggests that peer groups are highly influential, as individuals may feel compelled to belong to a specific group and, consequently, may be forced to conform to traditional gender norms if their peers regard them as "normal". Gender- or sexually diverse individuals might also choose to hide their identity, act heterosexual, or conform to gender norms and roles in front of others to avoid peer rejection (Evripidou 2020). In doing so, gender-normative and heteronormative ideologies are produced, reproduced, and maintained.

In South Africa, Sithole (2020) conducted a qualitative study in Newlands West, north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, to explore how young boys and girls make meaning of same-sex sexualities in primary school. The study discovered that heterosexual and normative ideologies were promoted and reproduced through the curriculum, teaching methods, and school structures. The curriculum did not include content about sexual diversity, and teachers did not address diverse sexualities (Sithole 2020:124). Consequently, learners were familiar with binary gender performances and regarded these as "normal". Moreover, children monitored one another's gender performance styles on school playgrounds, expecting every learner to display feminine and masculine traits, while marginalising gender-nonconforming peers (Sithole 2020). In line with Sithole's (2020) research findings, Singh and Sewnath (2025) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perspectives and responses of teachers towards learners of diverse genders and sexualities in a primary school in KwaZulu-Natal.

They found that teachers, both directly and indirectly, reproduced gender-normative ideologies through their interaction patterns, which were heavily influenced by their limited understanding of diverse genders and sexualities, as well as their heteronormative and moralistic views.

In schools, children play an important role in acquiring their gender identity (Mayeza 2015:6). Mayeza (2018) conducted a study in a primary school in a township in South Africa to explore how young children construct and enforce gender norms in the classroom. The study found that play in the classroom was regulated by South Africa's dominant discourse of gender polarity, which led to gender bias in the children's games and toys (Mayeza 2018). Girls tended to choose fantasy areas where feminine toys and games were available, while boys gravitated towards construction play areas (Mayeza 2018). The teachers organised the play areas in a gendered manner, and children monitored each other during playtime, policing those who transgressed prescribed spaces, toys, and gender boundaries (Mayeza 2018). Mayeza (2018) observed that the children were complicit in the reproduction of polarised ways of performing gender. Consequently, children learn to perform gender through peer interactions and gender policing at school.

Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that the curriculum, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards gender in school environments, and peer interactions play a crucial role in gender socialisation in schools. This research focused on working towards changing teachers' perceptions of gender. Teachers serve as important role models; the behaviour they exhibit in the classroom, including their reactions to gender nonconformity, impacts learners' gender development. If teachers fail to challenge gender-polarised actions in the classroom and display attitudes and behaviours that reinforce normative ideologies, learners learn from them, and this allows gender normativity to be fostered and maintained.

2.3.3 The role of the media in reproducing and maintaining gender-normative ideologies in society

The media plays an important role in gender socialisation in modern society. Seif (2017) contends that gender-normative ideologies are sustained through the media. Children are exposed to video games, social media, and different types of applications

in their lives and acquire new knowledge about gender on a daily basis (Bègue, Sarda, Gentile, Bry & Roché 2017; Cerbara, Ciancimino & Tintori 2022). In their quantitative research conducted in Rome, Cerbara *et al* (2022) found that when both girls and boys spend more time playing video games, they increasingly adhere to female and male roles because male and female characters are often portrayed stereotypically. Similarly, Bègue *et al* (2017) conducted quantitative research in France to assess the relationship between video game exposure and sexism. They determined that video game characters were depicted in gender-stereotypical ways; men were portrayed as strong heroes, while women were depicted as attractive and sexy in most video games. There is a possibility that youths who play these video games may model and learn their beliefs about gender roles from such characters, which could have enduring effects on their conceptions of gender identity (Bègue *et al* 2017:2).

Worldwide, gender nonconformity is often perceived as unusual in most television storylines and is frequently employed to generate comedic content in films (Thorfinnsdottir & Jensen 2017). Thorfinnsdottir and Jensen (2017) analysed 545 Danish public service children's television programmes over two weeks and found that the content reinforced heteronormativity, while portraying non-heteronormative behaviour as comedic. The characters depicted in these programmes typically featured heteronormative parents and exhibited heterosexual intimacy. Furthermore, gender was consistently performed in a heteronormative manner in the films analysed. Characters who failed to conform to gender expectations were directly dismissed, regarded as inappropriate, and punished. Similarly, a study conducted by Seif (2017) in the USA confirmed that heteronormativity continues to be represented in television series, with heterosexuality depicted as the prevailing standard of living. Seif (2017) observed that the storylines and character portrayals in the films studied were dominated by heteronormative ideas that reflected gendered stereotypes, lifestyle depictions, and sexual representations. Seif (2017) noted that parents expected their children to follow a traditional path of marrying an opposite-sex partner while struggling to accept same-sex marriage. In instances of same-sex marriage, one partner typically assumed the role of a woman while the other took on the role of a man. According to Seif (2017), this illustrates that even same-sex couples reinforce the narrative of a heteronormative standard of living.

In South Africa, Zungu (2023) conducted a study to examine how the media influences gender identities among students. Zungu's (2023) study found that the media shapes how students view themselves and others in terms of gender roles and stereotypes. Gender-normative and heteronormative ideologies are reproduced and maintained through media representations. Changing perceptions through education, which is the main focus of this study, may be the only solution to combat persistent gender-normative and heteronormative ideologies. Schools can play a crucial role in educating media professionals and training managers to recognise and dismantle gender identity bias in the media.

2.4 THE CONCEPT OF GENDER PERFORMANCE

Gender performance refers to the enactment of normative behaviours specific to a particular gender category, such as femininity or masculinity (Figueira 2016; Oldham *et al* 2017:468). Performing gender is often unavoidable, as individuals recognise that society expects them to fulfil certain roles, and others evaluate their performance and hold them accountable for these roles (Butler 1990). Gender is socially constructed and achieved by successfully engaging in the behaviours associated with one's gender (Butler 1990; Oldham *et al* 2017; West & Zimmerman 1987).

The performance of normative configurations is referred to as "doing" gender (Oldham *et al* 2017:468). Doing gender can be analysed not only as a result of social interaction and settings but also as a foundation for social structure and a reinforcing agent of sex and gender binaries (West & Zimmerman 1987). Individual factors, including gender identification and conceptualisation, alongside contextual factors such as relationships and interaction spaces, can interact to produce gender doing (Strough & Keener 2014). Darwin (2017) stipulates that gender doing comprises two elements: gender performance and accountability. In the process of performing gender, individuals see themselves as accountable to themselves, others, and society (West & Zimmerman 1987). This implies that performative actions may serve to reflect hegemonic values and norms, with the fear of marginalisation and exclusion for failing to uphold normative/heteronormative ideologies (Averret 2016; Butler 2004). When men's or women's behaviour contradicts society's stereotypes, such as the assumption that men are tough while women are soft, men may be told to "man up", whereas women are advised to always act like a "lady" (Ramaphele 2016). Ramaphele (2016:32)

argues that as we are reprimanded for gender scripts, we become more conscious of how we do gender. Individuals also use these gender scripts to police the behaviour of others as they interact with them in society (Ramaphele 2016). Gender performance is unavoidable due to essentialist societal beliefs. Boys' and girls' roles are determined by society, and through repetition, these roles become institutionalised gender performances (Butler 1990). However, Butler (1990) argues that people can also perform gender by not conforming to acceptable masculinity and femininity, as their behaviour, whether conforming or not, is inevitably interpreted in terms of prevailing societal gender norms. Gender is perceived differently across various societies and is constructed based on individuals' contextual factors. The manner in which gender performances are repeated determines the prevailing gender norms. Individuals have the capacity to establish and re-establish new approaches to doing gender (Butler 1990). Livingstone (2018) maintains that the beliefs individuals hold can influence their expectations regarding the behaviour of women and men in society. Against this backdrop, this research aimed to explore how teachers' beliefs influence their gender expectations for boys and girls in rural school settings.

2.5 GENDER NORMATIVITY IN GLOBAL NORTH SCHOOLS

A school is a microcosm of society; the behaviour of teachers, school staff, and learners reflects societal values and norms. The study of social interactions in schools is crucial for understanding prevailing gender perceptions. Literature affirms that gender normativity is prevalent in Global North schools. Horton (2022) conducted qualitative research in primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) and found that heteronormativity was expected from learners on a daily basis. Transgender and gender-nonconforming learners faced discrimination, rejection, victimisation, and non-affirmation from peers, administrators, and teachers, which resulted in health challenges such as gender minority stress (Horton 2022:1). Ullman (2017) conducted research in Australia to examine the school gender climate as a potential stressor for students while exploring their reports of teachers' attitudes towards diverse gender expressions. He found that teachers were rarely positive when dealing with gender-nonconforming learners, and heteronormativity continued to dominate in the studied Australian schools. Consistent with Horton's (2022) findings, Ullman (2017)

discovered that teachers negatively addressed gender nonconformity due to deeply entrenched gender-normative and heteronormative beliefs.

Gender normativity in schools is embedded in the curriculum, classroom practices, and sporting activities (Ngabaza & Shefer 2019). Kennedy (2024:157) argues that the curriculum fosters certain normative ideologies about gender and sexuality that promote stereotypical gender norms and heteronormativity. Davies, Simone-Balter and Rhijn (2021) explored educators' perceptions of discussing the development of sexuality and gender in early learning settings in Ontario, Canada. They found that teachers relied on gender-binarised notions of children's bodily development when addressing sexuality education in their professional practice. Teachers defined the purpose of sex education as teaching young learners to identify their gender orientation as either a "boy" or a "girl", and the gender binary was deeply entrenched in their teaching pedagogies (Davies *et al* 2021). The gender binary was also reinforced in bathrooms, which were identified as spaces where learners could learn about genital differences and gender developmental norms (Davies *et al* 2021:403). The above literature stipulates that gender normative ideologies, which are enforced in Global North schools, disrupt gender inclusivity and affect learning daily.

2.6 GENDER NORMATIVITY IN GLOBAL SOUTH SCHOOLS

Gender normativity in most countries in the Global South is intense due to religious and cultural beliefs held by communities. These are influenced by colonial legacies based on gender binary and heteronormativity (Bhana 2016; Juma 2023; Ngidi & Dlamini 2017; Nuer 2022; Olaoluwa 2018; Vilane 2018). In Pakistan, most schools' discourses on gender and sexuality are strictly influenced by Islamic religious and cultural doctrines that regard homosexuality and alternative expressions of gender as sins (Juma 2023:51). Juma (2023) conducted participatory research to explore how teachers enact gender equity in early childhood development classrooms in Pakistan and found that teachers' heteronormative beliefs perpetuated a "boy-girl" discourse that was entirely binary. Juma (2023) stipulates that teachers' and children's sexual and gender perspectives were highly influenced by the teachings from the Quran and Sunnah, which posit that God created man and woman to maintain gender order in society (Juma 2023:53). Heterosexuality was regarded as appropriate, natural, and normal in daily school discourses (Juma 2023:64). Similarly, in Brazil, gender

normativity remains dominant in schools. As in most countries, gender and sexuality issues are not included in the Brazilian curriculum, and teachers' perceptions are influenced by conservative discourses that are anchored in religious fundamentals that oppose the teaching of gender and sexuality content to learners (Gonçalves de Sousa & Aparecida da Silva Nogueira 2023). This implies that learners in Brazilian educational institutions are not exposed to gender and sexuality diversity, which promotes gender polarisation and heteronormative practices and leads to transphobic and homophobic reactions towards gender-nonconforming learners.

In addition to the aforementioned literature, Mim (2016) conducted an ethnographic study in a Bangladeshi secondary school. The study found that gender normativity was normalised and reinforced through the management and arrangement of space within the school premises, as well as the allocation of roles. For example, indoor play areas were designated for girls, while outdoor play areas were reserved for boys (Mim 2016). Gender discrimination was also noted, with class leadership consistently awarded to boys, who were given authority and more opportunities to lead, even during school assemblies (Mim 2016). Zaggi's (2022) ethnographic study in Nigeria similarly discovered that schools enforce and reinforce gender normativity through their structures. Zaggi (2022) found gendered principles of behaviour in the studied schools, where "boys were taught to be masculine while girls were taught to be feminine" through school structures. There is a need to eradicate gender normative ideologies which are insidiously persistent in Global South schools.

2.7 GENDER NORMATIVITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

South Africa is one of the Global South countries that has established progressive and inclusive laws that promote the rights and legal protection of gender and sexual minority individuals (Haffejee & Wiebesiek 2021). However, despite these anti-discrimination policies and legislation, gender-nonconforming learners continue to be marginalised in South African schools (Francis 2017, 2021, 2024; Francis *et al* 2019; Mdlolo 2017; Msibi 2012). The education system has not adequately addressed heteronormativity in schools, and most teachers reinforce heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality in the classroom (Francis 2023). Francis (2017) reviewed 27 publications, and all indicated that compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexuality proliferated in schools. From the reviewed literature, Francis (2017)

found that LGBTQ+ learners experienced transphobia and homophobia from teachers and administrators who were unable to tolerate gender diversity and nonconformity (Francis 2017:360).

Francis (2021) also conducted qualitative research in the Free State province of South Africa to examine the experiences of queer learners. The study found that some teachers still normalise and privilege heteronormativity due to societal cultural ideologies that assert heterosexuality as the only way of being human. Teachers expected girls to present themselves in traditionally feminine ways and boys in traditionally masculine ways, both in how they dress and in extracurricular involvement (Francis 2021:1578). Similarly, Mdlolo's (2017) qualitative research study in South Africa discovered that school environments influenced gender roles by increasing opportunities for learners to perform various femininities and masculinities. Mdlolo (2017) found that learners' lives and experiences in a school context were shaped by teachers' gendered behaviour models, gendered role expectations for learners, and school policies. Msibi (2012) conducted a qualitative research study on the experiences of queer learners in township schools in KwaZulu-Natal and found that schools remain key sites for the production of heterosexuality.

Based on the reviewed literature, gender normativity remains prevalent in schools due to perspectives shaped by religion and culture. Religion, social background, culture, age, gender, sex, and sexuality intersect to influence views on gender and sexual expectations in educational settings (Gonçalves de Sousa & Aparecida da Silva Nogueira 2023; Juma 2023). The above literature highlights the need to change teachers' perspectives on gender so that they can become more aware of and sensitised to gender issues.

2.8 TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN SCHOOLS

Globally, the types of relationships between teachers and learners affect learners' holistic development and significantly influence teachers' attitudes towards their teaching jobs (Gardee 2019; McKay & Macomber 2023; Rasuli *et al* 2023; Rytivaara & Frelin 2017; Soldaat 2019; Zhang 2022). High-quality teacher-learner relationships are typically linked to positive learner outcomes, whereas poor-quality relationships lead to negative outcomes (Alsem, Van den Brink, Hoogendijk & Tick 2024). It is

essential to identify and understand the types of teacher-learner relationships in school settings to raise awareness and promote the enhancement of positive relationships.

2.8.1 Types of teacher-learner relationships in schools

Researchers have utilised closeness, conflict, and dependency to determine the types of relationships between teachers and learners in schools (Koomen & Jellesma 2015; Verschueren & Koomen 2021). McGrath and Van Bergen (2019) identified four types of teacher-learner relationships: positive, complicated, reserved, and negative. A positive teacher-learner relationship is characterised by high closeness and low conflict, while a complicated relationship is marked by high closeness and high conflict (McGrath & Van Bergen 2019). A reserved teacher-learner relationship features low closeness and low conflict, whereas a negative teacher-learner relationship is defined by low closeness and high conflict (McGrath & Van Bergen 2019). Van Bergen, McGrath and Quin (2019) stipulate that students with complicated, reserved, and negative relationships with their teachers require support to improve their prosocial behaviour and to reduce aggression.

Although complicated teacher-learner relationships are characterised by closeness, learners in such relationships still require support, as their closeness to teachers may be less stable than the conflicts they encounter (Lee & Bierman 2018). Learners with reserved or negative relationships with teachers are often vulnerable to adverse academic and social outcomes, as they typically receive less attention from their teachers (Van Bergen *et al* 2020). Teachers play a crucial role in schools and must ensure that they maintain positive relationships with a diverse range of learners (McGrath & Van Bergen 2019). Positive teacher-learner relationships are of paramount importance in creating conducive, safe, and gender-inclusive learning spaces, which was the focus of this research.

2.8.2 The effectiveness of positive teacher-learner relationships in schools

Positive teacher-learner relationships are crucial in the teaching and learning process in schools. Lan and Moscardino (2019) maintain that these relationships can enhance learning enjoyment and social adjustment while reducing stress and burnout among learners. Rasuli *et al* (2023) analysed 11 research articles and three academic books to explore the effects of teacher-learner relationships on the learning process. They

discovered that teachers need to cultivate good relationships with learners for successful teaching to occur and found that positive teacher-learner relationships enhance learners' interest and motivation to learn (Rasuli *et al* 2023:69). Similarly, McKay and Macomber (2023) conducted a phenomenological study in the USA to understand educators' perceptions of building relationships in education. They found that students are motivated to learn when strong relationships are established. Furthermore, McKay and Macomber (2023) noted that learners trust teachers who are caring; if learners do not trust their teacher, learning suffers. In China, Zhang (2022) found a strong positive correlation between teacher-learner relationships and academic success after reviewing related literature to investigate the effects of teacher-learner interpersonal relationships. In South Africa, Gardee (2019) conducted qualitative research to understand the relationship between different teacher-learner social relationships and learners' abilities in Mathematics. The study found that these social relationships significantly shape learners' learning capabilities.

The consistency in the findings of the literature indicates that learners thrive in environments where they feel closely connected to their teachers. Positive relationships with teachers foster an atmosphere where learners feel accepted, loved, cared for, and safe, which enhances their motivation to learn (Zhang 2022:5). For teachers to create a conducive learning environment, they must accept all learners, regardless of gender differences, and address the diverse needs of all learners.

Nevertheless, teachers encounter various challenges in their efforts to create positive and productive relationships with learners (Van Bergen *al* 2020; Soldaat 2019). Soldaat (2019) conducted a case study in South Africa to examine the formation and development of relationships between teachers and learners and discovered that teachers often struggle to fully understand learners' diverse backgrounds and identities. When teachers do not share the same values as their learners, it creates a socio-cultural distance between them (Soldaat 2019:83). For example, teachers who hold gender-normative ideologies may distance themselves from non-normative sexual and gender identities in the school environment (Soldaat 2019:84). This is problematic, as it may hinder the progress of gender- and sexually diverse learners in educational institutions.

2.9 SOCIAL ROLES TEACHERS OCCUPY TO ENHANCE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEARNERS

The literature asserts that teachers need to perform various social roles, such as parental figure, counsellor, advisor, manager, facilitator, role model, and coach, in addition to delivering content, to foster bonds with learners (Rasuli *et al* 2023; Soldaat 2019). Some of the most important roles that teachers should perform to maintain healthy, inclusive social environments are discussed below.

First and foremost, to create positive relationships with learners, teachers should adopt parental roles. Soldaat (2019) discovered that teachers who referred to learners as their children while caring for their academic performance strengthened their bonds with them. Rytivaara and Frelin (2017) conducted a qualitative study that explored teachers' experiences of their diverse relationships with students in Sweden and found that parent-child relationships between teachers and learners fostered positive connections. Parents are known to be caring figures in an individual's development; teachers should therefore also care for learners' development to create strong relationships with them.

Teachers should also be role models for learners in schools. They should lead by example and inspire and encourage learners on the pathway to holistic development (Nazeef, Mushtaq & Balouch 2025). Nazeef *et al* (2025) conducted quantitative research to investigate the influence of teachers as ethical role models on academic and personal development and explored how learners perceived and were affected by their teachers' behaviour. They found that teachers who serve as ethical role models had a positive impact on learners' academic motivation, performance, and character development traits such as empathy, integrity, and responsibility. This underscores the importance of teachers conducting themselves appropriately and exhibiting values that positively influence learners.

In addition to the above, teachers need to be facilitators and managers of the learning environment to create conducive spaces that allow learners to express themselves freely and grow holistically (Rasuli *et al* 2023:66-67). Cahyono and Rusiadi (2025) maintain that, as managers and facilitators, teachers' role is to create a safe and supportive learning environment and to encourage learners to actively participate in

the learning process. Well-managed learning spaces enhance positive interactions that foster strong teacher-learner bonds.

Moreover, teachers should take on the role of counsellors or advisors to guide learners through their educational journey, which is not only physical but also a more profound mental, creative, moral, emotional, and spiritual journey (Rasuli *et al* 2023:67). This is a significant role that teachers perform when learners face troubling issues and have no one else to rely on (Soldaat 2019:82). Soldaat (2019) discovered that learners expect their teachers to intervene in resolving conflicts between peers or when they encounter health problems on school premises. Learners look up to their teachers, who need to be there for them, ready with constructive advice. This fosters the bond between teachers and learners.

Teachers should perform relevant social duties to foster positive relationships with their learners. However, socio-cultural beliefs have been identified in the literature as a hindrance to positive teacher-learner relationships (Soldaat 2019). The beliefs of both teachers and learners shape the way they interact with each other within school premises (Rasuli *et al* 2023:65). This research aimed to understand how rural teachers' beliefs about gender shape their relationships with learners.

2.10 SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND THE PROMOTION OF GENDER-NONCONFORMING LEARNERS' RIGHTS

To promote equal and quality education for all, South Africa has signed international development agreements such as the Framework of Action (UNESCO 2015) and the UN's SDGs to advocate for the abolition of unlawful discrimination in and through education (South African DBE 2017). If implemented effectively, the educational policies of South African schools can be powerful tools for promoting the rights of gender-nonconforming learners, as they are anchored in the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 and the Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000). These documents, along with their other intentions, advocate for equality, inclusivity, and non-discrimination based on gender, sex, or sexual orientation. According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), "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". The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act states that "no person may publish, propagate, advocate or communicate words against any person or propagate hatred based on sex, gender and sexual orientation". The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) advocates for an education system that is free from unfair discrimination and intolerance. The National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) promotes the protection of every person against discrimination within or by an education department or educational institution on any grounds whatsoever and recommends that the education system contribute to the holistic development of each learner, including the advancement of democracy and human rights in educational institutions and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Similarly, the National Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) aims to equip learners, regardless of their socio-economic background, race, gender, sex, or physical ability (South African DBE 2011). The principles and practices of social and environmental justice, as well as human rights, are also embedded within the CAPS, as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

To combat discrimination based on gender in and through education in South Africa, frameworks and guidelines based on the aforementioned policies and legislation, such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL), National School Uniform Guidelines, and National Framework for Quality Education, have been developed (Reygan 2019). The CSTL framework consists of six rights-based and inclusive approach pillars that foster safe, protective, supportive, and gender-sensitive school environments to promote equity and equality throughout the school system (Reygan 2019). The National School Uniform Guidelines urge schools to accommodate gender-nonconforming learners when establishing dress code policies (South African DBE 2017). The Rural Education Draft Policy follows principles enshrined in the South African Schools Act of 1996 that aim to promote learners' rights by combatting unfair discrimination in schools (South African DBE 2017). The South African DBE (2016) also mandates schools to have an anti-bullying policy that covers and protects all members of the school community, including gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ learners.

In South African legislation, Acts and frameworks to support and promote gender-nonconforming learners are already in place, as mentioned above. The problem lies

in the implementation stage, where educational stakeholders and gatekeepers are reluctant to enforce or apply the frameworks and guidelines that are designed to protect gender-nonconforming learners (Nichols 2023; Singh & Sewnath 2025; Thani 2016). Consequently, gender-nonconforming learners continue to face discrimination and victimisation in schools, particularly at a social level.

Thani (2016) conducted qualitative research to explore the pronouncements of gender and sexual diversity in the education policies of the South African education system. Thani (2016) discovered that education stakeholders are not adequately implementing policies that promote the rights of gender- and sexually diverse learners in schools. Thani (2016) examined institutional challenges and social and power dynamics through policy analysis and by interviewing officials from the basic education department responsible for the development and implementation of a gender and sexual diversity policy. The study revealed an absence of an accountability mechanism that enhances the practical application of constitutional values that promote gender and sexual diversity in schools (Thani 2016:119). Similarly, Nichols (2023) used qualitative methods to investigate how school principals respond to creating an inclusive school environment for gender- and sexually diverse learners in the Free State and Gauteng provinces of South Africa. Nichols (2023) found that despite numerous policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing the inclusion of LGBTQ+ learners, principals did not comply with any of the policy requirements and responsibilities. The principals willingly ignored the policy requirements (Nichols 2023).

In the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, Singh and Sewnath (2025) conducted a qualitative study to explore teachers' perspectives and responses towards learners of diverse genders and sexualities in a primary school in Durban. They discovered that the teachers had a limited understanding of diverse genders and sexualities due to entrenched heteronormative and moralistic views; as a result, they did not implement any policies to protect gender- and sexually diverse learners. South African studies on the implementation of policies and frameworks that protect gender and sexual diversity in schools support each other. The lack of accountability mechanisms in the South African DoE, as noted by Thani (2016), regarding policy implementation for the protection of gender- and sexually diverse learners, may explain why principals and teachers felt and acted as if they were not obligated to adhere to policy requirements.

This lack of policy implementation, as indicated by the literature discussed above, causes problems for gender-nonconforming learners, as schools remain unsafe environments for them (Bottoman 2021). The implementation of policies that promote the rights of gender-nonconforming learners helps schools to create safe, friendly, and inclusive environments that enhance and promote quality education for all. In line with SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, as well as the legislation and policies designed to protect gender-nonconforming learners, this research acknowledges the need to study gender normativity as a social phenomenon that perpetuates discrimination based on gender and sexuality. This study aimed to work towards the creation of safe learning environments free from gender stereotyping and discrimination, where teachers and learners can build positive relationships to enhance the teaching and learning process.

2.11 CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed in this chapter postulates that gender normativity is a pervasive issue in society and school environments, with compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexuality proliferating. This leads to negative experiences for gender-nonconforming individuals, who struggle to live according to traditional societal standards and norms. The reviewed literature postulates that gender normativity prohibits the acceptance of gender nonconformity, and the implementation of school policies thereby creating hostile and unsafe environments for learners. To dismantle gender normativity in schools, it is necessary to understand teachers' perspectives on gender normativity and to raise their awareness of gender-nonconforming issues. This study employed Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory and intersectionality to explore the dynamics of the phenomenon under investigation.

The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework that formed the basis of this study.

CHAPTER 3:

THEORISING GENDER NORMATIVITY IN SCHOOLS THROUGH BUTLER’S GENDER PERFORMATIVITY THEORY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Lempriere (2019), a theoretical framework serves as a supporting structure for a research study. Butler’s (1990; 1997; 2004) gender performativity theory and intersectionality formed the basis of this study. The purpose of this study was to explore rural teachers’ perceptions of gender and how these perceptions inform teacher-learner relationships. The use of the gender performativity theory helped to explain how teachers expect learners to perform gender in rural school environments. The collected data indicated the types of performative acts and discourses that teachers constructed for learners in these settings. Intersectionality became an important tool in analysing how gender intersects with other social categories such as race, sex, sexuality, class, religion, culture, and social background to shape rural teachers’ perceptions of gender. Understanding teachers’ perceptions of gender and how they are constructed was crucial for this research, as individuals’ views and beliefs shape their behaviour and influence how they expect others around them to behave (Livingstone 2018:602). It was imperative to learn from the participants’ narratives how teachers expected learners to behave concerning gender norms and roles as they interacted daily within school premises. The theoretical and analytical framework applied played a significant role in shaping the research design and methodology, as well as in revealing the study’s findings. This chapter outlines the principles underlying the gender performativity theory and intersectionality. An account of how other scholars have applied the gender performativity theory and intersectionality is also provided. The chapter concludes by linking the gender performativity theory with the intersectionality theoretical framework to demonstrate how the two can enhance the understanding of the studied teachers’ narratives.

3.2 BUTLER’S GENDER PERFORMATIVITY THEORY

The feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) coined the term “gender performativity” in her book titled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler

(1990) argues that being born male or female has no bearing on behaviour; instead, people learn to behave in specific ways to fit in with society. Butler (1990) stipulates that gender is not internal but a performance of acts and gestures that are visible on bodily surfaces. These acts and gestures are performative because they purport to express fabrications created and sustained through discursive means in society (Butler 1990:173). Power structures prioritise the maintenance of gender polarity and the binary; individuals who fail to perform their gender “correctly”, as prescribed by societal norms, therefore encounter discrimination or condemnation from their peers (Butler 1990:178). According to Butler (1990), gender performativity is not a matter of choice; people are obligated to perform social roles that society validates and accepts, fearing ostracism if they transgress and defy societal gender expectations. Through the repetition of these social roles, gender is socially constituted, and the subversion of gender identity within individuals depends on their daily behaviour and practices (Butler 1990:185). Nevertheless, the way individuals’ performativity is enacted can displace or challenge prevailing gender norms. Depending on core values and contextual factors, members of society can establish and reinforce new approaches to performing gender (Butler 1990:185). Expectations of gender performance may therefore vary from place to place and from time to time.

Butler (1997) examined gender performativity in relation to rhetorical and political acts, focusing on speech acts and their consequences. She posits that language, including name-calling and hate speech, creates vulnerability and considers the role of context in speech situations. Butler (2004:48) stipulates that performativity is not solely about speech acts but also encompasses bodily acts. This means that a norm can only remain a norm if it is acted out in social practice and idealised and reinstituted through the daily social rituals of bodily life.

Butler’s (1990; 1997; 2004) gender performativity theory has had a significant influence on gender studies, contemporary political philosophy, ethics, and other academic disciplines. This theory has remained relevant across various fields and has been employed by scholars worldwide to examine issues related to gender and the politics of sexuality, which are evident in every social institution, including educational spaces (Akurugu 2021; Jenkins & Finneman 2018; Hortiguera-Alcala *et al* 2022; Karpinskaia 2017; Ngcobo 2016). In educational contexts, the gender performativity theory is often applied to determine and analyse how gender is performed in specific

situations (Gowlett 2015; Karpinskaia 2017; Ngcobo 2016). For example, Karpinskaia (2017) utilised the gender performativity theory in qualitative research to explore the gender discourses surrounding women and leadership in a public co-educational school in Australia. Karpinskaia (2017) applied the theory to illustrate dominant perspectives on gender roles and how girls enact leadership. The overall aim of Karpinskaia's (2017) study was to investigate a girls' leadership programme that was designed and implemented in a public co-educational school and its influence on female students' perspectives on women in leadership roles. Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory aided Karpinskaia's (2017) study in uncovering what was considered normative behaviour for both genders and how cultural expectations shaped such behaviour. Karpinskaia (2017) discovered that the girls who participated in the leadership programme recognised how gender was performed through appearance and docility. They found themselves navigating conflicting discourses: on one hand, traditional individuals who remained submissive to men by complying with beauty regimes, and on the other, the discourses of strong women leaders and independent thinkers (Karpinskaia 2017:139-140). However, their ability to understand these discursive practices allowed the girls to view women and their roles from various perspectives, which helped them to disrupt clichéd gender stereotypes (Karpinskaia 2017:140). In this context, it is evident that gender was performed differently; some girls conformed to normative gender roles, while others challenged and disrupted established gender discourses associated with masculinity and femininity, such as associating women with docility.

South African scholars have also used Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory to explore experiences of gender in educational institutions. Ngcobo (2016) applied the gender performativity theory in her qualitative study to investigate children's experiences of gender in two primary schools in Pinetown, Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. Ngcobo's (2016) study aimed to learn from children's experiences how gender equality can be promoted in schools. Ngcobo (2016) used Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory to examine how boys and girls constructed gender. Ngcobo's (2016) findings indicate that children were sometimes influenced to conform to dominant gender discourses of masculinity and femininity, which were reinforced by the spaces and places that boys and girls occupied in their schools. The spaces and places that children occupied were largely ascribed to specific gender differences, and they

tended to categorise feminine and masculine qualities into male and female (Ngcobo 2016). Girls and boys were constrained to perform gender in line with preconceived gender expectations, especially during formal learning time. However, some children only conformed to dominant gender discourses during formal schooling and reverted to nonconformity during break times and after school (Ngcobo 2016:192). These findings imply that some learners transgress dominant gender discourses during informal schooling despite being compelled to conform to binary gender discourses during formal learning time by their teachers.

Another South African scholar, Bottoman (2021), employed Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory in a qualitative research study aimed at understanding the lived experiences of transgender learners and how schools respond to their needs. The research was conducted in the Northern Cape and Gauteng provinces, where semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with six young individuals who had recently completed basic education in public schools in these provinces. Bottoman (2021) used the gender performativity theory to explore the relationship between gender identification and occupation. Bottoman (2021) sought to examine how transgender students navigated their masculinity or femininity while participating in school activities. Bottoman's (2021) research illustrates how transgender learners embrace and express their masculinity and femininity in schools where compulsory heteronormativity is prevalent. The study found that such environments may create unfair exclusions and learning barriers for transgender learners (Bottoman 2021). Conversely, transgender learners indicated that they had unique and positive learning experiences that could inform policy development and educational practice, as they reported occasionally taking action against compulsory heteronormativity and transphobia within their school premises (Bottoman 2021:94).

In a nutshell, the studies mentioned above applied the gender performativity theory to explore how students perform gender in educational social institutions (Bottoman 2021; Karpinskaia 2017; Ngcobo 2016). These three studies indicate that gender is performed differently in educational settings. Some students conform to gender binarism, while others do not, despite being exposed to a compulsory heteronormative ethos in their schools.

This study employed the gender performativity theory to explore how teachers expected gender to be performed in rural school settings. It relied on teachers' narrations of their perceptions of gender and experiences to illustrate how gender normativity informed daily gender discourses and teacher-learner interactions in these environments. The gender performativity theory was also applied to unveil how teachers used language to reinforce gender norms and roles, as well as how they responded to gender-nonconforming learners. Teachers' views on how their learners reacted to established gender discourses in rural school settings, including conformity and resistance, and the consequences faced by those who did not conform, were crucial in addressing the main research question of this study. The gender performativity theory was instrumental in achieving the purpose of this research, which was to investigate how gender normativity informs teacher-learner relationships in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.

3.3 INTERSECTIONALITY: EXPLORING SOCIAL CATEGORISATIONS THAT INFORM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF GENDER NORMATIVITY

The term "intersectionality" was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a law professor and social theorist. Intersectionality is a social-theoretical framework that was developed as a contribution to feminist theory that aimed to explain how social structures combine to create multiple burdens and disadvantages for Black women in society (Crenshaw 1989:140). Crenshaw (1989:149) argues that Black women experience different types of marginalisation from both Black men and white women. Intersectionality highlights that power structures are influenced by individuals' social identities. According to Crenshaw (1989), we are assigned to various levels of power structures based on the intersections of our social identities, such as race, class, and gender. By considering both intragroup and intergroup differences, the framework offers a fundamental understanding of societal inequalities (Crenshaw 1989).

Crenshaw continued to expand intersectionality alongside other prominent scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1998; 2011; 2017; 2020). Collins (2000:87) highlights how individuals can easily locate themselves within a major system of oppression but often fail to recognise how their thoughts and actions uphold the subordination of others. In her later work, Collins (2020:124) considers the influence of the intersection of social categorisations and power relations in shaping individuals' ways of thinking and

behaviour, a concept she refers to as “intersectional knowledge production”. This production focuses on how individuals and groups in various social positions within intersecting power relations shape their views and reactions to different experiences of social phenomena (Collins 2020:124). Variations in experience and self-reflection regarding one’s behaviour and that of others can lead to radically different interpretations of social phenomena, which may share similar vocabulary but reflect very different worldviews (Collins 2020:125).

Against this backdrop, this study applied intersectionality to explore how gender, sexuality, race, sex, culture, religion, and social background intersect to shape teachers’ perceptions of gender and their daily interactions with learners within rural school settings, particularly with those learners who are gender nonconforming. This study was deeply concerned with “intersectional knowledge production” in terms of how the aforementioned social categorisations shape teachers’ viewpoints regarding gender beliefs and practices (Collins 2020:124-125). It examined teachers’ constructions of gender and the dynamics of their daily gendered expectations in rural schools when interacting with learners, with the aim of unveiling how the participants’ gender, sexuality, race, sex, culture, religion, and social background influenced their perceptions of gender.

Collins (2019:2) asserts that intersectionality is well on its way to developing into a critical social theory that is capable of addressing current social issues and the changes required to tackle them. Several theorists and scholars, both internationally and in South Africa, have adopted and utilised the intersectionality framework since its development (Msibi 2019; Kumar & Sahoo 2023; Svarstad 2021; López *et al* 2018; Johnson & Fournillier 2023; Lawrence & Nagashima 2020). Msibi (2019:394) attests that intersectionality has recently been employed to investigate the various ways in which multiple social categorisations, such as race, class, gender, and sexual identity, produce distinct and varied experiences for individuals. In research topics related to gender, sexuality, and education, intersectionality has been used to elucidate how identity and social categories intersect to exacerbate inequalities, discrimination, and oppression in educational settings (Lawrence & Nagashima 2020; Msibi 2019).

Lawrence and Nagashima's (2020) study in Japan employed a postculturalist intersectionality framework to explore the professional backgrounds and experiences

related to teaching principles and classroom interactions. A duo-ethnographic approach was utilised, with personal narratives serving as a tool to examine the teachers' professional histories and experiences with teaching principles and classroom interaction. Their study found that the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and native-speaker status affected the professional identities of language teachers and teaching professionals (Lawrence & Nagashima 2020:42).

Msibi (2019) also used intersectionality to illuminate the various ways in which Black male South African teachers who engage in same-sex relationships negotiate and manage their identities in a context deeply tainted by apartheid history. He employed a life history methodology to interview eight male teachers and discovered that those who engaged in same-sex relationships utilised a passing act to navigate their identities within heteronormative school contexts. Msibi (2019) found that culture and religion played significant roles in shaping and regulating the participants' ways of living (Msibi 2019:396). Moreover, Msibi's (2019) study noted that the responses of the interviewed Black male South African teachers were mediated through the intersectional lens of race, gender, culture, and context. The participants were primarily concerned about what society would say or do regarding their diverse sexual identities. According to Msibi (2019), by concealing their sexual identity, the participants aimed to protect their sense of belonging in their community. They also sought to maintain their status in society as "real men" (Msibi 2019:396). Msibi's (2019) research unveiled that social categorisations such as gender, race, culture, religion, and social background influence how people view gender- and sexually diverse individuals in society.

This study applied intersectionality to explore how the intersection of sex, sexuality, gender, race, culture, religion, and social background shapes teachers' perceptions and expectations regarding gender in rural school settings. The application of intersectionality enabled the researcher to explain how teachers construct, enact, reinforce, or challenge gender norms.

3.4 THE LINK BETWEEN GENDER PERFORMATIVITY THEORY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

McShane (2021) views the gender performativity theory and intersectionality as tools that locate and reveal the constructedness and situatedness of gender. These two concepts ground each other because, while intersectionality recognises the value of poststructuralist conceptions of gender as a socially constructed state of being, the gender performativity theory acknowledges the necessity of an intersectional approach to any gender-based analysis (McShane 2021:66). The gender performativity theory rejects the idea that gender is a natural phenomenon, while intersectionality also dismisses the notion that gender exists independently (McShane 2021:66). This suggests that both the gender performativity theory and intersectionality resist the idea that gender is fixed, which makes them closely linked.

In this study, Butler's (1990; 1997; 2004) gender performativity theory was integrated with the intersectionality theoretical framework to examine how teachers' perceptions of gender inform teacher-learner relationships in rural school settings. The objectives of this research included exploring rural school teachers' perceptions of gender normativity, exploring teachers' experiences of gender normativity, investigating how teachers respond to gender nonconformity and exploring the influence of gender normativity on teacher-learner interactions in King Cetshwayo District rural schools. The gender performativity theory and intersectionality complemented each other in this research and provided a robust knowledge base on how gender perceptions are formulated and how these perceptions influence daily teacher-learner interactions regarding gender performance in rural school premises. The application of gender performativity theory and intersectionality allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the studied teachers' narratives of their gender perceptions, experiences and gender performance expectations within their school premises. The two frameworks were helpful in giving a clear picture of the studied teachers' gender beliefs and practices and how they were shaped.

3.5 CONCLUSION

The gender performativity theory and intersectionality theoretical framework underpinned this study. The gender performativity theory was applied to explore how

rural teachers expected learners to perform gender. This theory was used to delve into the participants' narratives regarding their perceptions of gender and how they expected gender to be performed by learners in rural schools. The use of the gender performativity theory allowed for an exploration of the gender discourses established by teachers and how they perceived gender normativity. The rural teachers' language use in facilitating gendered discourses was examined through the application of the gender performativity "speech acts" ideologies. Special attention was also paid to how teachers responded to gender nonconformity in rural school settings. To determine how the teachers' perceptions of gender were shaped, the intersectionality theoretical framework was employed to investigate how the intersection of social categorisations such as race, sex, sexuality, class, religion, culture, and social background influenced their perceptions of gender normativity. To understand how these social categorisations shaped the teachers' gendered worldviews, the constructions of gender by teachers and their experiences of gender normativity were investigated.

CHAPTER 4:

RESEARCHING HOW GENDER NORMATIVITY INFORMS TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS: A FOCUS ON TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3, a theoretical framework was established to examine how teachers' perceptions of gender inform teacher-learner relationships in rural schools. This chapter outlines the research design and methods used to achieve the objectives of this study, as stated in Chapter 1. The study's objectives were formulated based on the aim of exploring how teachers' perceptions of gender are shaped and how these perceptions influence their interactions with learners, particularly those who are gender nonconforming, in rural school settings. A research design that accommodates exploratory research methods was deemed necessary to achieve the study's objectives. An interpretivist epistemological paradigm was chosen, and a qualitative research method was employed, as it provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of gender and the implications of gender normativity in rural school environments through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

This chapter begins by discussing the suitability of the interpretivist epistemological paradigm for this study and how it informed the methodological choices made during the research process. This is followed by an explanation of the research approach and methods used to conduct the study. A discussion of the study's sampling technique, data-collection procedures, and data-analysis methods is provided. This chapter also outlines the strategies implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and explains how ethical considerations were addressed. The chapter concludes with reflections on the researcher's positionality in relation to the study's research process, participants, and findings.

4.2 INTERPRETIVIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM

This research study followed the interpretivist epistemological paradigm. According to this paradigm, knowledge is produced by exploring and comprehending the social environment of the subjects being studied, with a focus on the meanings and

interpretations that are socially constructed by social actors within a given context (Al-Saadi 2014:4). Interpretivism emphasises attaching meanings to perceptions and interpretations of the world around us (Al-Saadi 2014:3). The meanings and interpretations that researchers create are influenced by those of the research participants (Al-Saadi 2014:4). Interpretivism centres on the idea that the social world is subjective, as it is constructed by human beings' typologies, concepts, theories, and beliefs (Lebow 2022:53). The term "epistemology" comes from the ancient Greek verb *episteme*, which means to know and internalise something very well through experience (Dieronitou 2014:5). Epistemology is a theory that deals with knowledge, including how and where it is obtained (Dunk-West & Saxton 2024; Omodan 2024).

An interpretivist epistemological paradigm was applied to this study, with the focus on how rural teachers' perceptions of gender are formulated and how their understanding of gender is constructed within their social context. This research study considered the socially constructed meanings and interpretations of gender by rural teachers to produce knowledge of how gender normativity informs teacher-learner interactions in rural schools.

The participants' typologies, concepts, theories, and beliefs about the studied phenomenon anchored the findings of this study. How the participants classified learners according to gender, their beliefs about gender norms and roles, as well as expectations regarding gender performance in rural school premises, played an important role in understanding their perceptions of gender normativity and its implications for teacher-learner relationships. Against this backdrop, it was necessary to apply a research method that aligned with the needs of the interpretivist epistemological paradigm. The study therefore followed a qualitative research approach, which was deemed the most appropriate for effectively exploring the participants' meanings, experiences, and interpretations of the phenomenon under study (Hammond & Wellington 2021:107). The application of qualitative research in this study is explained in the following section.

4.3 A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH TO TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY

Adu and Miles (2023:62) argue that a qualitative research approach is most suitable when a researcher is collecting non-numerical data, as it helps to address exploratory research questions. Dunk-West and Saxton (2024:51) stipulate that the qualitative research method can delve deeply into complicated human experiences and phenomena while offering a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon that centres on the participants' voices. Considering the nature of this study and its focus on exploring teachers' perspectives and experiences within their rural social context, a qualitative research design allowed for an in-depth understanding of how the participants' perspectives are shaped and applied in their daily lives as they interact with learners.

Creswell (2013) identifies five main qualitative methods: the case study approach, ethnographic approach, grounded theory approach, narrative approach, and phenomenological approach. This study employed the narrative approach, as its data relied on the rural teachers' narratives of their perceptions and experiences of gender normativity. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used in this study, which proved to be quite useful in allowing the teachers to provide detailed insight into their views and experiences regarding the studied phenomenon (Adu & Miles 2023). In-depth interviews helped to unpack how the participants viewed gender and how their perspectives were formulated. Open-ended questions were beneficial, as they allowed the participants to reveal the causes of gender normativity in rural schools and its effects on teacher-learner interactions on school premises. The following section discusses the method used to select the participants for the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

4.4 SAMPLING METHOD AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Hammond and Wellington (2021:107) suggest that an interpretivist epistemological study is more effective when implemented on a small scale. Dunk-West and Saxton (2024) stipulate that researchers who engage in qualitative research aim to gather rich, detailed data from a small sample size. Sampling is a technique used by researchers to select a relatively smaller number of representative individuals from a

predefined population to participate in research as data sources (Sharma 2017:748). To select the sample for this study, a purposive sampling technique was employed. This technique is a non-probability sampling method based on the participants' perceived informational value in a study (Polit & Beck 2017). McCombes (2019) stipulates that non-probability sampling is more suitable for exploratory research, where the aim is not to test a hypothesis but to develop an initial understanding of the studied population. This study was exploratory in nature as it sought to develop an initial understanding of perceptions of gender normativity. Non-probability sampling was therefore deemed the most suitable method. Sharma (2017:751) argues that the purposive sampling method relies on the researcher's judgement when selecting participants. Alvi (2016:30) suggests that predefined criteria must be utilised to select participants. Researchers must apply their own judgement to establish criteria for participant selection.

The criteria used to select participants for this research are outlined below:

- The teachers were employed by the South African DoE in the King Cetshwayo District during the duration of the study.
- Teachers had at least two years of teaching experience in King Cetshwayo District rural schools.
- Both female and male teachers who matched the above criteria had to show their willingness to participate in the study.

At the beginning of the data-collection process, the sample consisted of 16 participants: eight primary school teachers and eight secondary school teachers from rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District. However, two male participants who had consented to be interviewed withdrew and cancelled their interviews at the last minute. Those who withdrew were not replaced, as data saturation was confirmed after the 14th interview. Ultimately, the sample comprised 14 teachers: seven primary school teachers and seven secondary school teachers from rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District. The ages of the participants ranged from 28 to 50 years, and their teaching experience varied from three to 25 years. All the participants were formally employed by the South African DoE in rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District during the course of the study.

4.4.1 Profile of the participants

Table 4.1 provides an overview of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to facilitate the principle of privacy and confidentiality.

Table 4.1: Participant profile

Participant	Age	Gender	Primary or secondary school	Teaching qualification	Teaching experience (years)	Grew up in rural areas
P1: Mpilo	42	Male	Secondary	PGCE	15	Yes
P2: Mpume	40	Female	Secondary	BEd	13	Yes
P3: Langa	41	Male	Primary	BEd	19	No
P4: Mandla	50	Male	Secondary	BEd	14	Yes
P5: Nkanyezi	40	Female	Primary	BEd	10	No
P6: Phila	28	Male	Secondary	PGCE	5	Yes
P7: Phiwo	36	Male	Primary	Dip. in Edu	10	Yes
P8: Sipho	43	Female	Primary	Dip. in Edu	11	No
P9: Buhle	32	Female	Primary	BEd: ECD	3	Yes
P10: Liya	43	Female	Secondary	BEd	13	Yes
P11: Nandi	40	Female	Secondary	BEd: FET	17	Yes
P12: Musa	48	Female	Primary	BEd	25	Yes
P13: Bongiwe	33	Female	Primary	BEd Hons	10	Yes
P14: Msizi	49	Female	Secondary	BEd Hons	15	Yes

PGCE: Postgraduate Certificate in Education; BEd: Bachelor of Education; Dip. in Edu: Diploma in Education; ECD: Early Childhood Development; FET: Further Education and Training; Hons: Honours.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

Adu and Miles (2023:366) encourage qualitative researchers to utilise interviews when collecting data, as they are the most appropriate means to explore the feelings and experiences of participants. In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed for data collection. They enabled the teachers to articulate their perceptions of gender normativity and to provide accounts of their feelings and experiences about interacting with gender-nonconforming learners on school premises. An in-depth interview is a conversation between a researcher and a participant that is designed to elicit depth and provide relevant information on a topic of interest (Guest, Namey & Mitchell 2013:113). The semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers helped to unveil their views on processes, norms, belief systems, interpretations, motivations, and expectations as they engaged with learners of different genders on a daily basis (Guest *et al* 2013:116). This method facilitated the collection of rich, detailed information on gender normativity and its implications for teacher-learner

relationships, as the interviewing process led to the formulation of new themes and allowed for a broader understanding of the phenomenon (Groenland & Dana 2019:232).

According to Groenland and Dana (2019:241), the depth of an interview is determined by the interviewer's skills, where depth refers to a thorough understanding of why a person holds particular views, opinions, or evaluations, as well as why they exhibit certain behaviours. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, using an interview guide to facilitate preparedness, which enhanced the depth of the interviews. Following Marvasti's (2004:22) and Groenland and Dana's (2019:228) questioning techniques, open-ended questions based on gender normativity and related concepts were posed, which allowed the participants to share their perceptions and experiences. This approach encouraged the participants to provide more relevant information about the phenomenon under study.

Marvasti (2004:22) suggests that qualitative research questions should be designed to probe deeper layers of respondents' minds than the presumed surface level of their feelings. To create an interview guide, both international and local literature was reviewed, and specific themes were identified and incorporated into the guide (see Appendix A). The interview guide comprised Sections A to F. Section A included biographical questions to provide a clear understanding of the participants' backgrounds and personal and social identities. Given that the study adopted an intersectional theoretical standpoint, it was essential to include biographical questions to identify the participants' various social categorisations, including age, sex, gender, culture, religion, and social background, and to relate these factors to how they influenced the teachers' perceptions and experiences of gender normativity. Section B contained questions that were designed to explore how the participants perceived gender normativity based on their constructions and conceptualisations of gender and gender roles. Section C comprised questions that probed into teachers' experiences of gender normativity. The participants came from diverse backgrounds and had different identities, contexts, positions, and experiences, all of which affected how they understood and interpreted the studied phenomenon. Section D contained questions that explored how teachers in the studied rural schools responded to gender nonconformity, while Section E facilitated an investigation into how gender normativity

influenced teacher-learner interactions. Section F accommodated contributions and questions from the participants.

Before conducting the interviews, information sheets containing the details of the study (see Appendix C) were shared with the participants through the school's administration office, with the permission of the school heads. The participants had the opportunity to seek clarification if they did not understand any part of the information provided. Once the participants comprehended what participation in the study entailed, they were asked to sign informed consent forms (see Appendix D) to indicate that they were fully informed about the study. Additionally, the participants were asked to consent to the interviews being recorded (see Appendix B), with assurance that the recordings and their personal information would be protected.

The interviews were conducted face to face in private places that were chosen by the participants after the researcher had suggested interview locations. Most interviews were conducted in the participants' areas of work (rural schools) in the teachers' classes during late afternoons after school, when the learners were gone. Some interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, and a few interviews were conducted in the researcher's home. Most interviews were conducted on Fridays since the participants and the researcher finished work early on Fridays, and most participants opted to be interviewed on a Friday.

The interviewing process began at the end of August 2023 after the KwaZulu-Natal DoE granted the researcher permission to conduct research in public schools. Some interviews were conducted in September and October 2023, during which the researcher adhered to the DoE's restrictions that prohibited research interviews during Term 4, when teachers and learners were occupied with examinations. The interviews resumed in January 2024 and continued until April 2024. The average length of the interviews was one hour and seven minutes, with the shortest session lasting 46 minutes and the longest lasting one hour and 29 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, as all the participants were qualified professional teachers and fluent in the language.

A total of 14 teachers were interviewed, and the data collected and analysed indicated that data saturation was achieved. After the 12th interview, repetition in the data became apparent, and no new themes emerged from the participants' responses.

However, the researcher decided to continue with the interviews to confirm that no new themes would arise from the collected data. After the 14th interview, it was confirmed that data saturation had indeed been achieved, as the participants were not providing new insights. The initial plan outlined in the research proposal was to interview 16 participants, but this changed upon realising that data saturation had been reached after the 14th participant. Consequently, data for this research were collected from 14 teachers who lived and worked in the King Cetshwayo District rural areas.

4.6 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

To analyse the data collected for this research, the thematic analysis method was employed. Braun and Clarke (2012:2) view thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset”. According to Fona (2024:132), a thematic analysis approach is flexible, as it can be applied by researchers with different epistemological and ontological views. Thematic analysis is also a user-friendly approach for new researchers because it is less technical and easier to apply (Braun & Clarke 2006). By using thematic analysis, researchers can identify and understand the meanings and experiences that have been gathered or shared (Braun & Clarke 2012:2). Researchers should aim to identify important themes in the data and use these themes to address and answer their research questions (Maguire & Delahunt 2017:3353). To develop refined themes that were significant in answering the research questions of this study, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were adopted, which include familiarising oneself with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The following paragraphs explain how the researcher conducted thematic analysis to analyse the data for this research.

First, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher familiarised herself with the data by listening to the recordings from the interviews and transcribing the data verbatim. The data were manually transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, which were stored on the researcher’s electronic, password-protected Google Drive. The researcher then took the time to read through the transcripts extensively. While reviewing the transcripts, the researcher wrote notes and made annotations using the comment function in Word. The researcher employed the open-

coding approach to assign codes to the data and assigned labels that were likely to be relevant to the research questions. The researcher highlighted key sentences in the digital transcriptions and typed the codes in the margins. The generated codes were then compiled into a table in a Microsoft Word document (see Table 4.2), which was also stored in a password-protected electronic file on the drive for further analysis. In this case, the researcher focused on the participants' meanings, interpretations, and experiences of gender normativity. Table 4.2 shows examples of the codes assigned to the collected data.

Table 4.2: Example of the coding process and the codes that were assigned to the data

Quotations from the transcripts	Codes assigned
P2: "As a teacher, when you look at gender roles, I do believe that there are tasks or things that we expect girls to do. And there are tasks that we expect boys to do."	Gendered expectations Gender roles Beliefs
P4: "When I grew up, some tasks were assigned to me as a boy child. For example, the herding of cattle. It was taboo to find a girl herding cattle. It was just not normal. So, it was assigned to me as a boy. I was supposed to do that. Milking of cows was also for us boys. It was not for girls. It was for boys to do that. Ploughing, using the ox to draw the plough, was assigned to the boys as well."	Gender socialisation Beliefs
P1: "This is what I think I've explained previously; the school has a school policy. The policy means all learners, irrespective of gender, have to abide by the school policy. So, if the school policy says a boy must put on trousers and a shirt, I don't expect a boy to put on trousers and a blouse. So, if he does that, I have to confront him and say: 'You are not putting on the proper school uniform'..."	Gendered expectations School policies
P14: "It was a completely different scenario. We grew up under the custody of parents and grandparents who strongly believed in culture. In African culture, girls are made to do all the house chores. When you are taking care of the younger siblings, the caring of babies is done by you, the cooking, the washing, and you are supposed to put on clothes in a certain way; you are supposed to sit in a certain way. Even your choice of words must show that you are female."	Beliefs Gender roles Gender socialisation

After assigning codes to the data in the transcripts, the researcher examined the developed codes and identified meaningful patterns from the collected data. During this process, themes and sub-themes were constructed. Six themes were developed from the data. Themes 1, 2, and 3 are presented and analysed in Chapter 5, while Themes 4, 5, and 6 are presented and analysed in Chapter 6. The identification of the themes was done in light of the research questions of this study (Fona 2024:135). Theme 1 focuses on rural teachers' conceptions of gender and answers Research Question 1. Theme 2 focuses on rural teachers' experiences and constructions of

gender and answers Research Question 2. Theme 3 focuses on teachers' responses to gender nonconformity in rural school premises, which answers Research Question 3. Themes 4 and 5 address how gender normativity informs daily teacher-learner gendered discourses and interactions in rural schools, and they answer Research Question 4. Theme 6 sheds some light on how teachers' perceptions of gender affect the establishment of positive teacher-learner relationships in rural schools. It addresses the crucial part of the main research question by revealing how gender normativity inhibits rural school teachers from facilitating positive relationships with gender nonconforming learners. The types of teacher-learner relationships that were identified in the studied rural schools are also discussed under this theme.

In the next step, the researcher reviewed the developed themes, verified them, and made modifications and adjustments where necessary. As postulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), the themes were checked against the data transcriptions and recordings. The researcher compared the themes with relevant extracts and then assessed whether the themes were relevant, consistent, and logical. The validity of the themes was also evaluated; unsupported themes were deleted, while meaningful themes were merged or separated. Table 4.3 presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this stage of the data analysis.

Table 4.3: Developed themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Rural school teachers' conceptions of gender	• Rural school teachers' understanding of gender. • Rural school teachers' perceptions of culture and religion in relation to gender.
2. Constructions of gender in rural spaces	• Growing up in rural areas: Rural teachers' experiences of gender socialisation. • Intersection of gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and social background in shaping gender-normative ideologies.
3. Teachers' responses to gender nonconformity in rural schools	• Presence of gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools and teachers' responses. • Teachers' understanding and challenges in supporting gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools.
4. Teachers' gendered expectations in rural schools	• Gender expectations and performance in rural schools. • Learners' adherence to gender norms in rural schools.
5. Effects of gender normativity on daily teacher-learner interactions in rural schools	• Teachers' gendered language interrupts positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools. • Teachers' lack of understanding of gender nonconformity interrupts positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools.

Themes	Sub-themes
	Teachers' violations of gender-nonconforming learners' rights interrupt positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools.
6. Effects of gender normativity on teacher-learner relationships in rural schools	- Challenges in teachers' fulfilment of their social roles to facilitate positive teacher-learner relationships in rural schools. - Types of teacher-learner relationships in rural schools.

The next step was to review and analyse the themes. The researcher focused on the meanings, boundaries, and titles of each theme (Braun & Clarke 2006). Each theme was named, explained, and described in a few sentences. The researcher reviewed the names of the themes by revisiting the research questions and familiarising herself with the notes and codes on the transcripts to ensure that the remaining themes effectively addressed the research questions. The final step involved preparing a report, which the researcher presents in Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation. Table 4.4 contains the final themes developed for this research study, employing a thematic approach to data analysis, along with a brief explanation of what each theme covers.

Table 4.4: Final themes and brief explanation

Final themes	Brief explanation
Theme 1: Rural school teachers' conceptions of gender	Theme 1 consists of data on the views that rural school teachers hold on gender. The understandings and beliefs of what gender is and what they think about different gender expressions are explained according to the findings in this theme.
Theme 2: Constructions of gender in rural spaces	Theme 2 consists of data on the factors and experiences that shape rural school teachers' perceptions of gender.
Theme 3: Teachers' responses to gender nonconformity in rural schools	Theme 3 comprises data on how rural teachers respond to gender nonconformity in schools.
Theme 4: Teachers' gendered expectations in rural schools	Theme 4 consists of data that reveal how teachers expect learners to perform gender in rural schools. Data on how learners are expected to act, talk, dress, and behave in rural schools, and the analysis thereof, form the basis of Theme 4.
Theme 5: Effects of gender normativity on daily teacher-learner interactions in rural schools	Theme 5 discusses data on how gender normativity disrupts daily teacher-learner interactions. How the use of gendered language, lack of understanding of gender nonconformity by teachers, and the violation of gender-nonconforming learners' rights inhibit positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools is discussed in this theme.
Theme 6: Effects of gender normativity on teacher-learner relationships in rural schools	Theme 6 comprises data on how gender normativity inhibits the establishment of positive teacher-learner relationships in rural schools. Insights into how the rural teachers' perceptions of gender limit them from performing their social roles towards learners to foster positive teacher-learner relationships, as well as the types of teacher-

	learner relationships that were identified in the studied rural schools, are outlined in this theme.
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4.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Polit and Beck (2014) define ethics as moral principles that protect the rights of participants by guiding researchers' behaviour during a research study. Hammond and Wellington (2021:72) assert that research should be ethical in its conduct, purpose, respect shown to others, spirit, and in how it is reported. This implies that research ethics must be adhered to from the beginning of a study, when a researcher decides to engage in the research, to the final step of the research process. In this study, the researcher observed and applied research ethics throughout the research process. Before collecting data, an ethical clearance letter was issued by the University of South Africa's (UNISA) College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (see Appendix E), and permission to conduct research in rural schools in the King Cetshwayo District was granted by the KwaZulu-Natal DoE (see Appendix F). The research ethics that were considered and followed throughout the study are discussed in detail below.

4.7.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

According to Babbie (2016:62), participants must understand the procedures and potential risks of the study and offer their voluntary participation in the study. Researchers are obliged to inform participants about the research in its full context, including its procedures and implications (Kazdin 2022:4130). The final sample for this study consisted of 14 rural school teachers who, after comprehending the context of the study, volunteered to participate without coercion. The researcher provided adequate information about the study to the participants through an information sheet (see Appendix C), which was distributed via the schools' administration offices with the permission of the school heads. The information sheet outlined that the study focused on gender normativity in education and its implications for teacher-learner relationships. It stated that the study's purpose was to contribute to the development of intervention procedures that foster the creation of gender-sensitive school environments that promote equal and quality education for all. The participants were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without facing any consequences for their decision to withdraw. Those who

volunteered to take part in the study after understanding its context were asked to sign consent forms (see Appendix D). The participants were assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be maintained by the researcher.

4.7.2 Confidentiality and privacy

Kang and Hwang (2023) assert that confidentiality is crucial as it fosters respect between the researcher and the participants, which positively impacts the data-collection process. Confidentiality enhances autonomy by promoting participants' feelings of control and freedom of expression during data collection (Kang & Hwang 2023:5). Babbie (2021:67) states that confidentiality in a research project is upheld when the researcher promises not to publicly disclose the participants' private information. In this regard, the researcher provided a thorough briefing on confidentiality and privacy to the participants, assuring them that their sensitive personal information shared during the semi-structured in-depth interviews, such as their names and personal details, would not be revealed to the public. The participants were informed that their names would not be publicly displayed, even though they had provided their real names to the researcher. The participants were promised that the researcher would use pseudonyms in the research report; this commitment was fulfilled. During the interview process, confidentiality and privacy were maintained by conducting the interviews in private, quiet rooms in some rural schools, the participants' homes, and the researcher's home. The researcher made it clear to the participants that a suitable interview venue was required to facilitate private conversations. The participants were requested to choose their preferred location. After data collection, confidentiality and privacy were upheld by storing the data recordings and transcripts in password-protected folders on Google Drive to ensure that no unauthorised individuals could access the collected data or the participants' personal information. The Google Drive folders containing data for this research will be deleted once this dissertation has been examined and approved.

4.7.3 Beneficence and non-maleficence

According to UNISA (2016:11), research should not cause harm to participants or any other individuals. Strydom (2011:115) argues that it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to take all reasonable precautions to prevent participants from

experiencing physical or psychological harm as a result of a research project. This study was classified as medium-risk research; the researcher therefore arranged psychological services to support participants who might be affected by the research process. However, there were no indications of harm experienced by the participants. To uphold the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, the researcher respected the participants' feelings and interests, for example, by allowing them to choose the interview venue so that they would feel valued and free to express their thoughts. The researcher also ensured respect for the participants' views during the interviews, made them feel at ease by asking interview questions in a friendly manner, and avoided interrupting them while they provided their responses.

Adams, Allen and Flack (2022:123) stipulate that the principle of beneficence requires researchers to maximise the benefits of their research. The benefits of this research were communicated to the participants during the sampling and data-collection stages. This research is most beneficial to teachers and learners, as it raises awareness of the implications of gender normativity and how it can be eradicated to facilitate gender inclusivity in schools. Additionally, this study benefits policymakers and the South African DoE through its recommendations and insights, which include teacher training strategies and the enhancement of school gender policies.

4.8 STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO ENSURE THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Trustworthiness refers to the quality, truthfulness, and authenticity of findings in qualitative research (Cypress 2017:254). It also relates to the degree of trust or confidence that readers can have in the data-collection methods and research findings (Polit & Beck 2014). For a study to be considered credible by readers, researchers should establish the necessary protocols and procedures (Amankwaa 2016). Factors such as the smaller sample size and potential participant bias pose as potential limitations that affect the trustworthiness of the study. Since this study relied on the teacher's narrations that were acquired through semi-structured interviews from a small sample size, the researcher ensured that ways to achieve trustworthiness were implemented throughout this research study. The researcher focused on establishing credibility, reliability, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to ensure the current research's trustworthiness.

4.8.1 Credibility

According to Stahl and King (2020:26), the credibility of a study entails how congruent its findings are with reality. Polit and Beck (2014) postulate that the credibility of a study entails the degree to which readers can have confidence in the truth and accuracy of its results. Some techniques used to establish credibility in research include prolonged engagement with participants, peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling (Connelly 2016; Stahl & King 2020). To establish the credibility of this study, the researcher ensured prolonged engagement with the participants. The researcher dedicated sufficient time to conduct the interviews and focused on building trust and rapport. The interviews were conducted over six months, with mostly Friday afternoons utilised, as the participants indicated that they preferred this day after their work sessions. The researcher ensured that the participants were free to explore their perspectives through the use of open-ended and follow-up questions, which allowed for the capture of rich, detailed data. Peer debriefing was another strategy applied to maintain the credibility of this study. In addition to acquiring permission from the relevant research boards and following their guidelines, all research procedures were checked and verified by an institutional supervisor, who is also a prominent researcher in the field of sociology.

4.8.2 Reliability and dependability

Thyer (2010:356) defines reliability as the degree to which data-collection and data-analysis procedures produce consistent and stable results in research. Noble and Smith (2015:34) emphasise the importance of the appropriateness of the methods used in research to reach findings when assessing the reliability of a study. Connelly (2016) indicates that reliability is akin to dependability, although the understanding of stability in data depends on the nature of the study. Dependability is described as the stability of data over time (Polit & Beck 2014). Ahmed (2024) states that dependability can be achieved through rigorous documentation and the establishment of an audit trail. An audit trail involves recording crucial phases, as well as theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions, in addition to a researcher's evolving thoughts during the project (Carcary 2020).

To establish the reliability and dependability of this study, semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. The researcher prepared sufficiently for the interviews before meeting the participants and ensured that she had all the necessary backup tools for the sessions. For example, the researcher made sure to have two fully charged smartphones for recording the interviews and a journal to note important details of the study, such as the date and time of the interviews, events that occurred during the sessions, and reflective thoughts about the interviews. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The audio files, transcripts, and the researcher's journal were all essential resources during and after the data-analysis process, as they were used to verify the data against the findings.

4.8.3 Confirmability

Connelly (2016) defines confirmability as the degree to which research findings are consistent and can be repeated. Some of the techniques employed to achieve confirmability include peer debriefing, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail (Ahmed 2024; Connelly 2016). To establish confirmability, the researcher made it a daily practice to listen to the audio recordings of the interviews and read the transcripts to ensure thorough transcription. Furthermore, every step of the process, from data collection and analysis to the interpretation of findings, was guided and confirmed by the research supervisor. Peer debriefing was also utilised to establish confirmability, with the supervisor reviewing the field notes and providing feedback in the capacity of a fellow researcher. Also, the researcher was privileged to be a finalist in the UNISA 2024 Showcase Innovation Competition, where she had the opportunity to present the process and findings of the research. The researcher received immediate feedback and advice from the judges and experienced scholars and researchers who facilitated the competition. This feedback confirmed that the research methods and data-collection techniques employed were effective in producing detailed findings.

4.8.4 Transferability

Polit and Beck (2014) explain transferability as the extent to which research findings can be useful to individuals in other settings. Qualitative inquiry aims to enhance understanding of the studied phenomena by transferring findings from one context to

another (Stahl & King 2020:27). Ahmed (2024) stipulates that transferability can be achieved through comprehensive and detailed explanations of the data-collection and data-analysis processes. To establish transferability in this study, the researcher reviewed literature related to gender normativity in schools to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Both Global North and Global South literature were explored to comprehend the status quo of gender normativity in schools around the world (see Chapter 2). Additionally, the data-collection steps and experiences are described in detail in this chapter, covering the research design, research method, sampling method, data-collection method, and data-analysis process of this study. The specifics of where and how interviews were conducted, as well as the social and cultural contexts surrounding data collection, are discussed to provide readers with an understanding of the research setting.

4.9 RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY¹

According to Soedirgo and Glas (2020:528), researchers are instructed to be reflexive in examining the effects of their social standing on their research processes in order to address positionality in their studies. Throughout this research, I had to constantly reflect on my social standing and traditional cultural beliefs to ensure that they did not interfere with the research processes and the interpretation of the collected data. I am a Black, middle-aged, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual female who was born and raised in Zimbabwe, a conservative, traditional, and religious country where the gender binary is culturally and politically considered “normal”, while trans and nonbinary/genderqueer individuals face severe discrimination (Evans & Mawere 2022; Machingura & Kalizi 2024; Mkhize & Mambondiani 2023). After immigrating to South Africa and having been in the teaching profession for 17 years, I became interested in researching the issues that hinder the achievement of quality and equal education in Africa. In my quest for knowledge, I discovered that gender discrimination is a major problem experienced in African schools and beyond. Consequently, I decided to explore gender normativity as the primary cause of gender discrimination in schools, with the aim of eradicating it to foster better acceptance of gender-nonconforming learners who are predominantly discriminated against in educational settings. This

¹ This section is written in the first person to facilitate a personal account.

automatically entails that this research study advocates for the inclusion of gender-nonconforming learners, which may include transgender, gender-diverse, and sexually diverse individuals in schools. This position seems to conflict with the core values of my social background. However, as I embarked on this research journey, I reflected on my religious and traditional belief systems, as well as my identity in society concerning gender, to ensure that these factors did not affect the research processes of this study.

Reflexivity is an ongoing process throughout an entire research project, and researchers should pay extra attention to personal and interpersonal factors, as well as to methodological and contextual factors that influence the study being conducted (Olmos-Vega *et al* 2022). To reduce bias considering traditional and religious beliefs, I had to choose an appropriate research design for the study, which was the interpretivist epistemological paradigm. According to the interpretivist epistemological paradigm, all knowledge about studied phenomena is not intrinsically formulated by researchers but is created by attaching meanings to the perceptions and interpretations of the participants (Al-Saadi 2014:3). Adhering to the principles of an interpretivist epistemological paradigm served as a tool for reducing bias during the data-collection and data-analysis processes. I successfully relied on the teachers' narratives to produce knowledge on gender normativity in rural schools and its impact on teacher-learner relationships.

Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas and Caricativo (2017:426) state that reflexivity helps researchers to acknowledge the changes brought about in themselves through the research process and how these changes affect their studies. During data collection, I had to consider that I had acquired some related knowledge about the phenomenon under study during the literature review. For example, I understood in detail what gender discrimination entailed in the context of this research. During the interviews, I noticed that some participants used "inappropriate" language to discriminate against gender-nonconforming learners, which I had encountered in the literature review. In these instances, I had to reflect on my position as a researcher, taking the participants' perspectives as they were and analysing them objectively without adaptations. For example, during the interviews, when the participants described gender nonconformity as "abnormal", "evil", or "demonic", I quickly realised that it was not my place to correct them or indicate that I held different perspectives. I maintained positive facial

expressions to allow the participants to express their views freely and to ensure that they felt comfortable giving their honest, unbiased responses.

Maake (2021) highlights how reflexivity can be a complex process for a first-time researcher studying a population with which they are affiliated. Throughout the research process, I reflected on my position as a teacher living and working in the King Cetshwayo District while conducting a study on fellow teachers in the same district. I ensured that my prior interactions with the participants and their environment did not influence the data-collection and -interpretation process. Although I reside in the urban area of the King Cetshwayo District, the rural areas are in close proximity. Schools in both rural and urban areas of the King Cetshwayo District engage in sports fixtures at times. I had encountered individuals resembling the sample group of this study and had visited rural schools for sports fixtures, as well as friends who reside in the areas where the study took place. Critical reflexivity enabled me to mitigate the impact of my prejudices and limit the influence of my perceptions on the research findings.

As a novice researcher, I reflected in my journal after each interview to identify ways to improve my interviewing skills. For example, the first interview was the shortest of all, which prompted me to assess my interview techniques. I realised that I needed to dedicate more time to preparing for the interviews. I learned that arriving early at the interview venue allowed me to settle in before starting the process, which helped me to engage more deeply with the participants. I also revisited relevant literature on conducting interviews, and my supervisor provided advice on refining my interview skills during the peer debriefing process, using insights from my reflexive journal.

Lastly, during the data-analysis process, I reflected on my status as a beginner in data interpretation and considered spending time reviewing literature on analysing data using the chosen approach, which is recommended for novice researchers (Braun & Clarke 2006; Fona 2024). Reflexivity proved to be a powerful tool that enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings of this study.

4.10 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the research techniques and processes. The chapter therefore described the methodology used in the data-collection and data-analysis phases of the research project. The interpretivist epistemological paradigm

served as the foundation for the research design. The research questions were successfully addressed through a qualitative approach that captured the participants' narratives regarding their perceptions and experiences. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews facilitated the collection of rich data, which provided a comprehensive picture of the participants' perspectives on gender normativity and gendered experiences on school premises. These interviews were a valuable source of information during the data-collection process, as they allowed the participants to discuss their experiences working with learners of different genders, as well as their views on the phenomenon under study. This chapter also described the strategies employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness, alongside ethical concerns such as protecting the participants and maintaining their confidentiality. The chapter concluded with the researcher's reflection on her reflexivity towards the research and data-analysis procedures, which indicated how the impact of potential researcher bias on the study and the participants was managed, as well as the influence that the study and the participants had on the researcher.

The next chapter presents the study's findings.

CHAPTER 5:

RURAL SCHOOL TEACHERS' SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 discussed the research paradigm and methods used to conduct this study. This chapter primarily engages with the findings and analysis related to teachers' constructions and conceptions of gender normativity. It focuses on the participants' narratives regarding their social constructions of gender and how these constructions influence their understanding of gender. During the interviews, most participants indicated that they grew up in families where gender normativity prevailed, with roles specifically allocated based on traditional belief systems that expected boys and girls to act and behave in gender-normative ways. In most participants' families, femininity in girls and masculinity in boys were nurtured and prioritised, as girls were trained to be feminine while boys were groomed to become masculine.

A few participants indicated that their families did not emphasise or impose gender-normative ideologies on them. This research suggests that teachers' social backgrounds, religion, culture, gender, sex, and race impacted their understanding of gender, which in turn influenced how they interacted with learners at school. The chapter begins with a discussion of how the participants' conceptions of gender are constructed. It then focuses on their responses to gender nonconformity in rural school settings. The participants' understanding of gender nonconformity and the challenges that rural school teachers face in supporting gender-nonconforming learners are also discussed. A conclusion is provided at the end of the chapter.

5.2 THEME 1: RURAL SCHOOL TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER

Butler (1990) views gender as a social construct, where the performance of roles in society plays a significant role in the development of gender identity. In this study, most participants defined gender based on the sex assigned to a person at birth, while a few related gender to the capacity to fulfil societal roles. An outline of the participants' understanding of gender follows.

5.2.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Rural school teachers' understanding of gender

In line with the gender performativity theory, which formed the basis of this study, gender is a social role performed by individuals and validated by fellow members of society (Butler 1990; Morgenroth & Ryan 2018). Butler (1990) stipulates that gender is neither fixed nor universal, but depends on the current cultural framework in which it is enacted. Gender is created and sustained through discursive means in society (Butler 1990). This study found that most participants viewed biological attributes of maleness and femaleness as the foundation of gender identity, which they perceived in binary terms. Their responses, when asked to define their understanding of gender, indicated a biological perspective centred on being born with male or female private parts. Below is how Mpilo and Phiwo defined gender:

“Gender concerns who you are in terms of being male or female. For me, a boy is a male individual who happens to be straight. A girl is someone who is biologically female, a straight female. That’s my take” (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

“Gender is about being a boy or a girl. I can say this is a boy because of his physical appearance, mainly his private parts. The same applies to a girl. Girls have different private parts from boys and do not have the physical strength. Boys grow up to be fathers, whilst girls grow up to be mothers. It’s also with the body because usually the body is built differently. That is true. Even in sports, girls don’t compete with boys just because of the capabilities they have. Girls and boys are built differently; that’s gender” (Phiwo, 6 October 2023).

Mpilo and Phiwo described gender in biological terms, defining it as being born with male or female private parts. Mpilo stated that a boy is a straight male, while a girl is a straight female. He framed gender within a heteronormative principle, suggesting that those born male should be attracted to females, while those born female should be attracted to males, implying that both girls and boys should be straight. Similarly, Phiwo defined gender in terms of biological makeup, specifically being born with male or female private parts. He further stipulated that boys grow up to be fathers while girls become mothers. Like Mpilo, Phiwo connected his definition of gender to heterosexual principles. Both Mpilo’s and Phiwo’s views suggest that they regarded gender, sex, and sexual orientation as inextricably linked. They both addressed the issue of gender as comprising biological makeup (sex organs) and sexual orientation, and implied that

males and females should be straight. Additionally, they linked gender to heteronormative gender roles. The conceptualisations of gender by Mpilo and Phiwo align with Butler's (1990) argument that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are often seen as fundamental characteristics that are intimately intertwined.

Although some participants portrayed their understanding of gender in heteronormative binary terms, others indicated that they believed gender is constructed and influenced by the performance of societal gender norms assigned to individuals within a specific context. For example, Phila viewed gender in relation to the "rules" provided by society, which are based on one's sex:

"Let me start with gender. My understanding of gender is that you are given the rules by the society where you grow up, and these rules are based on your sex, whether you're a boy or a girl. For a girl, the same thing. A boy should usually be someone rough, strong, and brave, while a girl is tender and caring. My description is also based on the physical, biological, and genetic makeup. So, as long as someone has the male genetic organ, the sexual organ, to me, that's a boy. Alright" (Phila, 29 September 2023).

Phila understood gender as something determined by societal norms, which he referred to as "rules". He indicated that gender involves the ability to fit into binary categories of male or female by adhering to these prescribed norms. Phila's response suggests that boys are given "rules" to be masculine, while girls are given "rules" to be feminine. In his view, this is how gender is shaped. Phila's understanding of gender reflects a heteronormative binary framework that reinforces gender conformity. These gendered expectations are expressed through traditional, stereotypical norms, which may pose challenges for gender-nonconforming learners.

In addition to defining gender by biological body makeup, some participants also defined it in relation to the performance of normative gender roles, which are supported by human physical appearance. They considered the functions of various body parts, such as breasts and the ability to become pregnant in females, as facilitating the fulfilment of societal gender roles:

"Gender is about how people are naturally created as male or female with different body parts and roles to occupy. Just like a girl is born with breasts, if she falls pregnant, she has to lactate the child, which cannot be done by a boy."

So, the role of the girl is naturally assigned because she does have breasts, which the boy does not have. So, she already has a duty assigned to her naturally. Boys have different duties from the girls. That's the difference between the two genders. Roles cannot be cross-assigned" (Liya, 9 February 2024).

"Gender is the way one is born as a girl or a boy with different bodies. Boys are usually stronger, while girls are weaker. Boys can easily do manual and heavy-duty work, but girls can do lighter stuff" (Sipho, 26 January 2024).

Liya and Sipho understood gender in terms of successful gender role occupation and stipulated that gender roles cannot be swapped. Their view of gender suggests that they believed it was natural. People are born with different organs that allow them to express their gender in specific ways. Liya's example of a girl born to fulfil the role of a mother by falling pregnant and breastfeeding her baby, due to her having breasts, indicates that she viewed gender in binary terms. Sipho discussed boys being born stronger to perform heavy-duty work, while girls are born with weaker bodies that are only suitable for lighter tasks. Liya and Sipho's views align with traditional stereotypical normative ideologies of masculinity and femininity.

Overall, most of these teachers' understanding of gender indicates that they did not perceive it as fluid. Most participants indicated that they regarded gender as a fixed entity within human bodies. By connecting gender to the natural biological makeup of individuals, which enhances the performance of societal gender roles, the participants demonstrated that they considered gender to be static. However, acknowledging that there are rules that society allocates to different genders provides insight that gender is socially constructed, and some teachers were aware of this. The participants' perspectives reflect a hybrid understanding of gender, recognising it as socially constructed through norms while simultaneously adhering to biological essentialism, where gender roles are seen as naturally determined by anatomy. This dual view reinforces the gender binary and legitimises conformity, which marginalises individuals whose identities or bodies fall outside normative expectations.

5.2.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Rural school teachers' perceptions of culture and religion in relation to gender

In line with previous research, this study found that rural school teachers' perceptions of gender were significantly influenced by their cultural traditions and religion (Bhana 2016; Juma 2023; Ngidi & Dlamini 2017; Nuer 2022; Olaoluwa 2018; Vilane 2018). Most teachers stated that their cultural traditions and religion opposed gender and sexual diversity. Musa and Nandi were among the participants whose perceptions of gender were shaped by their religious beliefs:

"God created two genders, and I think it should be that way. There is no way to say I feel like being a girl or I feel like being a boy when you are a different person. I think it is because of social media, as I said. Obviously, if kids see something, they want to experiment with it. You know these other genders are being exposed to our kids and the youth when they are also too weak to decide, or when they cannot make strong decisions for themselves. They end up falling into that pit. As a Christian, I feel that the twisting of the gender binary is demonic. If you understand its spiritual form, it's just a spirit that is moving around, so if you entertain it, it's also going to ruin your life" (Musa, 8 March 2024).

"As a Christian, I believe that God created people. From the first people, Adam and Eve, man and woman. There was no one in the middle of being a man or a woman. And ever since in the Bible, we have never heard of anyone who tried to behave like a woman when he was a man or vice versa. So it is difficult for me to accept gender nonconformity because of my Christian background. To me, promoting such behaviour as gender nonconformity is neglecting God's creation" (Nandi, 23 February 2024).

Neither Musa nor Nandi believed in gender nonconformity due to their Christian teachings and values. Musa presumed that people are merely experimenting or are being influenced by demonic powers when they express gender nonconformity. Nandi thought that gender nonconformity is not real and should not be promoted. This Christian religious framing of gender leaves no conceptual space for gender nonconformity, as it assumes that gender is predetermined, fixed, and directly aligned with biological sex. Additionally, Musa's narrative extended beyond religious

arguments to issues of morality, portraying gender nonconformity as something socially acquired and a threat to the moral order. By attributing nonbinary gender identities to the influence of social media and framing them as a “demonic” disruption of the natural order intended by God, Musa constructed gender diversity as a moral and spiritual threat to young people, who are perceived as lacking the capacity to make reasonable decisions. Nandi’s narrative, while less morally charged, similarly positioned gender diversity as incompatible with Christian values. Some participants, such as Phiwo, based their perceptions on their cultural belief system as Black Africans:

“We have our culture as Africans. We do not expect African countries to behave like European countries. There was no such thing as gender nonconforming or transgender when we grew up, because we respected our culture until people were getting exposed to European countries’ cultures. Yes, we have African traditions. We have our own culture as Africans. If you go from here, you go to Namibia, you go to Nigeria, you go to Zimbabwe, Kenya, you name them. If you go there, the culture is the same. So, when you now buy into the European culture and you put it in African culture, you have mixed masala, and things will not work properly. That’s when you start to hear of people who act weird. Men want to dress and act like women, whilst women dress and act like men. That is improper. Men marrying men, whilst women marrying women. That’s societal disorder, according to my culture as a Black person” (Phiwo, 6 October 2023).

Phiwo’s narrative reflects a fixed African cultural belief that constructs gender nonconformity as incompatible with African traditions. He assumed that gender nonconformity is an imitation of European cultures and suggested that it was not authentic and that it contaminated African cultures. The use of terms such as “societal disorder” and “acting weird” positions gender nonconformity as not merely culturally inappropriate in African contexts but also socially destabilising and links it to a decline in morality. Phiwo did not accept gender nonconformity; according to his cultural beliefs, those born male should dress and act like men, while those assigned female at birth should behave and dress like women.

Ultimately, the narratives of Musa, Nandi, and Phiwo reveal how religious and African cultural discourses intersect to perpetuate heteronormative and normative

understandings of gender. The findings demonstrate that rural school teachers' perceptions of gender are deeply shaped by the intersection of religious ideologies and African cultural traditions. Christian teachings, as illustrated by Musa and Nandi, frame gender as predefined, fixed, and morally regulated, leaving little conceptual space for nonbinary gender identities. Similarly, Phiwo's cultural perspective constructed gender nonconformity as a foreign import that is incompatible with African cultural traditions. Together, these narratives illustrate how religion and cultural traditions operate as mutually reinforcing systems that sustain heteronormative and normative understandings of gender among rural school teachers, which are further reinforced by other social factors such as sex, sexuality, race, class, and social background, as explored in Section 5.3.2.

5.3 THEME 2: CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER IN RURAL SPACES

This section explores how the participants' perceptions of gender were shaped by the societies in which they grew up. It also reveals how the intersection of gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and social background influenced the participants' perceptions of gender.

5.3.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Growing up in rural areas: Rural teachers' experiences of gender socialisation

Socialisation plays a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of gender. Schyff (2022) highlights the crucial role of primary and secondary socialisation in establishing and transmitting ideologies from generation to generation. Sibanda (2020) identifies family and school as key institutions that produce and uphold gender normativity. In this study, most participants reported that being socialised in rural communities, families, and schools reinforced their gender-normative ideologies. They grew up in environments where gender roles were rigidly assigned according to heteronormative categories. These gender-normative ideologies were deeply embedded in community norms, household practices, and educational settings. Within the home, individuals assigned male at birth were socialised towards the performance of masculinity, while those assigned female at birth were groomed to embody femininity:

“As a girl, I was expected to play and stay with other girls. We were not allowed to chill or spend more time with the boys. Parents tried to separate us from the

boys. Boys were supposed to be with the boys, being taught boys' stuff by our father, while girls stayed with women. Girls cleaned, cooked, and were taught all the girlie chores at home. The boys looked after the cows, goats, and all those animals. They were expected to be stronger than us" (Mpume, 1 September 2023).

"Well, since I mentioned that I grew up in a rural area, I don't know whether to say I was lucky or not. We had to take care of the cattle and the goats and make sure that the yard was clean. Also, if there were ceremonies at home, one would take the initiative and responsibility to monitor the visitors. If anything goes wrong, you should be answerable. And also, you should do hard labour. I train my children the way I was trained. A boy learns men's duties and responsibilities, whilst a girl learns women's roles" (Phila, 29 September 2023).

The quotations by Mpume and Phila support Hoang's (2019) study, which highlights the family as a powerful socialisation structure that influences children from a young age. Mpume explained how her parents expected her to perform feminine gender roles as a young girl. Her gender identity and perceptions were shaped by her parents' expectations and training regarding gender performance. In contrast, Mpilo described how his family assigned masculine duties to him and trained him in hard labour. He further noted that his perceptions were rooted in gender polarity ideologies, which stem from the way he was socialised by his parents, and he is raising his children in the same manner. This further supports Hoang's (2019) assertions that parents convey gender-normative ideologies by imposing gendered behaviour on their children.

Apart from families, the findings of this research indicate that the schools the participants attended while growing up also played a role in their gender socialisation process. Evripidou (2020) argues that gender norms in schools are typically enforced during teacher-learner and peer-learner interactions. Some participants mentioned that during their school years, boys were expected to be masculine, while girls were expected to be feminine, as teachers assigned hard, laborious tasks to boys and easier, nurturing tasks to girls in the school environment. Mpilo said:

"There may be other things that I might forget, but basically, all things that were a bit rough were assigned to me as a boy child. We were expected to do rough

jobs at school as boys. For example, lifting everything, fencing the school, and cleaning the school. Of course, that depended on the nature of the cleaning that was supposed to be done. All those hard, laborious tasks were given to us as boys. We were supposed to be strong, as boys. Girls were given simple tasks that didn't require them to use a lot of energy" (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

Mpilo explained how the allocation of duties by teachers at his school was gendered. He noted that teachers stereotypically assigned tasks based on the assumption that boys are stronger than girls. This was evident in the types of work that Mpilo and the other boys were expected to do, in contrast to the tasks assigned to the girls. Mpilo's teachers maintained and reproduced gender-normative ideologies through their role allocations. This aligns with research conducted by Singh and Sewnath (2025) and Sithole (2020), which found that teachers directly and indirectly reinforce gender-normative ideologies due to their heteronormative and moralistic views.

This research also discovered that societal beliefs influenced the participants' perceptions of gender. Most participants reported being born and raised in communities where gender binarism was the norm. In the areas where they grew up, gender-nonconforming individuals were often considered taboo and abnormal, largely due to religious and cultural beliefs rooted in gender polarisation. The participants recounted witnessing members of society mistreat gender-nonconforming individuals:

"In my community, gender-nonconforming people were treated badly. People were saying bad things. They were swearing at them and calling them names. Regarding them as taboo" (Buhle, 2 February 2024).

"It wasn't usually clear whether someone was gender nonconforming, queer, transgender, or whether they were gay or lesbian because, during that time, it was more forbidden. So it would also make it very difficult for people to show their gender differences. So those kinds of behaviours would be suppressed a lot. So we might have had them, but because of our environment, it was very difficult for them to easily show those qualities" (Mandla, 15 September 2023).

"Gender-nonconforming people were treated badly. It was bad, bad, bad, bad, really bad. Terrible! You would feel sorry for the person, and you almost wanted to say, 'Why did you decide to do something like this? Because look at how

people are treating you now.’ The community’s reaction towards gender-nonconforming people was really bad” (Phiwo, 6 October 2023).

Buhle, Mandla, and Phiwo’s narratives indicate that they grew up in communities that did not tolerate gender-nonconforming individuals. The use of terms such as “taboo” and “forbidden” by Buhle and Mandla to describe how being gender nonconforming, queer, or transgender was perceived suggests that their communities held cultural beliefs that opposed gender nonconformity. Mandla stipulated that in his community, gender-nonconforming individuals concealed their identities to avoid mistreatment by other community members.

Although almost all the communities where the participants were raised and socialised upheld gender-normative ideologies, a few participants revealed that their immediate families had exceptions, as gender roles were not emphasised in their households. They were taught to perform all the chores, regardless of whether they were girls or boys. In some cases, boys were expected to do chores traditionally assigned to girls, such as caring for the home and cooking. Similarly, girls were expected to perform laborious work. Very few participants claimed that their parents provided them and their opposite-sex siblings with the same training, tasks, and chores without considering gender differences. These participants viewed gender-stereotypical training chores for children as something that disrupts the level of responsibility and believed that every individual should possess the same characteristics necessary for survival, whether they are a boy or a girl:

“I think my upbringing as a child has to do with a lot of what I’m doing now with the kids that I’m teaching. Because, like I said, to us when we were growing up, there were no girls, there were no boys. We did chores like anything. So there were no chores for boys or chores for girls. So we did things together in my family. So that’s what I’m even doing now with my kids. At home, I only have sons, so they have to learn everything” (Langa, 8 September 2023).

“As a girl, I grew up doing all types of chores. I have been a class teacher for quite some time. Unfortunately, the way I was allocating roles created some bit of conflict with my colleagues because, in my class, I would say, in terms of sweeping the class, everyone is going to be on the roster, whether you’re a boy or a girl. So on Fridays, we normally do a thorough cleaning where we mop the

floors and put some polish. So I had to answer several questions from different colleagues, saying, 'How do you make boys sweep and also mop the floors while girls are cleaning the windows or lifting desks?' So I was saying, 'No, these are all students of the same class. So I don't see any problem in them carrying out duties that are more or less the same. What happens one day if maybe all the girls are not here? Should we not be able to clean the classes?' So in my class, I've just been allocating duties to everyone regardless of the gender of the student" (Msizi, 12 April 2024).

Both Langa and Msizi attested that they grew up in families that did not place much emphasis on gender role socialisation. They reported that their families treated them and their siblings equally. Langa noted that he was treated the same as his sisters and did the same chores alongside them. His mother taught him to cook and clean the house; however, he often felt ashamed, as it seemed that he was the only boy in his neighbourhood who did these chores. Msizi also mentioned that she performed all the chores at home, including helping her father with fencing around the house. Both participants affirmed that they were raised in households that did not adhere to traditional stereotypical gender norms and roles. Langa further stated that his father sometimes cooked for them and washed the dishes while they were growing up, as his mother was a nurse and often worked night shifts.

Predominantly, the participants' narratives indicated that family, school, and community were significant agents of socialisation that enhanced the participants' gender-normative perceptions and ideologies. The teachers' views and perceptions regarding gender normativity were influenced by their social backgrounds and their upbringing experiences in their homes, communities, and schools. Consequently, most teachers believed in and enforced gender-normative behaviours and expectations in rural school settings. Teachers created spaces for social interaction at their workplaces based on their held gender-normative perceptions.

5.3.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Intersection of gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and social background in shaping gender-normative ideologies

Intersectionality has been used to investigate how social categorisations intersect to exacerbate inequalities, discrimination, and oppression in educational settings (Lawrence & Nagashima 2020; Msibi 2019). This research's findings indicate that an intersection of gender, sex, race, religion, culture, and social background played a major role in shaping the studied teachers' perceptions of gender. In line with Horton's (2022) and Ullman's (2017) studies, which demonstrated that teachers held negative perceptions of gender-nonconforming learners, most participants in this study reported that they found it difficult to view gender nonconformity positively due to their deeply held cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Most participants grew up in rural areas where the conservation of cultural traditions and religion was prioritised. They considered gender nonconformity to be taboo and demonic. These participants discussed the importance of the gender binary in Black culture for producing offspring to maintain the family name and pointed out that they valued gender polarity and adhered to the sex assigned to them at birth because they believed in the importance of marriage for reproduction. For example, Phiwo's rejection of gender-nonconforming identities was significantly influenced by his gender, sexuality, race, religion, culture, and social background:

"As I have said earlier, coming from a Zulu/Christian background, nothing was unclear. Everything that a man should do was laid out. Even up to now, I partake in the maintenance of heteronormativity and the gender binary because our culture encourages people to have offspring to carry on the name and the Bible talks about reproducing and multiplying. If we encourage same-sex relationships and marriages, how will this be possible? Gender-nonconforming behaviour at an early age leads to all this, and it should be discouraged during school days. Boys should know they are boys and are supposed to be fathers when they grow up. The same applies to girls. This is to avoid cultural abandonment. I am a man, a real man, and I wouldn't want to see my family name disappear because my children say that they are gender nonconforming, queer, gay, or whatever" (Phiwo, 6 October 2023).

Phiwo's narrative indicates that he held heteronormative views of gender and sexuality. His statement that being heterosexual and adhering to a heteronormative standard of living constituted being a "real man" reveals that he did not consider those who did not conform to these gender and sexuality norms as "real men". This suggests he did not believe that individuals can genuinely exist outside of societal gender-normative roles. Phiwo's perspectives stem from his religious and cultural beliefs, which assert that he should bear offspring who will carry on his family name. He also expected his children to follow a heteronormative way of life, as he stated that he would never allow them to deviate from the gender and sexuality norms set by his religion, culture, and society.

Two other participants who shared the same sentiments as Phiwo were Liya and Buhle. They discussed their religious beliefs, which did not allow for gender nonconformity, and asserted that they would never accept or tolerate it, viewing it as the primary cause of same-sex relationships. Liya provided an example of her son bringing home a same-sex partner and expressed her concerns about how she would react as an African mother. Meanwhile, Buhle highlighted how her religion prohibited both gender nonconformity and same-sex relationships.

"Boys should act like boys, while girls do the same from a younger age. If my child brings a person of the same sex to marry, that would be the highest degree of disrespect. It's either he and his partner will leave my house, or I will leave because it's not acceptable to me for personal reasons, culture and even religion. There is nothing that I believe in which has room for homosexuality. Children should be encouraged to follow their correct gender from a young age to avoid all this" (Liya, 9 February 2024).

"My religion does not allow it. The same applies to my culture. It has never happened in my family. We never had people who were born male behaving like women or turning into women or vice versa in my family" (Buhle, 2 February 2024).

From the above narratives, it is clear that most participants believed that gender-nonconforming children inevitably become homosexual. All the participants in this study identified as heterosexual, and none belonged to the LGBTQ+ community. It was evident that their sexual identities influenced their negative attitudes towards

gender nonconformity. Additionally, growing up in rural communities contributed to the formation of the teachers' gender-normative perceptions. Most teachers were born and raised in rural areas where, even today, gender normativity remains prevalent and gender nonconformity is rejected:

“Gender-nonconforming individuals are still not safe in rural areas because no one wants to associate with them. It’s still not safe to walk around saying that you are gender nonconforming, queer, or transgender, or that you are gay. Or they will try to kill you at some point, or even rape you. Especially the girls who say that they are lesbian. Because it’s a community that is full of Black people. So they have this mindset that men should behave like ‘men’ while women act as ‘women’. So it is difficult for them to find a community or a place where they would feel that they belong. Or a place where they will be accepted for their truth. So it’s still difficult. Unless you go to the town areas, where I think everyone minds their own business” (Phila, 29 September 2023).

Phila attested that gender nonconformity in rural communities is still not tolerated. The lives of gender-nonconforming individuals are at risk in Phila's rural community. He indicated that rural areas are not safe spaces for these individuals due to the prevailing gender perceptions. According to Phila, gender is strictly binary, and all members of the rural community are expected to adhere to this gender binarism.

By and large, the research data indicate that the intersection of culture, religion, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and social background shaped the teachers' perceptions of gender normativity. This aligns with Msibi's (2019) research, which discovered that social categorisations played a major role in shaping and regulating the participants' perceptions and ways of living. In this study, most participants held normative ideologies that prevented them from embracing gender nonconformity, as they largely deemed it unacceptable. This led many teachers to react negatively towards gender-nonconforming learners, which affected teacher-learner relationships within school premises.

5.4 THEME 3: TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO GENDER NONCONFORMITY IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Gender nonconformity occurs when individuals' behaviour and actions do not align with society's established roles and norms (Ally & Phala 2017; Xu *et al* 2024). Members of society typically react negatively to gender nonconformity due to entrenched normative gender perceptions (Lyons 2016). Consistent with previous research (UNESCO 2016), this study found that teachers in the examined rural schools viewed and responded negatively to gender nonconformity. The majority of the teachers adhered to gender-normative ideologies and actively enforced school rules that reinforced and regulated binary gender divisions.

5.4.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Presence of gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools and teachers' responses

This research found that gender-nonconforming learners were present in the studied rural schools, and the teachers often responded negatively to them by correcting their behaviour and asking them to change. Most participants indicated that they did not fully understand gender nonconformity; as a result, they questioned and challenged gender-nonconforming learners when these students expressed their gender differences. Bongiwe and Liya said the following:

"We have girls who enjoy dressing like boys, and most of them like sagging their pants [to lower their pants below their waistline in a public setting, often showing their underwear], and they behave like boys. They always avoid wearing dresses. They prefer wearing trousers; unfortunately, the rule does not allow them. We also have boys who behave like girls. We see them, they enjoy putting on earrings and plaiting their hair. Again, this is against our school rules" (Bongiwe, 15 March 2024).

"Yeah, we have gender-nonconforming learners, we have them. You can see even from a young age. I have this learner whom I have been observing from Grade R. She is just a boy, you know, the way she speaks, walks, and behaves. She is physically tough, and she likes games like soccer. From Grade R, you could see when they were going out to play, instead of going to play with the girls, she would run to play with the boys, big boys. At our school, they wear

blue shorts and a golf T-shirt as a uniform. So you can see even how she wears the uniform, yeah, she just looks like a boy. There is also a boy, and the way he speaks, he is outspoken. He speaks like a girl; he uses his hands while speaking. During break time, you can see him with a group of girls. He does not associate with the boys, and he likes attention. How he walks and his structure, he is like a girl. So yeah, we have gender-nonconforming learners in my school" (Liya, 9 February 2024).

Bongiwe's and Liya's responses acknowledge the presence of gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools. There are learners with diverse gender expressions that do not align with traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity. However, the expressions of gender-nonconforming learners are often restricted on school premises when teachers insist that they must abide by school rules. For example, Bongiwe pointed out that girls who preferred to wear trousers as part of the school uniform were not allowed to do so, while boys who wished to wear earrings at school also faced prohibitions. In contrast, Liya expressed personal beliefs about how boys should be tough, likening a girl she has observed since Grade R to a boy based on her mannerisms. Liya associated qualities such as outspokenness, attention-seeking, and a specific body structure with girls, indicating that she personally held gender-normative ideologies that she expected learners to adhere to.

Although the teachers indicated that gender nonconformity was prevalent in their rural schools, most of them stated that the learners were expected to conform to gender expectations at school, which are closely linked to gender polarity. Some teachers mentioned that they encouraged learners to be gender nonconforming at home but expected them to conform when at school:

"I don't think it's wise to promote such behaviour as gender nonconforming at school because we have different characters and personalities. I think those should be exercised outside of the school premises, and when it comes to school, every child should follow the school rules. Learners should come only to learn, not to expose their strange and different personalities to the school and other kids' lives. Other kids will also copy this type of behaviour, and promoting such behaviour is neglecting God's creation" (Nandi, 23 February 2024).

Nandi was one of the rural school teachers who expected all learners to conform to traditional gender discourses while at school. She believed that gender nonconformity should not be promoted in an educational setting. Nandi viewed gender nonconformity as a form of behaviour rather than an identity, which is problematic as this misunderstanding leads teachers to believe that they can change the identities of gender-nonconforming learners. She expected these learners to alter their identities at any time to align with the teachers' normative gender expectations. Furthermore, Nandi believed that gender nonconformity was negative behaviour that could be imitated by other students and should therefore be prohibited within school premises.

Francis (2021) critiques the African education system for enforcing binary gender norms on learners. This pattern is evident in the rural schools examined in this study, where gender nonconformity was largely ignored by both the curriculum and teaching staff. Gender-nonconforming learners often lack the freedom to express their identities, as teachers frequently demonstrate disapproval or resistance towards gender nonconformity. The participants expressed that gender-nonconforming learners were not yet free to be themselves in rural schools. Some participants noted that these learners hid their identities and conformed while at school, and revealed their true selves only when away from the school environment. They still encountered discrimination from some teachers and peers. The participants attested that rural schools were not safe for gender-nonconforming learners and those with sexual minority identities:

“Gender-nonconforming learners encounter discrimination at school, even from some of the teachers. I’ve seen a case where one was discriminated against in a way that he didn’t know where he belonged. Because when he went to sit with boys, boys didn’t want him on their side, and when he sat with girls, girls didn’t want him on their side. They must be careful for their safety and their well-being at school. Not that I’m saying that all children and teachers don’t understand these kinds of gender expressions, but some can be totally against gender nonconformity, and they will make a learner feel that they are against it” (Phila, 29 September 2023).

Phila’s narrative reveals that some teachers and learners discriminated against gender-nonconforming students because they failed to understand their way of life,

which seemed to differ from the prevailing social norms that are organised around gender binary discourses and expectations. The data indicate that gender-nonconforming learners were present in the studied rural schools, but they were often suppressed by codes of conduct and teachers' gendered expectations, which were rooted in gender-normative ideologies. This suggests that gender normativity poses a threat to the existence and safety of gender-nonconforming learners in rural school environments.

5.4.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Teachers' understanding and challenges in supporting gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools

In line with previous research, this study found that the concept of gender nonconformity in rural schools is complicated. Most teachers, as revealed through their narratives, displayed misconceptions about gender nonconformity due to a lack of understanding (Njapha *et al* 2024; Singh & Sewnath 2025). The participants indicated that they did not know how an individual might transition from the gender assigned at birth to adopting a different gender identity or sexual orientation. Similar to Olaoluwa's (2018) findings, some participants attributed this to demons, while others pointed to social media and peer pressure. However, most participants expressed that they did not understand why gender-nonconforming learners behave as they do:

"I just feel sorry for gender-nonconforming learners because I don't know what makes them behave in that way. But I think we need to leave them and let them live their life because we don't know what makes them" (Langa, 8 September 2023).

"Gender-nonconforming learners confuse me. I do not understand their personalities, but I think others get it from the environment they are living in. There is a learner who is gender nonconforming in my class. I discovered that he was adopted by transgender parents. Yeah, so in this case, that child is getting it from the parents. It's like the environmental influence and others, I can say they take it as a fashion. Oh, yes, like a social trend on the Internet. There are so many transgender youth now because of social media" (Mpume, 1 September 2023).

Mpume's and Langa's narratives demonstrate rural school teachers' uncertainty and limited understanding of gender nonconformity, which reflects gaps in knowledge about gender and sexual diversity in rural schools. Langa's response indicates a sense of sympathy paired with resignation, which suggests tolerance that is passive rather than informed or supportive, as he clearly admitted that he did not understand the origins of gender-nonconforming behaviour. He stated that gender-nonconforming learners should be allowed to be who they are; however, his response implied an assumption that gender-nonconforming learners were not "normal". The statement also carried a negative connotation, as he expressed that he did not know what made "them", referring to gender-nonconforming learners, which suggests that they are not naturally supposed to express their genders differently from the societal norm. Mpume's narrative further highlights the tendency among teachers to attribute gender nonconformity to social and environmental influences, including family background or exposure to social media, rather than recognising gender nonconformity as a legitimate and normal aspect of gender expression. This stipulation aligns with Matasovska's (2024) research findings, which indicate that teachers perceive gender and sexuality identity as a phase or trend. Matasovska (2024) conducted qualitative research involving interviews with teachers in the UK to examine how special needs education teachers view their pupils' exploration of LGBTQ+ identities. The study revealed that these teachers regarded alternative expressions of sexuality as a phase or a trend that is prevalent in society. These perspectives demonstrate that, while teachers may not express overt hostility towards learners, their lack of conceptual understanding perpetuates misconceptions and limits their capacity to provide meaningful support to gender-nonconforming learners.

Matasovska (2024) postulates that not understanding gender- or sexually diverse learners limits teachers' ability to support them effectively. Most participants in this research stated that they did not know how to handle gender nonconformity appropriately, and some were very candid about this during the interviews. Some indicated that it was challenging; they did not know how to react and expressed a desire to be educated about gender nonconformity to address this problem:

"Usually, you know, this is why I'm laughing, because that's my reaction when I see gender-nonconforming learners. I just laugh and be shocked. I will be like, what is happening exactly?" (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

“I think as teachers, we need a module like this so that we can get more information about gender nonconforming, gay, queer, lesbian, and all those things. That will help us even when we have children like this in our class. Then we will know how to handle them and how to deal with them. I think a module like this will help us. I wish all the institutions, colleges, and universities could add a module like this so that we can help our children. Because these days, we are teaching the children who are like this. I wish we could have this module” (Sipho, 26 January 2024).

Mpilo and Sipho were among the teachers who expressed uncertainty about how to handle gender nonconformity on school premises. Mpilo indicated that he laughed when he saw a learner expressing gender differently. His narrative of laughing and feeling shocked when encountering gender-nonconforming learners reflects discomfort and a lack of understanding, which suggests that teachers' immediate responses to these learners are often driven by surprise or confusion rather than informed engagement. This reaction underscores the absence of prior knowledge or professional training for teachers to address gender nonconformity in schools.

Sipho was honest in her response, stating that she needed to be equipped with knowledge about gender and sexual diversity to support gender-nonconforming learners effectively. Her narrative highlighted an awareness of the knowledge gap among teachers and a desire for structured university education on issues of gender and sexual diversity in schools. By suggesting the inclusion of a dedicated module in teacher training, Sipho acknowledged that teachers require formal guidance to effectively support gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools. These findings underscore the significance of gender and sexual diversity education for rural school teachers who operate in social contexts where gender normativity and heteronormativity prevail, which hinders the acknowledgement of gender and sexual diversity.

The participants also explained that they found it difficult to cater to gender nonconformity within school premises due to the school infrastructure. For example, there are only two toilets for males and females, and schools have not built toilets for each gender categorisation or sexual orientation group.

“The other issue is that we do not have the relevant infrastructure to accommodate gender-nonconforming learners. We only have two toilets for girls and boys, and one has to fit in either two of them, nothing else” (Phiwo, 6 October 2023).

“In my school, we only have two toilets, one for boys and one for girls. We don’t have the right buildings to accommodate gender-nonconforming learners. There was a case where we had a learner who was gender nonconforming, and it was showing. He looked and behaved like a girl, and it was difficult for everyone. He didn’t even know which toilet to use due to being harassed in the toilets. When he went to the girls’ side, the girls would be screaming, and when he went to the boys’ side, the boys didn’t feel comfortable around him. Other learners didn’t feel safe around him. Teachers were not that supportive either in this case. We also didn’t know how to assist” (Msizi, 12 April 2024).

Phiwo’s and Msizi’s narratives highlight the structural barriers and infrastructure limitations that contribute to the challenges rural schools face in accommodating gender-nonconforming learners. They argued that the lack of infrastructure to support gender and sexual diversity made it difficult to assist these learners in rural settings. Rigid binary school infrastructure fails to consider the needs of gender-nonconforming students, which institutionalises exclusion. According to Msizi, gender-nonconforming learners are not accepted by some teachers and fellow students, as he observed that some students found it difficult to share toilets with their gender-nonconforming peers. He described a student experiencing harassment and uncertainty regarding toilet use, while peers expressed discomfort, and teachers felt ill-equipped to support him. This case demonstrates how physical spaces in rural schools can reinforce heteronormative gender ideologies and thus contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of learners whose gender identities do not conform to binary expectations. Msizi’s response indicates that teachers were unable to assist a gender-nonconforming learner who made other students uncomfortable in the designated boys’ and girls’ toilets. This may suggest a lack of willingness to support gender-nonconforming learners, as this research also found that some participants noted that certain teachers displayed an unwillingness to accept gender-nonconforming learners due to their entrenched gender-normative ideologies, which were influenced by their intolerant Christian religious beliefs and African cultural traditions.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that teachers in rural South African schools predominantly hold and reproduce gender-normative ideologies. These ideologies are deeply shaped by the intersection of cultural traditions, religious beliefs, socio-economic contexts, and personal identities, which collectively sustain heteronormativity in school environments. Teachers' conceptualisations of gender were largely anchored in biological essentialism and binary understandings of masculinity and femininity, with little recognition of gender fluidity. As a result, teacher-learner interactions frequently reinforced restrictive norms, which marginalised learners who did not conform. At the same time, the chapter revealed important nuances. While most participants positioned gender nonconformity as abnormal, sinful, or culturally "foreign", a few acknowledged more flexible practices in their families or expressed sympathy towards gender-nonconforming learners. However, even these instances of partial acceptance were constrained by limited knowledge and a lack of institutional support, which signal that rural schools remain sites where learners' rights to dignity and equality are compromised.

Theoretically, these findings affirm Butler's notion of gender as performative while also demonstrating how rural cultural and religious contexts embed such performativity within rigid binaries. The data highlight how family, school, and community socialisation perpetuate gender normativity across generations, as well as how isolated counter-practices disrupt these patterns. This underscores the importance of viewing rural schools as critical sites where cultural ideologies and institutional structures intersect to produce exclusionary environments for gender-diverse learners.

In summary, this chapter contributes original insights by situating rural teachers' constructions of gender within the broader nexus of sex, religion, culture, race, and social background. It reveals how these discourses are mobilised to legitimise the regulation of learners' identities and expressions. By foregrounding teachers' voices, it exposes the urgent need for professional development, inclusive policy reform, and community engagement strategies that can dismantle entrenched heteronormativity. Without such interventions, rural schools risk continuing to perpetuate inequality, which disrupts positive teacher-learner relationships and effective learning rather than serving as transformative spaces of inclusion.

CHAPTER 6:

GENDER NORMATIVITY: INFLUENCE ON TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN KING CETSHWAYO DISTRICT RURAL SCHOOLS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the research findings on the teachers' constructions and conceptions of gender. The research data revealed that most teachers held binary gendered perceptions that perpetuate gender normativity in the studied rural schools. This chapter provides a further discussion of the research findings by focusing on the implications of gender normativity for teacher-learner relationships in the studied rural schools. It discusses and analyses the findings on how the teachers' perceptions of gender inform teacher-learner interaction processes in terms of gendered expectations, gender performance, gender nonconformity tolerance, and how teacher-learner relationships are affected in rural schools.

The chapter begins by examining how the participants expected gender to be performed and how their expectations, along with learners' reactions, shaped their day-to-day interactions in rural school environments. It then unveils the implications of gendered language in these schools. The chapter continues by explaining how rural teachers' lack of understanding of gender-nonconforming learners interrupts their daily interactions and perpetuates violations of these learners' rights within rural school premises. Additionally, it discusses the difficulties the participants faced in performing their social roles in fostering positive relationships with gender-nonconforming learners.

The chapter concludes by identifying the types of teacher-learner relationships present in the studied rural schools and shedding light on how gender normativity negatively affects positive teacher-learner relationships in these social institutions.

6.2 THEME 4: TEACHERS' GENDERED EXPECTATIONS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

In line with previous research, this study found that the rural schools examined exhibit principles manifested through gendered behaviour models, expectations, and school policies that enforce and reinforce heteronormative gender roles (Horton 2022; Mim 2016; Mdlolo 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer 2019; Kennedy 2024; Zaggi 2022).

The participants indicated that, in these rural schools, gendered expectations aligned with normative behaviour. Most schools had specific gender-normative configurations established between boys and girls that learners were expected to adhere to while interacting with teachers and one another. The codes of conduct outlined structures followed in all the participants' areas of work, which did not recognise gender differences. Instead, the gender binary was enforced. In the studied rural schools, there were specific dress codes for "boys" and "girls", different play areas for "boys" and "girls", as well as distinct behaviour expectations for "boys" and "girls".

6.2.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Gender expectations and performance in rural schools

In line with Evripidou's (2020) qualitative study, which found that schools directly or indirectly impose stereotypical gender norms on learners, this research discovered that the rural schools examined prescribed normative gendered expectations. Most teachers indicated that boys were expected to be physically and emotionally strong, while girls were expected to be soft and nurturing. This was evident when the participants described what constituted a "boy" or a "girl" and articulated their gendered expectations of the learners. Below are the responses from Sipho and Nandi when asked to explain their expectations of what a "boy" and a "girl" should be:

"[Laughs] I think a boy needs to look strong and handsome, and they must be rough. Maybe I can explain to them like that, and girls need to be like dollies, need to be soft, even when they are playing, they must play easy games, not rough like the boys' games" (Sipho, 26 January 2024).

"Expectations for behaviour are different. Girls are expected to be ladylike, not to raise their voices, not to run, to cross their legs when they sit, and to put up their hands when they want to speak. So there's a nuance there where the girls have slightly more expectations. You know, boys are more physical. There are strong girls, but boys are stronger than girls. So, to expect them now to be in touch with their feelings is unrealistic. Or, on the other hand, to expect girls to be able to... I don't want to use an example of physicality, but to expect a girl to do something that is a more male-dominant characteristic is unfair" (Nandi, 9 February 2024).

Sipho's and Nandi's narratives indicate that boys' and girls' characteristics were distinguished and used to determine what they could and could not do within school premises. Learners were expected to perform gender in line with the principles of masculinity and femininity at their schools. This finding aligns with Strough and Keener (2014), who stipulate that the type of interaction patterns in spaces enforces how gender is performed. From Nandi's and Sipho's narratives, it is evident that girls were bombarded with more expectations and responsibilities in their daily interactions at school than boys. Girls were expected to be careful in how they walked and talked, and they were also expected to be soft, while boys were expected to be strong and rough. Oldman, Lindsey and Niehuis (2017) mention being ladylike and soft as traditionally allocated attributes of femininity for girls, and being strong and muscular as traditional characteristics of masculinity associated with boys.

In the rural schools where the participants worked, girls were prepared to take on traditional feminine roles, while boys were taught traditional masculine roles. The teachers indicated that they reminded learners daily about how they should act in accordance with their gender. This practice strengthened specified gender scripts and reinforced heteronormative gender performances. This aligns with Ramaphela's (2016) view, which states that as individuals are reprimanded, they become conscious of how they perform gender. The learners in the studied rural schools, where the participants worked, were reminded daily of gender scripts aligned with femininity and masculinity. This provides further evidence that gender normativity is prevalent in these rural schools and negatively influences how teachers and learners relate, as gender-nonconforming learners were also expected to perform gender in line with traditional feminine and masculine expectations. Buhle reinforced this idea as follows:

"A boy needs to look like a boy. You cannot come to school with plaited hair while you're a boy, and a girl cannot come to school in boys' clothes. When that happens, I just talk to him if it's a boy. Boys don't do this; they must do this nicely. I tell them to act like boys, and I also tell girls who try to act like boys to stop it. I tell them nicely[ly] [and] with love" (Buhle, 2 February 2024).

Buhle's narrative indicates that teachers are privileged because of their position. Teachers are above learners, and gender-nonconforming learners must suppress their feelings and strive to perform gender as prescribed by the school and teachers

for fear of being discriminated against or judged. Teachers respond negatively to gender nonconformity within school premises and impose gender-normative ideologies on learners. In doing so, they oppress the identities of gender-nonconforming learners. Buhle pointed out that she lovingly reprimanded learners who acted or behaved contrary to gender expectations. The implication that she reprimanded gender-nonconforming learners “with love” suggests that Buhle did not recognise that coercing gender-nonconforming learners to conform to traditional gender stereotypes was detrimental to their well-being and development.

It is noted that gender performance discourses within the participants’ rural schools were altered to fulfil the teachers’ gendered expectations, which compromised the well-being of gender-nonconforming learners who were coerced to conform. Butler (2004) postulates that gender is a performance that can be modified to suit the social context. In line with Juma’s (2023) research findings, the participants in this study indicated that learners had no choice while on school premises; they had to adhere to the rules and were forced to conform to teachers’ binary gendered expectations despite their gender differences. This situation is problematic for gender-nonconforming learners, who may feel oppressed and suppressed by their teachers’ gendered expectations. Interactions characterised by the oppression and suppression of feelings are unhealthy and lead to strained teacher-learner relationships.

6.2.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Learners’ adherence to gender norms in rural schools

In line with Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, which posits that individuals enact gender out of fear of societal repercussions, the participants in this research revealed that learners were required to perform gender according to the expectations set by their schools’ policies and codes of conduct. The teachers indicated through their narratives that these policies and codes of conduct prescribed traditional gender-normative behaviours for boys and girls. According to the participants, both teachers and learners were obliged to adhere to the school policy and code of conduct:

“At my school specifically, boys and girls are expected to act differently. There are school rules. There is a school code of conduct which specifies that boys do this, girls do that. Indirectly, we are defining gender roles. So any school is controlled by the rules that are in the code of conduct. This school code of

conduct is an agreement between the teachers and the parents because it was built in a meeting. So in my school, boys do as boys are supposed to do. Like boys, they play soccer; girls play netball. And then, when it comes to rugby, there is a team for boys, but there is no rugby team for girls. All because boys are brave, according to the definition of a boy. And then girls play netball, something which is more feminine. If there is something which needs to be done, like cleaning or washing, only girls are taken for that. That is how it is done in my school” (Musa, 8 March 2024).

Musa’s narrative illustrates the institutionalisation of gender norms in rural schools through both the formal and informal structures of schooling. The explicit differentiation between boys’ and girls’ behaviours, codified in the schools’ codes of conduct, reveals how educational policies and practices regulate gendered performances in line with heteronormative expectations. The statement that “boys do as boys are supposed to do” reflects Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of gender performativity, where individuals are compelled to display behaviours that are culturally assigned to their sex category. Musa explained that girls and boys have specific expectations based on normative gender role expectations. Girls are expected to engage in activities and sports that are traditionally regarded as feminine, such as cleaning and playing netball. Boys are required to participate in activities traditionally regarded as masculine, such as rugby and soccer. This reflects the current situation in the studied rural areas, where learners are not given opportunities to choose activities that do not conform to stereotypical gender expectations. Specific sporting activities, behaviours, and dress codes are assigned to particular genders, as indicated by the participants in this study. Musa’s narrative highlights how rural schools serve as sites for regulating gender performance, where formal policies (such as the code of conduct) intersect with cultural traditions and norms to shape and police learners’ gender expressions. All learners are expected to adhere to the school code of conduct, which typically enforces normative gender expectations. Failing to do so has consequences, as illustrated by Bongiwé’s and Mpilo’s narratives:

“Our expectations lie in the dress code at school. We expect boys to wear trousers whilst girls wear a tunic. If we see something else, then we tell them to follow the code of conduct and wear a correct uniform. But sometimes you find a girl wearing grey trousers, not a tunic. So it is our duty to tell the girl that grey

trousers are for boys and she should wear a dress as prescribed by the code of conduct” (Bongiwe, 15 March 2024).

“This is what I think I’ve explained previously. The school has a policy. The policy means all learners, irrespective of gender, have to abide by the school policy. So, if the school policy says a boy must put on trousers and a shirt, I don’t expect a boy to put on trousers and a blouse. So, if he does that, I have to confront him and say: You are not putting on the proper school uniform. If the school policy says boys are supposed to cut their hair short, I don’t expect a boy to have long hair, worse off, plaited hair, because he is a boy, he must behave like a boy, he must align himself with the dress code and behaviour of boys within the school. Girls must also do the same” (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

Bongiwe’s and Mpilo’s narratives reveal how school dress codes function as mechanisms that enforce heteronormative gender binaries. Both participants emphasised that the schools’ codes of conduct prescribed specific clothing and grooming standards for boys and girls (trousers for boys, tunics or dresses for girls, short hair for boys, and gender-specific sports or activities), thereby policing how learners express their gender. These policies construct a rigid link between biological sex and socially sanctioned appearance, where “acceptable” gender identities and performances are produced and maintained through repeated acts that align with normative societal expectations. Mpilo’s acknowledgement that *“gender differences are not considered in the school policy”* exposes how rural school regulations exclude gender diversity and fail to accommodate gender-nonconforming learners. By framing deviations from the dress code as disciplinary offences, the schools’ approach not only invalidates gender nonbinary and diverse gender identities but also reproduces structural inequalities by privileging normative gender expectations. This rigid enforcement of binary dress codes and behaviour expectations illustrates how rural school policies institutionalise heteronormativity and marginalise learners who do not conform. In rural contexts, where community norms and institutional policies are often closely aligned, such regulations reinforce a gender order that limits learners’ freedom to identify and express themselves authentically.

The research also revealed, through the participants’ narratives, that teachers in rural areas exert power over learners by enforcing heteronormative gender binary rules and

regulations outlined in the codes of conduct. Most participants stated that they were very strict when enforcing the school code of conduct.

Like Bongiwe and Mplilo, Nkanyezi and Musa reported similar actions when a boy is dressed like a girl, partially dressed like a girl, or vice versa:

“I make sure that I stop the child before the child goes to the classroom. Try to talk to that child and find out why she or he is coming to school like that. And then call the parents and talk to them, and then try to convince them not to allow the child to come to school like that. Even if I see that the child is gender nonconforming, queer, lesbian or gay, I will tell the parents that the child can behave like that when they are not at school. Because here at school, we need to follow the school rules. So she needs to act like a girl if she is a girl. A boy needs to come to school looking like a boy” (Nkanyezi, 22 September 2023).

“Oh, my kids! [laughs] My girls know that in the morning, I always check them. I want them to know that they are representing their school in their beautiful uniform, and they need to wear their white socks. Boys should know that they can’t wear white socks to school. It doesn’t matter how they want to do it, but in my class, boys and girls have specific uniforms they have to wear, and I make sure that they wear their uniforms accordingly. Wearing the wrong uniform leads to disciplinary measures, and the children know this. No exchange of clothes is allowed; boys do not wear girls’ uniforms, and girls shouldn’t wear boys’ uniforms” (Musa, 27 September 2023).

Nkanyezi’s and Musa’s narratives indicate that nonconformity to assigned dress codes was not tolerated in their schools and may lead to undesirable consequences for the learners. Nkanyezi explained the steps she followed when a learner failed to adhere to the prescribed dress code, while Musa noted that those who did not comply with the boy/girl dress code were disciplined. Both participants’ responses suggest that there were no exceptions regarding gender differences among the learners. Every learner was required to fit into binary gender categories and dress accordingly, as perceived by the teachers. Failing to abide by these rules resulted in consequences.

Overall, the participants’ narratives in this research demonstrate how rural school policies and codes of conduct operate as disciplinary measures that institutionalise a

heteronormative gender order. By prescribing dress codes, dividing sporting activities, and establishing behavioural norms according to binary boy and girl gender categories, these school policies compel learners to perform gender in a manner that aligns with culturally prescribed roles. This display is consistent with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, where conformity to normative gender expectations is driven by the fear of social and institutional sanctions. Teachers, acting as custodians of the code of conduct and supported by consensus among parents, actively police these gender performances, leaving little space for deviation or self-determined gender expressions. Such school policies and regulations not only erase the identities of gender-nonconforming learners but also legitimise their marginalisation by framing nonconformity as grounds for discipline. In these rural contexts, where school policies reflect and reinforce prevailing community norms, these practices sustain a heteronormative gender hierarchy that restricts learner autonomy, silences nonconforming gender identities, and reproduces entrenched structural inequalities. This ultimately hinders positive relationships in rural school learning spaces.

6.3 THEME 5: EFFECTS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY ON DAILY TEACHER-LEARNER INTERACTIONS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

The teachers' narrations of their perceptions and experiences in this study revealed that gender normativity existed in the studied rural schools. Data collected unveiled that learners in the studied rural schools were expected to live up to normative gendered expectations daily. It was compulsory to live up to heteronormative standards of living for learners and this held negative implications for daily teacher and gender-nonconforming learners' interactions, which in turn compromised their relationships and inclusive learning spaces. The following section outlines how gender normativity reflected in the participants' gendered perceptions interrupted positive teacher-learner interactions.

6.3.1 Sub-theme 5.1: Teachers' gendered language interrupts positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools

In line with Feni and Makena's (2024) research findings, this study found that the use of gendered language in rural schools disadvantages gender-nonconforming learners and disrupts smooth teacher-learner interactions. Butler (1997) highlights the

importance of language in shaping individuals' understanding of gender and identity, as well as its influence on how people view themselves and others in society. This study discovered that most rural school teachers labelled gender as binary. The labelling of learners as boys or girls, based on their assigned gender at birth, favours conforming learners while marginalising gender-nonconforming learners. Referring to learners as boys or girls not only imposes normative discourses but also creates challenges for gender-nonconforming learners, who may feel excluded and marginalised. This research revealed that the social linguistics created by most teachers in rural schools impose gendered discourses. Most rural school teachers utilise language to enforce and reinforce gendered behaviours. They assign stereotypical behaviours to girls and boys within school premises, which are also embedded in their school code of conduct and communicated through both verbal and written language to learners.

“We teach learners that boys need to act as boys while girls act as girls because sometimes it’s hard to see a child acting in the other way. Besides being out of the code of conduct, it also irritates you as a teacher. It also disturbs the other children because they keep asking why they are behaving like this, so you end up answering so many questions if other learners behave differently. Boys need to behave like boys, while girls behave like girls. No sagging pants for girls and no plaited hair or earrings for boys” (Nkanyezi, 22 September 2023).

In the quotation above, it is noted that teachers label gender as binary and use this framework to compel gender-nonconforming learners into normative expressions. Learners are pressured to fit into either a boy or girl category, as perceived by their teachers, and to act in accordance with gendered expectations. In Nkanyezi’s case, the situation was more intense, as she mentioned feeling irritated when she saw learners expressing themselves differently from what was expected at school. Nkanyezi further indicated that she did not appreciate it when other learners asked questions about those who expressed themselves differently. If Nkanyezi were fully informed as an educator in the 21st century, where gender is understood to be fluid, this could be a valuable opportunity for her to educate other learners about gender differences, rather than attempting to avoid such questions. Nkanyezi’s approach and response were unwelcoming to gender-nonconforming learners.

Unwelcoming attitudes from rural school teachers towards gender-nonconforming learners perpetuate negative language use against them, including name-calling and hate speech. According to Butler (1997), this behaviour enables vulnerability in the victims. This research found that the language discourses of most teachers did not favour gender nonconformity. Some participants expressed during the interviews that they viewed gender nonconformity as demonic, satanic, and an abomination:

“It’s taboo, it’s taboo to have someone become gender nonconforming, transgender, or even gay. It’s taboo. It’s more satanic. So, I don’t tolerate that. I don’t believe in that. It’s just like trying to maybe say, what is your view on rapists? Because people are raping day in and day out. A lot of people are being raped, and you take that as normal, because people are raped, so we should accept it in society. So, to me, it’s taboo. It’s not correct to say we need to tolerate children who were born female and now want to act like a man or want to become a man. That’s not possible, and it’s more satanic. So, I don’t believe in that and I don’t tolerate that. Okay?” (Mpilo, 25 August 2025).

Mpilo used strong negative language to describe gender nonconformity. He classified gender nonconformity, transgender identities, and homosexuality as the same, viewing them as the most unthinkable things a human being can do. For Mpilo, being gender or sexually diverse was equivalent to being a criminal, as he compared these identities to that of a rapist. Whether Mpilo communicated these sentiments directly to gender-nonconforming learners or not, there was an indication that, like Nkanyezi, he was also irritated by gender nonconformity. Teachers who express negative views towards gender-nonconforming learners may not communicate these sentiments directly, but their actions often reveal their attitudes. Negative attitudes and language towards gender diversity hinder inclusivity in rural schools.

This research discovered that some teachers made negative comments in front of gender-nonconforming learners or behind their backs:

“Gender-nonconforming learners are afraid to face some of the teachers or make mistakes at school because the moment they do so, the comment that will come from a teacher is hurtful. Some teachers make nasty comments. Some teachers can’t hide that they don’t like them at all” (Langa, 8 September 2023).

“To be honest, even we as teachers, because we don’t say it in front of them, but when we are talking in the staff room or the corners, you can hear that, okay, this teacher is not using the right words to describe those learners who are gender or sexually diverse” (Mandla, 15 September 2023).

The above data reveal that some teachers used negative, hurtful language towards gender-nonconforming learners based on their gender perceptions. This negative language disrupts smooth interactions in rural school environments. As Langa pointed out, some gender-nonconforming learners avoided contact with certain teachers due to fear of victimisation. The hesitation of gender-nonconforming learners to engage with some of their teachers demonstrates that the promotion of gender discrimination – rooted in gender normativity and manifested through negative language – interrupted positive teacher-learner interactions, which ultimately fostered negative teacher-learner relationships in rural schools.

6.3.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Teachers’ lack of understanding of gender nonconformity interrupts positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools

In line with previous research findings, this study discovered that most participants did not relate well to gender-nonconforming learners because they did not understand them, primarily due to perceptions ingrained in religion and culture (Bhana 2016; Ngidi & Dlamini 2017; Olaoluwa 2018; Singh & Sewnath 2025). This research found that some teachers referred to gender-nonconforming learners as gay or lesbian. Sexual diversity has been a “nightmare” in traditional and religious societies, particularly in Africa (Olaoluwa 2018). The fact that it is referred to as taboo, an abomination, satanic, abnormal, and unforeseen indicates that sexual diversity is unwanted in most

traditional and religious societies (Gonçalves de Sousa & Aparecida da Silva Nogueira 2023; Juma 2023; Nuer 2022; Olaoluwa 2018; Vilane 2018).

The fact that most participants equated gender nonconformity with sexual diversity may explain their strong disdain for it. Every boy who exhibited stereotypically feminine characteristics, as perceived in most participants' responses, was regarded as gay, while every girl who displayed masculine traits was perceived as a lesbian. Consequently, gender nonconformity in rural schools was largely misunderstood and not tolerated by most participants. This finding aligns with the research of Mbonambi (2021) and Singh and Sewnath (2025), who also discovered that teachers had a limited understanding of transgender and gender-nonconforming identities, which perpetuated discrimination and homophobia against these minority identities. In this study, some participants assumed that all learners who did not currently conform to traditional gender norms would grow up to be gay or lesbian, which reflects a misunderstanding of gender nonconformity. This means that they believed boys who walked, spoke, and dressed like girls would be sexually attracted to other men, and vice versa:

"In the school where I'm currently teaching, there are learners, especially boys, who behave like gays. At some point, I've had a conversation with them trying to understand how they feel, only to find out that, from their perspective or their view, they feel like they don't belong in the male category. So, they identify themselves as gay. For example, when they are not at school, you find them wearing skirts. They even put makeup on top of that. They even wear dresses and do all those kinds of ladylike things. Over the past eight years of my teaching experience, there have always been cases like that. There would be girls as well who would behave like boys, and when you talk to them, they will tell you that they don't see themselves as girls. They are comfortable appearing and living the rest of their lives as lesbians" (Sipho, 26 January 2024).

"In 2018, there was this girl, and she was the only girl in the school who was a lesbian. By that time, because she was still young and in primary school, she couldn't show it to us, but we could see the signs. I was the first one to see that there was something wrong with this girl because each and every day she was

wearing school tracksuits. You would never find her wearing a school dress or a school uniform dress at all” (Liya, 9 February 2024).

“When teachers are sitting together in the staffroom, we talk about a lot of things, and only to find that when we talk about this topic, some teachers will be angry in a way that you might even pity yourself for trying to defend gender-nonconforming learners. Because they hate this kind of student, because they don’t understand them” (Mandla, 15 September 2023).

The above responses reveal that some participants did not understand or tolerate gender nonconformity. For example, Sipho and Liya referred to learners who do not conform to the stereotypical traditional dress codes as “gays” and “lesbians”. These terms should be used to refer to individuals who are sexually attracted to people of the same sex (Moleiro & Pinto 2015:1). The responses of the studied teachers indicate that they lacked an understanding of the difference between sexual and gender diversity and gender nonconformity, which perpetuates their intolerance of gender-nonconforming learners. In addition to using the incorrect term to refer to the gender-nonconforming learner in question, Liya stated that she noticed something “wrong” with a girl who always avoided school dresses, asserting that the girl was the only lesbian in the school. Liya’s use of the word “wrong” suggests that she disagreed with the way the girl presented herself on school premises. Liya expected the girl to conform to wearing a school dress, as this was the norm in her school.

Mandla’s response above, drawn from his conversations with colleagues, reinforces the notion that most teachers do not understand gender-nonconforming learners. Consequently, they often express anger when discussing these students, and some exhibit a clear disdain for gender nonconformity. Mandla’s observation was supported by other participants:

“Like, honestly, sometimes I feel angry with them because I don’t understand what makes them be like that. To me, it’s like they want to go with the fashion. It’s like fashion these days. So sometimes I just feel angry, and I don’t know what I can do if it’s my child. For sure, I will kill my child” (Buhle, 2 February 2024).

“To be honest, it is hard for me. It is hard for me to teach that learner, but I try. I try by all means to give the learner attention. I don’t know what I can say or do to avoid him or her, but I try by all means to teach him or her. But I won’t lie, it is hard for me because sometimes by the time they change their genders, they also become disrespectful to elders. I’m not trying to be rude, but sometimes they just disrespect you. They are rude sometimes. I try to give gender-nonconforming learners attention. But I won’t lie, it is hard. Hard, very hard” (Nkanyezi, 5 February 2024).

Buhle’s response indicates that she held a strong opinion against gender nonconformity. She assumed that gender-nonconforming learners were merely following a trend. She did not view gender nonconformity as an identity but rather as a deliberate act that could be stopped at any time. Like fashion comes and goes, Buhle assumed that gender nonconformity could also come and go. Nkanyezi shared the same view as Buhle, as she expressed that she did not feel comfortable teaching gender-nonconforming learners. In her response, Nkanyezi indicated that she believed that when learners changed their gender identity, they became “*disrespectful*” and “*rude*”. This response suggests that Nkanyezi thought that there was a specific moment when gender-nonconforming individuals decided to change themselves, which may coincide with when they indicated that they were different. Learners being “*disrespectful*” and “*rude*”, as speculated by Nkanyezi, might stem from a defensive resistance that arises in response to the criticism, discouragement, disapproval, and non-affirmation of their gender expressions from teachers who may be coercing them to conform to traditional gender norms.

To a great extent, this research found that most teachers did not understand gender nonconformity; consequently, they found it difficult to tolerate gender nonconformity on school premises. Frustration from teachers who do not understand gender-nonconforming learners disrupts positive teacher-learner interactions, which are essential for positive relationships in rural schools. Gender-nonconforming learners are often accused of interacting with their teachers negatively by being disrespectful and rude. The research revealed that some teachers directly violate the rights of gender-nonconforming learners, which may explain why these learners retaliate and appear disrespectful or rude to their teachers.

6.3.3 Sub-theme 5.3: Teachers' violations of gender-nonconforming learners' rights interrupt positive teacher-learner interactions in rural schools

South Africa is one of the countries that advocates for the rights of gender-nonconforming learners and gender inclusivity in schools through the development of gender anti-discriminatory policies and frameworks (South African DBE 2017; Haffejee & Wiebesiek 2021). Although policies and frameworks aimed at protecting learners from gender discrimination are in place, this research discovered that in the studied rural schools, gender binary-based codes of conduct and teachers' gendered expectations perpetuate the violation of gender-nonconforming learners' rights. This aligns with Francis's (2023) view, which states that the education system and most teachers still reinforce heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality in schools. The enforcement of gendered expressions, dress codes, and the use of gendered language by teachers render gender nonconformity invisible. The codes of conduct and the teachers' language are binary and exclude acknowledgement of the existence of gender-nonconforming learners. Gender nonconformity was not affirmed in the studied rural schools. Some participants attested that gender nonconformity was ignored by most teachers.

“Well, honestly speaking, in the school that I’ve been in, they’ve never actually taken the gender nonconformity thing seriously. In a way, if you’re a boy, you’re given all the chores that boys need to do. It doesn’t matter if you’re seeing yourself as gender nonconforming. If you’re a girl, you do all the chores that the girls do at school. Especially in our rural areas, where girls will be responsible for mopping the classroom on Friday afternoons, and the boys will be responsible for carrying all the heavy equipment. Those who wish to do the chores otherwise or act differently are discouraged or bear negative comments from teachers or peers” (Langa, 8 September 2023).

The above response indicates that some teachers in rural areas do not consider gender differences among learners, which creates problems for gender-nonconforming individuals who are expected to behave in accordance with the gender roles assigned to them by their teachers and society. In rural areas, gender is often generalised in binary terms. Some boys may enjoy sweeping and mopping, but they are denied the right to choose their preferred chores, which they know they would

perform better, because their teachers assign tasks based on traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Additionally, some teachers believed that gender nonconformity should be discouraged. Some revealed that their schools aimed to promote gender conformity among learners through assemblies:

“I don’t believe in gender nonconformity. A boy behaving like a girl or a girl behaving like a boy does not make sense. I do not know how those children would be feeling, but it should be stopped. We should teach them that those feelings are wrong. If they are stopped, those feelings will die” (Musa, 8 March 2024).

“In my school, there are times when we try to convince gender-nonconforming learners to change. We hold special assemblies for boys and special assemblies for girls, trying to encourage gender conformity. We tell them that you are girls or you are boys, you are expected to do this or that” (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

Musa believed that gender-nonconforming learners should be “stopped”, while Mpilo attested that they took action to try to change gender-nonconforming learners in his school. The special assemblies held at Mpilo’s school focus on training in masculinity and femininity and encourage learners to occupy traditional gender roles. This is problematic because learners are not allowed to be who they truly are in terms of gender; they are taught who to be instead. They are coerced into conforming, and the rights of gender-nonconforming learners to exist in such environments are suppressed. Some participants described how gender-nonconforming learners felt after being coerced into conforming by their teachers:

“Gender-nonconforming learners usually feel uncomfortable when they are told to act in accordance with their prescribed gender. I once witnessed a learner crying, saying that he wanted to go home after such an incident. Gender-nonconforming learners start feeling uncomfortable when they are around teachers who confront them, telling them to change. This affects them a lot. We all know that when a learner is not comfortable with a certain teacher, he or she does not enjoy that teacher’s subject, and this affects her or his marks” (Mandla, 15 September 2023).

“Usually, in primary school, the learner will start crying, wanting to go home, and I think once there’s been such a reaction from a learner, the learner will not enjoy a particular subject until the end of the year or if the teacher changes” (Langa, 8 September 2023).

In their response, Mandla and Langa highlighted that gender-nonconforming learners who are coerced into conforming are unhappy at school, which negatively impacts their relationships with the teachers who try to force them to change. Learners perform better when they have positive relationships with their teachers. Misunderstandings of gender nonconformity and intolerance hinder smooth interactions between teachers and learners in rural school environments.

6.4 THEME 6: EFFECTS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY ON TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Teachers have a key role to play to foster positive teacher-learner relationships, which in turn facilitate the establishment of inclusive safe learning places for learners (Soldaat 2019). This research data revealed that rural teachers’ perceptions of gender play a huge role in how they interact with learners daily and determine the type of relationships that are established between them. Teachers’ gender normative perceptions lead them to adhere to traditional stereotypical gender norms. Teachers tend to enforce gendered expectations within school premises and this has consequences in the way they relate with gender-nonconforming learners.

6.4.1 Sub-theme 6.1: Challenges in teachers’ fulfilment of their social roles to facilitate positive teacher-learner relationships in rural schools

Teachers have a great responsibility to secure positive relationships and create strong bonds with their learners. In addition to delivering content, teachers must fulfil various social roles in the school environment, such as being parental figures, counsellors, advisors, managers, facilitators, role models, and coaches (Rasuli *et al* 2023; Soldaat 2019). This diversity of roles strengthens their relationships with the learners. This research found that most rural school teachers struggled to fulfil their social roles to facilitate positive relationships with gender-nonconforming learners. The frustration experienced by teachers who did not understand gender-nonconforming learners

disrupted gender inclusion and hindered positive teacher-learner relationships in rural schools:

“If a learner is behaving in a way that I don’t understand. For example, if a boy decides to act like a girl or vice versa. I just ignore the learner and carry on? Transgender issues are encompassed within the Constitution of South Africa. Everyone who lives in South Africa has to respect those rights. Everyone has a right to gender expression. So, no one has the right to confront a gender-nonconforming person trying to get into whatever you believe in. I, as a male teacher, have nothing to do with that. Because it is not going to interfere with my teaching. It’s not going to interfere with my main duty at school, which is to deliver content. So, I have to leave it like that” (Phila, 29 September 2023).

“I can’t do anything. I just feel sorry for them, especially the ones that are in the senior phase, because they end up having no friends. Let’s say a child is a girl, but inside, you can see that the child is a boy. So, when she’s trying to go to the boys, the boys don’t want to give that child attention. So, sometimes you feel sorry for the child because she or he [is] used to being alone, with no friends, and no one wants to be with that child. And sometimes the teachers also feel tired of talking to the child, trying to convince the child to change the way he or she behaves” (Msizi, 12 April 2024).

Phila’s and Msizi’s responses indicate that they were not fulfilling all the social roles as teachers to support gender-nonconforming learners. Phila’s response reveals that he distanced himself from learners’ gender developmental issues, which suggests an uncaring disposition. He was one of the rural school teachers who believed that their main duty was solely to teach the prescribed learning content and did not engage with issues of gender development. Mbonambi (2021) also discovered through his qualitative research in South Africa that most teachers chose to focus exclusively on prescribed subject content and showed reluctance to engage with topics related to gender and sexuality. According to Rasuli *et al* (2023), teachers should create a conducive learning environment by performing social roles that provide learners with opportunities for holistic growth. Holistic development entails that teachers facilitate the social, emotional, physical, and mental development of their learners, not just the

academic aspect. It is the teachers' duty to address learners' social needs in learning spaces to foster positive relationships.

Msizi, on the other hand, expressed sympathy for gender-nonconforming learners; however, there is more she could do as a teacher to foster acceptance of these learners in her school and to enhance their relationships with both teachers and peers. Msizi could educate, coach, or advise gender-conforming learners about gender nonconformity to enable them to accept and tolerate their gender-nonconforming peers. Additionally, she could offer counselling sessions to gender-nonconforming learners to help them cope with rejection by their peers. These are all social roles that a teacher can fulfil to improve positive relationships in the school environment (Soldaat 2019).

Teachers should effectively manage learning spaces and facilitate positive teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships (Cahyono & Rusiadi 2025). Rather than ignoring gender-nonconforming learners or merely feeling sorry for them when they face rejection, teachers can adopt parental roles and serve as role models by addressing all learners' needs and attending to their social requirements, including those of gender-nonconforming learners. Such learners need love, affection, acceptance, and support from their teachers and peers. However, some rural school teachers indicated that it was not easy for them to fulfil their social roles in catering to the needs of gender-nonconforming learners:

“Honestly, I find it hard to teach and cater for gender-nonconforming learners. It is not easy to teach these learners. Some of the learners become rude when they start changing their genders. It is really hard. I wish there was a way this gender exchange could be stopped or avoided. I just don't know how” (Buhle, 2 February 2024).

Buhle's narration revealed her difficulty in teaching gender-nonconforming learners. She expressed uncertainty about how gender nonconformity can be addressed or avoided. Buhle perceived teaching a gender-nonconforming learner as a challenging task and viewed these learners as rude. This perception may stem from their resistance to the negative treatment some teachers direct at them based on their gender differences. As suggested by Rytivaara and Frelin (2017), teachers can adopt a parental role and serve as role models to strengthen their bonds with learners. It is

important for teachers to understand the reasons behind the rude behaviour of gender-nonconforming learners and to empathise with their feelings in order to maintain positive relationships and create conducive learning environments for all.

6.4.2 Sub-theme 6.2: Types of teacher-learner relationships in rural schools

In line with previous research, this study analysed the findings and utilised the three relational constructs of closeness, conflict, and dependency to identify the types of relationships between teachers and learners in the studied rural schools and to determine the implications of gender normativity for these relationships (Koomen & Jellesma 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen 2017, 2019; Van Bergen *et al* 2019; Van Bergen, McGrath, Quin & Burns 2023; Verschueren & Koomen 2021). As derived from McGrath and Van Bergen's (2019) literature, this research found that positive, complicated, reserved, and negative types of teacher-learner relationships existed in the studied rural schools. Positive teacher-learner relationships are characterised by being high in closeness and low in conflict. Complicated relationships are characterised by being high in closeness and high in conflict. Reserved relationships are characterised by being low in closeness and low in conflict, while negative teacher-learner relationships are characterised by being low in closeness and high in conflict (McGrath & Van Bergen 2019).

In this study, the types of relationships between teachers and learners were determined and interpreted from the participants' narratives of their daily experiences with learners. The study analysed the data to identify the levels of closeness, conflicts, and dependency among teachers and learners in order to ascertain the types of teacher-learner relationships that existed in the studied rural schools and to explore how gender normativity informed these relationships. Closeness was determined by daily positive interactions such as care and support between teachers and learners. Conflicts were identified by negative interactions that teachers and learners encountered daily on rural school premises, while dependency was measured by the teachers' availability to support learners of different genders (Van Bergen, Graham & Sweller 2020).

The study found that positive teacher-learner relationships, which are characterised by high closeness and low conflict, existed between gender-conforming learners and their teachers. The data collected revealed that rural school teachers found it easy to

maintain good relationships with gender-conforming learners, as they did not encounter conflicts that arise from gendered interactions. Teachers' normative perceptions of gender did not affect gender-conforming learners. It was easy for these learners to adhere to the codes of conduct and school policies enforced by teachers, as the policies were based on gender-stereotypical principles. Gendered interactions between teachers and learners were positive, and no teacher reported witnessing conflicts between gender-conforming learners and teachers in this regard.

This study also discovered through the analysis of the collected data that complicated teacher-learner relationships, characterised by both high closeness and high conflict, existed in the rural schools examined. Some participants indicated that they tolerated and cared about gender-nonconforming learners but also revealed that they talked to them about changing their behaviour to conform to what they considered "normal". The data indicated that, in some cases, asking gender-nonconforming learners to change resulted in conflicts between the teachers and the learners involved:

"I tolerate and manage gender-nonconforming learners well. I usually sit with them and try to find the root cause of their behaviour because I think these things come with cravings, like the way you know those people who smoke or those people who drink beer. We were born the same; no one was born drinking beer, but other people are now drunkards, and they are addicted to certain things because they permitted such things to rule their lives. So I would just call them and try to find the root cause, and try to explain to them how bad it is not to follow your gender and tell them how it will affect them, even academically. A child might be intelligent, but because of being gender nonconforming, they might not be hired at a certain company, because it is something that is being accepted lawfully, but not by everyone in society. I try to talk to them, but you know, with these kids who are into that line, most of them are stubborn. They create that defence mechanism, knowing that the community is not promoting it, they will have those defensive characteristics" (Liya, 9 February 2024).

"We do have those learners who appear to be gender nonconforming. I do not have a problem with them. I love them. They are also free to come to me, as a teacher who has to perform several roles at school. You know a teacher can be a father, mother, pastor, or counsellor to learners. I try to give gender-

nonconforming learners advice, telling them that what they are doing is wrong. But some of them do not want to be told this; they become rude and start avoiding you after trying to talk to them” (Nandi, 23 February 2023).

Liya and Nandi indicated that they tolerated, cared for, and loved gender-nonconforming learners, and they were close to them. However, they also mentioned that they advised these learners to conform to societal gender roles, which caused conflict. Liya and Nandi revealed a significant misunderstanding of gender nonconformity among most teachers in rural schools, which is the main cause of gender exclusivity that hinders positive teacher-learner interactions. Liya likened gender nonconformity to drinking beer and the cravings associated with smoking addiction, while Nandi believed that gender nonconformity was wrong. In the studied rural schools, most teachers’ normative perceptions of gender hindered positive relationships, particularly with gender-nonconforming learners.

Through the analysis of the collected data, the study also found that reserved teacher-learner relationships characterised by low closeness and low conflict also existed in the studied rural schools. Some teachers indicated that they avoided or ignored gender-nonconforming learners. This behaviour entails discrimination and a lack of care and support of these students. Ignoring them may result in low closeness between teachers and learners, as well as low conflict, which will lead to a diminished level of interaction:

“Teachers are not the same. Some don’t take it at all. They don’t even talk to gender-nonconforming learners. If you are gender nonconforming, queer, transgender, gay, or any of those, they will say. ‘You mustn’t talk to them.’ In some cases, gender-nonconforming learners hide themselves because they know the behaviour of other teachers. They know that they will treat them badly, yeah” (Mandla, 15 September 2023).

“Sometimes, gender-nonconforming learners try to hide by participating in all the duties that they are given, especially boys who act like girls. They won’t talk a lot. They avoid interacting too much with their teachers. They wouldn’t want to be noticed. But somehow along the line, some of those female traits will be visible. You can see that they are trying, by all means, to be like boys so that

their identity may not compromise their relationship with male teachers” (Langa, 8 September 2023).

Good communication enhances relationships. Mandla’s and Langa’s responses indicate that communication between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers is disrupted by gender discourses in the rural school environment. Teachers may avoid engaging with gender-nonconforming learners as a form of punishment, while these learners often conceal themselves to avoid drawing attention. This type of relationship is characterised by low closeness and low conflict, as both teachers and gender-nonconforming learners tend to avoid one another. Such a relationship is detrimental, as learners feel unable to communicate openly with their teachers and are restricted in their ability to express their gender identity. Their social and gender development is hindered in this type of learning environment, which is not gender-inclusive. As a result, gender-nonconforming learners are suppressed and their relationships with their teachers are strained under these circumstances.

Last but not least, this study discovered that negative teacher-learner relationships characterised by low closeness and high conflict were also common in the studied rural schools. The teachers’ accounts indicated that, in most cases, gender-nonconforming learners were not close to their teachers and frequently experienced conflicts with many of them.

These teachers coerced the learners into conforming to traditional, stereotypical gender roles and enforced gender conformity within the school premises:

“According to my observation, male teachers don’t like gender-nonconforming learners. Some do not want to accept them. Even when they want to send a learner, maybe to the shop or to do something at school, when they see that the close[st] learner is gender nonconforming, they just say, ‘No, no, no, go, I’m not calling you.’ They avoid them. The relationship is not good at all. Other teachers sometimes separate them from other learners. They don’t treat them as normal human beings, but most of those gender-nonconforming learners seem not to care. Especially the older ones, they just continue expressing themselves in the same way, and some teachers get offended as they feel like gender-nonconforming learners are rude” (Mpilo, 25 August 2023).

Other participants, like Mpilo mentioned above, reported that male teachers tend to have more negative relationships with gender-nonconforming learners than female teachers do. This finding aligns with González-Mendiondo and Moyano (2023), who evaluated teachers' attitudes towards transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals using quantitative methods in Spain. They discovered that women and feminine individuals were more likely to approve of cross-gender behaviours than men. Mpilo, as a male participant sharing this perspective about his fellow male colleagues, suggested that his observations were unbiased. The intolerance towards gender nonconformity exhibited by male teachers may stem from cultural expectations, where they anticipate boys to behave in traditionally masculine ways and may view females who exhibit masculine traits as disrespectful. This intolerance from both male and female teachers perpetuates conflicts between educators and gender-nonconforming learners:

"I witnessed several commotions between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers, particularly in high schools where I have been teaching. When teachers reprimand or say nasty words to gender-nonconforming learners, it will go out in a way where a learner and a teacher will be exchanging words or getting physical at some point. Learners in high school can express their feelings without fear" (Msizi, 12 April 2024).

"Conflicts would arise when teachers pass bad comments, [for example], your problem is that you are always trying to act like a girl, you need to man up, things like that. Sometimes you can notice that no, it's getting a bit tense, a bit tough because of the commotion" (Phila, 29 September 2023).

Msizi and Phila's responses reveal that some teachers reprimand learners for being gender nonconforming, which instigates commotions in rural school premises, especially in high schools where learners more openly explore their identities.

Learners advocate for their gender identity rights by resisting their teachers' negative comments. This resistance leads to conflicts and disrupts interactions between teachers and learners in school premises. When these interactions are not smooth, relationships tend to become negative. However, the situation is somewhat different in primary schools, where gender-nonconforming learners respond differently to teachers' negative comments:

“They cry; you see a boy or a girl crying when the teacher is talking. Then you ask what’s going on. Then they won’t tell you. You will find a letter given to you that I was crying because this teacher did this, or this teacher is treating me this way because of how I look or dress. But they normally keep quiet and cry” (Sipho, 26 January 2024).

“In the foundation phase, if teachers reprimand gender-nonconforming learners, for example, when they tell a girl to stop dressing up like a boy. Some children respond accordingly, but the way they act or behave remains the same. They try to follow what the teachers say about girls acting like girls and boys acting like boys. However, senior primary learners sometimes indicate that they do not like the fact that you are stopping them. They become angry and ignore the teachers” (Musa, 8 March 2024).

Sipho and Musa indicated that while there were negative relationships between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers in rural primary schools, the nature of the conflicts differed. Foundation phase learners often respond by crying, as they lack the courage to confront their teachers. This crying reflects their discomfort with the teachers’ reactions to gender nonconformity and signals hurt feelings. Since these learners cannot express their emotions directly to their teachers, they resort to writing letters, which suggests a lack of closeness. In contrast, gender-nonconforming senior primary learners resist negative comments from teachers by ignoring them, which signals their disapproval of their teachers’ remarks. These reactions reveal a negative relationship characterised by low closeness and high conflict.

By and large, this research discovered that positive relationships exist between gender-conforming learners and their teachers in rural school settings. In contrast, gender-nonconforming learners are affected by the demands of gendered school codes of conduct and teachers’ daily gendered expectations. They find it difficult to thrive in learning environments characterised by heteronormative discourses and expectations. Relationships between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers in rural schools are often strained due to these gendered codes of conduct, with many teachers embedding gender-normative ideologies into their daily expectations of learners. Tensions arise when older gender-nonconforming learners retaliate against negative comments from teachers. Some gender-nonconforming learners avoid the

teachers and withdraw to escape conflict, while others resist by ignoring the teachers' negative comments and advice. Younger gender-nonconforming learners in the foundation phase often feel subordinate to their teachers' authority and instruction. They do not retaliate when teachers ask them to change their behaviour or make negative comments about it. Instead, they typically cry and attempt to follow the teachers' instructions; however, they often struggle to change their behaviour.

6.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter illuminated how rural schools in South Africa remain deeply invested in sustaining heteronormative and gender-conforming expectations, with teachers emerging as both enforcers and negotiators of these norms. Through their regulation of dress codes, language, and conduct, teachers often reproduce a binary understanding of gender that marginalises learners who do not conform. Drawing from Butler's theory of performativity, the findings demonstrate that these regulatory practices are not neutral but function as disciplinary mechanisms that shape the possibilities of identity and belonging in educational spaces. This research found that most participants' perceptions of gender were built on normative ideologies. Most teachers expected learners to behave in traditionally gender-stereotypical ways, which created tension between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers. Many teachers in rural schools use gendered language, and some employ inappropriate language to refer to gender-nonconforming learners. The teachers' behaviour is exacerbated by their lack of understanding of gender-nonconforming identities, which are often regarded as abnormal or inappropriate by most teachers in rural school settings. The rights of gender-nonconforming learners are violated in the name of helping them to comply with the school's code of conduct and assisting them in becoming "normal".

Most participants revealed that they had difficulties performing social roles, particularly towards gender-nonconforming learners, beyond delivering learning content. The chapter highlighted a troubling paradox: while schools are mandated to be inclusive, they remain sites where the rights of gender-nonconforming learners are undermined through subtle and overt practices of exclusion by teachers. Teachers' lack of understanding of gender nonconformity, reliance on religious and cultural justifications, and use of negative language reveal how systemic inequities are

reproduced in school premises. Importantly, the findings show that this exclusion is not only symbolic but materially affects learners' educational experiences, sense of safety, and social integration.

In summary, gender normativity in rural areas impacts gender inclusivity, which renders rural learning spaces unsafe for gender-nonconforming learners. A significant strength of this study is its focus on rural school contexts, where cultural traditions, community authority, and institutional codes of conduct intersect to reinforce heteronormativity and gender conformity in the school environment.

In the following chapter, the researcher makes recommendations aimed at challenging gender-normative ideologies in schools to create safe learning environments that accommodate all learners, regardless of their gender differences.

CHAPTER 7:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This research stipulates that the relationships between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners in rural schools are strained due to the gender normativity perpetuated by most teachers. Previous research has identified gender normativity as a stumbling block to gender inclusivity in various educational institutions worldwide (Francis 2021; Horton 2022; Mdlolo 2017; Msibi 2012; Naeimi & Kjaran 2022; Ullman 2017; Zaggi 2022). Most teachers' narratives about their gender perceptions and experiences revealed that they continue to hold gender-normative ideologies that are based on gender binarism. Chapter 6 outlined how these gender-normative ideologies affect day-to-day teacher-learner interactions, as most schools and teachers expect gender to be performed and recognised as binary. Daily interactions between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners are characterised by commotion, poor communication, unresolved conflicts, and unmet expectations. Most teachers respond negatively when learners do not conform to gendered codes of conduct and expectations. The narratives of many teachers indicated that they did not understand gender nonconformity; they therefore found it difficult to tolerate or support gender-nonconforming learners. However, the teachers indicated that the chances of having positive relationships with gender-conforming learners were high. Gender-conforming learners could easily adhere to the code of conduct, which is primarily based on gender binary principles, and express themselves in ways that satisfy their teachers' gendered expectations.

The following sections outline the research's conclusions, contributions to the body of existing knowledge, recommendations for policymakers and future research, and the limitations of the study. The next section unpacks the research questions and how they were answered.

7.2 IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY FOR TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

The main research question for this study was: “How do teachers’ perceptions of gender normativity inform teacher-learner relationships in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?” The main research question was addressed using the following secondary research questions:

- 1) What are the teachers’ perceptions of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- 2) What are the teachers’ experiences of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- 3) How do teachers respond to gender nonconformity on school premises in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?
- 4) How does gender normativity inform the way teachers and learners interact in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

The following subsections indicate how these questions were answered, which ultimately led to answering the main research question.

7.2.1 What are the teachers’ perceptions of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

The findings of the research demonstrated that most teachers held gender-normative ideologies and believed in gender binarism. This was perpetuated by their socialisation, whereby the intersection of gender, sex, sexuality, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, and social background played a major role in shaping their views on gender. Most teachers enforced gender-normative behaviours in school premises, where the gender binary was considered normal for boys and girls. This ideology is integrated into the school learning content, uniform policies, playgrounds, and chores around the school. Most participants specified that they expected those assigned male at birth to act and behave like “boys” at school, while those assigned female at birth were expected to act and behave like “girls”. As indicated by most participants, boys were expected to be stronger and more masculine at school, while girls were expected to be “dollies”, which, as one participant put it, means that they should be “soft” and make efforts to look “cute” all the time.

Gender perceptions held by most teachers influence their division and allocation of duties based on traditional gender stereotypes. For example, most participants noted that they assigned laborious duties, such as carrying desks, to boys and gave lighter duties to girls. Some even differentiated sports for boys and girls in their schools. Most participants indicated that they did not expect girls to be as physical as boys. The participants adhered to the principles of traditional femininity and masculinity, whereby boys are expected to be strong and girls are seen as soft and nurturing. To a greater extent, the data revealed that most teachers' perceptions align with Butler's (1990) view that members of society tend to see sex, gender, and sexuality as intimately intertwined. Most participants defined gender as being born with female or male genitalia and acknowledged that gender is fulfilled by performing allocated stereotypical gender and sexual roles in a given context.

Consequently, the way most of the studied teachers view gender in binary terms has negative effects in rural schools, as the teachers often find it difficult to understand and tolerate gender nonconformity within the school premises. This finding aligns with the research studies of Njapha *et al* (2024) and Singh and Sewnath (2025), which discovered that teachers had a limited understanding of diverse genders and sexualities due to their heteronormative and moralistic views.

7.2.2 What are the teachers' experiences of gender normativity in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

As indicated above, the socialisation of most teachers played a major role in shaping their gender perceptions. The research data showed that most of the studied teachers grew up in rural communities where gender was predominantly viewed as binary. Most participants experienced gender normativity in their communities, families, and educational settings. Social roles and chores were rigidly assigned according to heteronormative gender categories. Gender perceptions in the environments where the participants were raised were embedded in daily community and household practices, as well as in their educational institutions. Most female participants reported that their families groomed them for feminine gender roles, while the males indicated they were trained to become masculine. Chores in most families and schools were assigned according to stereotypes; nurturing and caring tasks, such as cleaning and cooking, were allocated to girls, whereas laborious tasks were assigned to boys.

Most participants' communities, families, and schools held gender-normative ideologies and enforced heteronormativity, both of which were passed down to the participants. In these communities, gender nonconformity was not tolerated. Individuals who were gender nonconforming were labelled as taboo and faced abuse. Although, few participants attested that their families did not stereotypically divide chores in their households, most rural school teachers studied were socialised into believing that the gender binary should be the "norm", which reinforced gender normativity in their areas of work.

Most participants indicated that they reinforced and enforced gender-normative behaviours and expectations in their workplaces. They expected learners to adhere to their assigned gender at birth, categorising them strictly as either a "boy" or a "girl". Anything outside these categories was deemed "abnormal". Chores were stereotypically assigned in the studied rural schools, and there were specific expectations regarding boys' and girls' appearance and behaviour. Dress codes for boys and girls were enforced in schools. Some participants also noted that sporting activities were still allocated based on stereotypes, with boys participating in sports such as soccer and rugby, while girls played netball. Most participants mentioned that learners who failed to conform to gendered expectations faced disciplinary measures and were pressured to change their behaviour to align with normative standards. This hindered gender inclusivity in rural schools and created a hostile environment for gender-nonconforming learners.

The above finding supports various recent studies on gender-nonconforming learners, which also found that transgender, nonbinary, and gender- and sexually diverse learners faced hostile school environments characterised by discrimination, misgendering, and exclusion (Francis 2021; Francis & Monakali 2021; McBride & Neary 2021; Juma 2023). Teachers expected gender-nonconforming learners to refrain from expressing their felt gender identity in order to conform to the dominant heteronormative educational discourses. In a nutshell, in this study, the teachers' experiences of gender normativity played a role in establishing their perceptions of gender binarism, which they also expected learners to conform to within rural school premises.

7.2.3 How do teachers respond to gender nonconformity on school premises in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

Most participants indicated that they were against gender nonconformity. The research data showed that teachers attempted to change learners when they behaved in ways that contradicted gendered expectations. Some teachers reported telling gender-nonconforming learners to change with “love”. However, this cannot be considered love when the rights of gender-nonconforming individuals are violated.

Most rural school teachers demonstrated a lack of understanding of gender nonconformity and lacked knowledge on how to support gender-nonconforming learners on school premises. A few participants (three) who expressed comfort around gender-nonconforming learners mentioned that when they observed learners behaving or dressing in ways that deviated from gender expectations, they laughed before asking the learners why they appeared as such. One (female) participant stated that she laughed to calm her nerves before addressing such learners. The other two (male) participants stated they laughed because they found it funny and comical. Laughing at gender-nonconforming learners is an inappropriate reaction. While teachers may perceive it as a joke, gender-nonconforming learners may feel insulted and degraded. They may not have the power to ask their teachers to stop laughing at them, which may harm their self-esteem. Gender-nonconforming learners may feel unable to express themselves freely in front of their teachers, as they may fear being regarded as a joke. This could damage their relationships with their teachers. A good relationship is characterised by both parties interacting freely and comfortably.

This research revealed that some teachers ignored gender nonconformity and acted as if it did not exist. Some participants expressed that they solely focused on teaching the learning content and did not concern themselves with gender differences. This contradicts the ethos of the teaching profession, which is to facilitate learners’ holistic development, including their gender development. Ignoring gender issues may hinder the development of gender-nonconforming learners, as they might think less of themselves as individuals.

The participants also pointed out that some teachers did not want to be associated with gender-nonconforming learners because they could not stand them. For example, they expressed that they disliked gender-nonconforming learners and accused them

of being rude. This rudeness might be a protective cocoon constructed by gender-nonconforming learners to resist the unfavourable treatment they received from teachers. Some form of retaliation indicates their dissatisfaction with how the teachers treated them. Other participants noted that teachers found it difficult to even send gender-nonconforming learners on errands. This suggests that some teachers did not trust these learners and viewed them as unfit and unreliable individuals who cannot be entrusted with any tasks. A specific example was provided by a participant who recounted an incident where a male teacher called a learner to give them money to buy something. When the learner approached the teacher, he recognised the learner as a known gender-nonconforming individual and simply told them to turn back, and called another learner to run the errand instead. This lack of trust from teachers jeopardises the teacher-learner relationship. When gender-nonconforming learners are not trusted by teachers, they may also struggle to trust their teachers in turn. Trust is a two-way street; there can be no good relationship without it (Ganguly 2022).

In summary, this research found that most teachers respond negatively to gender nonconformity in rural school settings due to their entrenched gender-normative perceptions, which render gender nonconformity “abnormal” and lead to misunderstandings of the concept among teachers. They expect gender to be performed within binary discourses, which results in conflict when gender-nonconforming learners fail to meet these expectations. This research revealed that older gender-nonconforming learners tend to retaliate and confront teachers if they are dissatisfied with their treatment, whereas younger learners often become emotional and cry. The teachers’ reactions to gender nonconformity suggest that the relationships between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners in the studied rural schools were strained and characterised by low closeness and high levels of conflict. In contrast, most teachers managed to maintain positive interactions and good relationships with those learners who adhered and conformed to gender-normative practices.

7.2.4 How does gender normativity inform the way teachers and learners interact in King Cetshwayo District rural schools?

The research findings indicated that gender normativity was prevalent in the studied rural schools. Due to gender-normative perceptions, some teachers despised gender

nonconformity and struggled to interact with gender-nonconforming learners. Most teachers reported setting daily practices and expectations based on the gender binary. They used biological and physical appearances to categorise the learners by gender. Gender-nonconforming learners were not given the opportunity to express themselves. If a learner appeared to be a boy, he was expected to perform the duties allocated to boys without excuse, and the same applied to the girls. There were no exceptions to these gender norms in the rural schools. Gender discourses based on the binary framework were created by the school systems and teachers. Gender-nonconforming learners did not have the power to challenge school policies or their teachers' gendered enforcement and demands. The participants pointed out that failure to conform to gender expectations led to serious consequences, such as being embarrassed at assembly in front of peers while being told to reform. In other words, gender-nonconforming learners were oppressed as teachers exerted power to enforce binary gender performance during their interactions with gender-nonconforming learners within rural school premises.

The study found that daily interactions in the studied rural schools were not positive, particularly between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners. The teachers reported that they constantly reprimanded and corrected those learners who did not conform to the schools' gendered rules and expectations. This indicates that gender normativity negatively influenced teacher-learner interactions. In their interactions with learners, the teachers employed gendered language, categorising gender as binary, and some used inappropriate terms such as "demonic" or "satanic" to refer to gender-nonconforming learners. The use of such language disrupted positive teacher-learner interactions. This research revealed that teachers leveraged their privileged position to insult gender-nonconforming learners in an attempt to force them to change and become "normal". The participants also recounted that some gender-nonconforming learners were afraid to interact with certain teachers due to concerns about the discriminatory language they would typically encounter.

In summary, this research found that gender normativity negatively influenced interactions between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners in the studied rural schools. Most teachers adhered to gender normativity and were in a privileged position, as they enforced conformity among gender-nonconforming learners within the school premises, which hindered the creation of positive teacher-learner

relationships. This finding aligns with Horton's (2022) research, which revealed that learners were expected to behave and act in a heteronormative manner during teacher-learner interactions at school.

7.3 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

Firstly, the findings of this research contribute to the existing data on inclusive education and gender diversity, which are scarce (Francis *et al* 2019). Ullman (2017) stipulates that teachers' attitudes towards gender expression in schools are under-researched. This study addressed this gap by examining how teachers react to gender nonconformity in rural schools. It was found that most teachers held negative attitudes towards gender nonconformity due to entrenched gender-normative perceptions, which were primarily rooted in the intersection of gender, sex, sexuality, race, class, culture, religion, and social background.

Secondly, this study confirmed the interrelatedness of the gender performativity theory and the intersectionality theoretical framework. Through the application of these theories, it was found that the intersection of social categorisations such as gender, sex, sexuality, race, religion, culture, and social background significantly influences how gender perceptions are constructed and how these perceptions shape gender performance expectations in rural school settings. Future researchers who intend to study similar topics can apply these two theories together.

Thirdly, the findings of this research raise awareness of gender normativity among readers by outlining some of the factors that contribute to its existence, sustenance, and maintenance. By exploring teachers' perceptions and experiences, the research highlights how mindsets can be changed to eradicate negative attitudes towards gender nonconformity in schools.

Lastly, the research offers recommendations, such as the development of gender diversity policies, the creation of gender diversity curricula for student teachers and learners, and the provision of gender diversity handbooks and workshops for teachers. Eradicating gender normativity in schools may lead to the achievement of this research's primary goal: to create a safe, loving, and welcoming school social environment for all learners, regardless of gender differences by improving the quality of teacher-learner relationships. Nevertheless, the practical challenges that may be

faced in implementing the recommendations offered by this research should not be overlooked. The development of gender diversity policies, the creation of gender diversity curricula for student teachers and learners, and the provision of gender diversity handbooks and workshops for teachers may be affected by limited resources and a lack of engagement by relevant stakeholders. Provision of adequate resources and full engagement by stakeholders will enhance the establishment and implementation of this research's recommendations outlined below.

7.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

South Africa is one of the countries that advocates for and supports the UN's SDGs. SDG 4 promotes the achievement of inclusive, equal, and quality education for all by 2030 (Adipat & Chotikapanich 2022). The eradication of gender discrimination to ensure inclusive learning spaces for gender and sexual minorities in educational settings should continue to be prioritised to facilitate the achievement of SDG 4 (UNESCO 2015). The South African DoE should ensure that the topic of gender nonconformity is included in teacher training modules so that future educators, whether from rural or urban backgrounds, are aware of its dimensions before entering the classroom to teach these learners. The studied teachers understood and acknowledged that they had been taught about individual uniqueness and children's rights during their training; however, it would be beneficial for gender uniqueness to be included so that teachers can be fully equipped to appropriately handle all unique learners. For example, preservice teachers can be educated about what gender nonconformity is and what it means through compulsory modules, while qualified teachers can receive training through workshops.

In addition to the above, those involved in the teaching and learning industry should be educated about different sexual orientations and gender expressions. This is important because the research revealed that most teachers were not familiar with concepts and terms related to gender nonconformity or gender/sexual diversity. Both preservice teachers and qualified teachers need comprehensive education on all aspects of gender/sexual diversity. This understanding will help them to better comprehend gender nonconformity and will enable them to treat and support gender-nonconforming learners as "normal" human beings.

Moreover, the DoE should collaborate with gender experts to develop policies that specifically address gender diversity in schools. Clear policies that outline how teachers should treat gender-nonconforming and diverse learners must be established. Teachers serve as role models; if they continue to discriminate against gender-nonconforming learners, students are likely to follow suit. Handbooks on how to support and assist gender-nonconforming learners should also be created. Additionally, anti-bullying guidelines should be included in these handbooks for teachers. This would help teachers to understand how to respond when gender-nonconforming learners report instances of being bullied by teachers or fellow learners.

Furthermore, the DoE and stakeholders in gender issues should ensure that schools establish bodies to support gender-nonconforming learners. These bodies should provide a safe space for learners to report issues, seek counselling, and find comfort. This initiative may help gender-nonconforming learners to counter feelings of resentment that could lead to dropping out of school, drug abuse, or suicidal thoughts. A school is a second home; all learners need to feel safe, loved, and welcomed, regardless of their gender differences.

Lastly, the DoE and relevant stakeholders should ensure that the school curriculum covers the topic of gender nonconformity to allow learners to acquire knowledge from a young age. This education will help learners to understand how to treat gender-nonconforming individuals in schools and their communities. Learners will grow up to be members of society, leaders, employees, or teachers who possess adequate knowledge of gender and sexual diversity. This will contribute to creating a better world for gender-nonconforming individuals, which will improve their safety and inclusion in schools and society. The participants indicated that they sometimes unknowingly mistreated gender-nonconforming learners. Educating young minds will help to spread essential information about gender-nonconforming individuals and address issues of gender discrimination in schools and communities.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should aim for a continuous understanding of teachers' reactions and attitudes towards gender nonconformity. This will help the research community to track

how gender perceptions shift over time. Both urban and rural schools should be targeted. To expand on this research, the extent to which education stakeholders understand gender nonconformity should be examined. Future studies may focus on departmental officials, principals, teachers, and learners. This research showed that rural school teachers are not adequately informed about issues of gender nonconformity. The same may be true for principals, learners, and departmental officials. Policy development and implementation regarding gender nonconformity in schools can only be effective if stakeholders fully understand what gender nonconformity is. This should be the priority and focus of gender research bodies.

7.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Firstly, some participants were hesitant to share their views and feelings about gender-nonconforming learners, as most of them held negative perceptions. However, building rapport by assuring the participants of identity privacy helped to foster trust in the research, which led them to open up and openly express their feelings and experiences with gender-nonconforming learners.

Secondly, accessing rural schools for sampling and conducting interviews was challenging but ultimately worthwhile. Travel was somewhat costly and time-consuming, as the rural schools studied were located on the outskirts of remote areas.

7.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Education plays a crucial role in an individual's social life. It is essential for every human being to have the privilege of acquiring an education. It is distressing to learn that some children are deprived of this right due to their gender differences. This study is significant as it examined gender normativity as one of the factors that disrupts the inclusivity of gender-nonconforming learners in schools. The four objectives of this research study were to explore teachers' perceptions of gender normativity, to determine the causes of gender normativity, to investigate how teachers respond to gender nonconformity on school premises, and to explore the influence of gender normativity on teacher-learner interactions in King Cetshwayo District rural schools. This research sought to answer the main question: How do teachers' perceptions of gender normativity inform teacher-learner relationships in King Cetshwayo District

rural schools? The objectives were achieved, and the research question was answered.

This research found that most rural school teachers held gender-normative perceptions and facilitated gender normativity in rural schools. The studied teachers' perceptions were shaped by their gender socialisation experiences and the intersection of their gender, sex, sexuality, culture, religion, and social background. Due to these gender-normative perceptions, the rural school teachers expected gender to be performed in binary terms and found it difficult to understand, accept, and tolerate gender nonconformity within rural school premises. The teachers enforced school codes of conduct that were embedded in gender-normative ideologies and coerced learners into conforming to stereotypical gender categories of "boys" and "girls" during daily interactions. They responded negatively to gender nonconformity within rural school premises; some teachers ignored, judged, and discriminated against gender-nonconforming learners and struggled to support these learners' rights to express their gender identity. Interactions between teachers and gender-nonconforming learners were characterised by power dynamics, with teachers in positions of authority being able to ignore, reprimand, and discipline those learners who did not conform to gendered expectations. Consequently, gender-nonconforming learners had no option but to conform, hide their identities, or retaliate against their teachers' negative actions and reactions and faced the consequences thereof. The relationships between the teachers and gender-nonconforming learners were found to be mostly reserved, complicated, and negative due to the practices and enforcement of gender normativity. This research advocates for positive teacher-learner relationships and school environments that are gender inclusive, and it recommends intervention programmes aimed at eradicating gender-normative ideologies in schools.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Gender Normativity in Education: Implications On Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools

Instructions

Interviews will only commence after reading the informed consent form and information sheet and after the participant has understood and consented to be interviewed.

Section A: Biographical questions

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. Where are you staying currently?
5. What is your gender?
6. What is your sexual identity?
7. What is your educational level?
8. What is your religion?
9. What is your teaching experience?
10. How long have you been teaching in the King Cetshwayo District?

Section B: Teachers' perceptions of gender normativity

1. What is your understanding of gender?
2. How do you describe a boy and a girl?
3. Should boys and girls be treated the same way in school?
4. As a teacher, how do you define gender roles?
5. How do you allocate chores between girls and boys in your classroom?
6. What are the expectations of girls and boys within the school premises?
7. Do you have learners who identify as gender nonconforming in your school?

Section C: Teachers' experiences of gender normativity

1. Briefly explain your childhood experience in terms of gender and gender roles.
2. What was expected of you when you were growing up?
3. Which activities did you perform at home as a boy or a girl?
4. Did you live with or come across gender-nonconforming individuals as you grew up?
5. What was the community's perspective on gender nonconformity?
6. What was your perspective on gender-nonconforming individuals while growing up?
7. What is your perception of gender-nonconforming individuals now?

Section D: How teachers respond to gender nonconformity within the school premises

1. What views do you hold about gender-nonconforming learners in your school?
2. Do you think gender-nonconforming learners are tolerated in your school?
3. How do you describe the interaction patterns between gender-nonconforming learners and teachers in your school?
4. What advice would you give to learners who are gender nonconforming?
5. What kind of support does the school give to learners who get bullied due to their gender differences?

Section E: How gender normativity influences the interaction patterns of teachers and learners in rural school premises

1. Are the boys and girls expected to act the same or differently at school?
2. What are your usual reactions to boys who are seen to behave or dress like girls?
3. How do you react when you see a girl behaving and dressing like a boy?
4. What are your thoughts about gender-nonconforming learners in your school?

Section F: Are there any questions you would like to ask?

THANK YOU!

Appendix B: Recording Consent Form

Informed consent for the recording of the interview

Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools

I ----- (full name of the participant) hereby agree to participate voluntarily in the study. I acknowledge that I will be interviewed and all the interviews will be audio recorded as part of an audit trail.

Signature of participant ----- Date -----

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Dear Participant

My name is Mrs Thandiwe Dewa, a master's student at the University of South Africa (Unisa), student number 54620643, Department of Sociology. As part of my master's degree requirements, I am currently doing a study on **Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools**. The study seeks to explore teachers' perspectives and understanding of the concept of gender normativity and how it affects their relationships with learners.

Participation in the study will require you to take part in an interview where you will be answering questions that I will be asking you; questions about yourself, experiences, and perspectives of gender normativity. The interview will be recorded, and I will be taking notes during the interview. The duration of a single interview will be 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews will take place at your school or any place where there is privacy at your convenience. The collected data will be kept protected in electronic folders that are password-locked. The interviews will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and personal information. Your participation in the study is voluntary and will not include any rewards or penalties. You can decline to participate in the study or withdraw from participation at any time with no repercussions or penalties. The information collected will be used in completing the master's dissertation and for future publications.

Should you have any questions or require clarity on any aspects of the study, during or after the completion of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me on my cellphone number: 0817125068 or via email: thandiwedewa@gmail.com or my supervisor, Mr Maake, on 012 429 6567 / emaaketb@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for your participation

Kind regards,

Mrs Thandiwe Dewa

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools

I ----- (full name of the participant), hereby agree to participate voluntarily in the study. I acknowledge that I will be interviewed for 45 to 90 minutes. I understand that I will not be rewarded for participating in the study. The decision to participate is voluntary, and I can withdraw from participating at any time without penalties or consequences. I understand that all the collected information will be kept safe, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity and personal information.

Signature of Participant ----- Date -----

Appendix E: Ethical Clearance Letter



COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

27 June 2023

Dear Mrs Thandiwe Dewa

NHREC Registration # :
Rec-240816-052
CREC Reference # :
54620643_CRECHS_2023

Decision:
Ethics Approval from 27 June 2023
to 27 June 2024

Researcher(s): Name: Ms. T. Dewa
Contact details: 54620643@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Supervisor(s): Name: Mr. T. B. Maake
Contact details: emaaketb@unisa.ac.za

Title: Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationship in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools
Degree Purpose: Masters

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa College of Human Science Ethics Committee. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **medium risk application** was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the



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- confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
 6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
 7. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date (**27 June 2024**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **54620643_CREC_CHS_2023** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature:



Prof. KB Khan
CHS Research Ethics Committee Chairperson
Email: khankb@unisa.ac.za
Tel: (012) 429 8210

Signature: PP



Prof ZZ Nkosi
Acting-Executive Dean: CHS
E-mail: nkosizz@unisa.ac.za
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Appendix F: Permission to Conduct Research in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1051

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Mrs B.T. Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/7552

Mrs Thandiwe Dewa
P.O. Box 8317
Empangeni Rail
EMPANGENI
3910

Dear Mrs Dewa

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"GENDER NORMATIVITY IN EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS ON TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIP IN KING CETSHWAYO DISTRICT RURAL SCHOOLS"**; in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **14th August 2023 to 31st December 2025**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 14 August 2023

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix G: Editing Letter



22 January 2026

To whom it may concern

Re: Proofreading and academic editing: Mrs T. Dewa

I, Ms Jeanne-Louise van Aswegen, hereby confirm proofreading and academic editing of the master's thesis entitled *Gender Normativity in Education: Implications on Teacher-Learner Relationships in King Cetshwayo District Rural Schools* by Thandiwe Dewa (student number 54620643) in December 2025 / January 2026. The editor is not liable for post-editing changes made by the researcher.

Please contact me on 082 811 6857 or at jeanne@grammarguardians.co.za regarding any queries that may arise.

Kind regards,


J.L. van Aswegen
Grammar Guardians