

# Analyzing LGB-based school bullying among senior phase learners in South Africa

 Nizibone Juliet Mguye<sup>1</sup>,  Bunmi Isaiah Omodan<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Butterworth campus, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

\*Corresponding author: Bunmi Isaiah Omodan (Email: [bomodan@wsu.ac.za](mailto:bomodan@wsu.ac.za))

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Despite LGB recognition, recent literature and news reports have evidenced the existence of LGB-based school bullying among school-going adolescents. Through this, learners experience calamities such as anxiety, insecurity, poor academic performance, and even suicide. For this reason, this study investigates the limitations of schools in combating LGB-based school bullying and determines methods to combat LGB-based school bullying.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** This qualitative study was lensed through Social Stigma Theory (SST) and the Anti-bias Education Approach (ABEA), adopting a constructivist paradigm and a case study design. To elicit descriptive data from the participants, in-depth interviews were conducted with 9 purposefully sampled participants, including 4 senior phase teachers (grades 8 & 9), 2 lesbian females, and 3 gay senior phase learners. Researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis to make sense of the data.

**Findings:** This study revealed a number of barriers that prevent schools from addressing bullying that is based on LGB among students in the senior phase. These include uneducated and unsupportive professors, the lack of recognition of LGB, adherence to religion, vague and nonexistent claims of bullying based on LGB, and the use of the same facilities as students who are heterosexual. This study also revealed that avoiding gender disclosure, creating awareness about gender diversity, providing bathrooms for LGB learners, and following up on LGB-based bullying cases are methods that can be practiced to combat LGB-based school bullying.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes by recommending frequent dialogues about LGB among learners and teachers to familiarize themselves with its existence.

**Research Implications:** The study identified the need for schools to combat LGB-based school bullying.

**Practical Implications:** The study recommends open dialogues on gender diversity, discourages LGB-based bullying, empowers teachers to intervene, and promotes confidence in LGB-based learners.

**Contribution to Literature:** This research contributes to the body of knowledge by identifying and addressing the unique challenges associated with LGB-based school bullying.

**Keywords:** *Bias, Bullying, Heterosexual learners, Homosexuality, LGB, Prejudice, senior phase learners.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the profusion of encounters faced by learners in Amathole East District of the Eastern Cape Province, specifically those attending public schools settled in rural settings, is Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB)-based school bullying. Consequences of this are blamed on fist-tightness of teachers in offering LGB-based sexuality education to learners in their early stages of upbringing, while on the other hand, UNESCO (2016) observed that LGB-based bullying among senior-phase learners is driven by the stigma and biases emanating from cultural beliefs about gender roles, masculinity, and femininity. That is, elders' indoctrination of the qualities and responsibilities of each gender causes those who still follow suit to look down on those who associate themselves with LGB. This has led to episodes of bullying cases, including but not limited to discrimination, humiliation, physical assault, and sexual

harassment (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), of those who conform to LGB, which is not validated by traditional gender norms and yet is not societally accepted.

LGB has become extremely popular among adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is eventually gaining popularity with the clock ticking, irrespective of the fact that the utmost number of learners, teachers, and parents perceive it as blasphemy. Although homosexuality, including LGB, is no longer prohibited in many countries, including South Africa (Reygan, 2016), misconceptions, stigma, misjudgments, and misunderstandings of these genders still exist among people. It is for this reason that we found it imperative to analyze LGB-based bullying in an inclusive school environment.

Comparatively, Angerson (2019) observed that in England, post-criminalization of sexual activities between men by the Buggery Act of 1533, men rarely identified themselves as sexually intrigued by the same sex. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Section 28, which was part of the Local Government Act of 1988, prohibited the intentional promotion and facilitation of homosexuality (Nicholls, 2021). That is, schools were not allowed to teach learners about any aspect of homosexuality because they had to remain blind-eyed about it so they would not identify themselves as LGB. Post-revoke of Section 28, a startling number of LGB learners in Britain's schools was revealed, and it turned out that they were experiencing traumatic sexuality-based bullying (Bradlow, Bartram, Guasp, & Jadvá, 2017) and could hardly talk about it because, judging from how LGB was demonized, they believed that being LGB was wrong. In response to the LGB-based school bullying, England's secondary schools are authorized to teach about sexual orientation as well as gender identity (Milne, 2020), and the English government also prioritized wellbeing of LGB learners, as they clearly state that bullying of any form, prejudice-based bullying included, could no longer be tolerated (Tippett, Houlston, & Smith, 2010).

LGB-based school bullying is prevalent in the United States, as various scholars have reported cases of bullying that targeted school-going LGB learners. The unavailability of documented information based on the victimization of LGB learners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century supports the notion that homosexuality was not as popular as it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This articulation emerges from the research that was conducted by Kosciw, Clark, Truong, and Zongrone (2020) in New York State, which indicated that information about LGB-based bullying in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not available. The scholar further asserted that in 2019, numerous learners whose assigned birth sex did not match their gender reported feelings of insecurity since they were called homophobic names, harassed, and assaulted. In the study conducted by Humphries, Li, Smith, Bridge, and Zhu (2021) in the United States, it has been reported that the dehumanization of LGB learners through electronic bullying, which is also known as cyberbullying, has been reported as a consequence of suicide attempts. This shows that although LGB population is among the categories that are protected by the law, lawmakers have not yet implemented documented sources that address LGB group misconceptions, vulnerability, and prejudice (Payne & Smith, 2013).

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, homosexuality in Japanese schools was believed to be the main source of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). This articulation surfaced in the South China Morning Post (2016), as it reported that teachers in Japanese schools stated that same-sex relationships were the main cause of AIDS and made homophobic comments about gays, which eventually stirred bullying that resulted in gay learners experiencing depression. A startling number of Japanese LGB learners were bullied in secondary schools and reported that their teachers did not intervene merely because they were not capacitated with relevant information and materials to combat LGB-based bullying in their respective schools (Mainichi Japan, 2017). Similarly, Yoshida, Matsushima, and Okazaki (2022) concluded that in Japanese medical schools, education on LGB content is less established.

In Australian schools, learners endure both verbal and physical sexuality-based bullying, which can be easily remedied by engaging learners in LBG-based discussions to enlighten them about the encounters they put the LGB community through when they display mean attitudes towards them (Parker, Webb, & Chonody, 2023). However, the likelihood of diminishing LGB-based bullying among Australian learners is close to nil since the University of South Australia (2022) observed heterosexual teachers' biases as they prefer not to intervene in LGB-based bullying since they have negative attitudes towards minoritized genders. Hence, this exposes LGB learners to never-ending intimidation, humiliation, and demotion (Parker et al., 2023).

The LGB population is among the most marginalized populations in Africa (Westman, 2022) because countries like Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria are still maintaining laws that British colonizers ratified to marginalize LGB because they perceived it as sodomy (Roxburgh, 2022). Homophobic bullying in Nigerian secondary schools is deemed to be driven by the absence of educational policies that protect LGB learners (Okanlawon, 2017), which

results in appearance misconceptions and difficulties in befriending other learners in the school setting (Ogueji & Ogueji, 2022). It also emerged that Nigerian schools foster heterosexuality through homophobic views and rules with the intent of marginalizing the LGB lifestyle (Okanlawon, 2020), which belittles the already minoritized group. Hence, the scholar observed the imperativeness of implementing culturally sensitive anti-bullying programs to ensure the safety of LGB learners. In Ghanaian schools, LGB learners are deprived of participating in democratic domains since they are not among the majority group - heterosexuality (Akagbor, Dzisah, & Sedegah, 2022). This raised uncertainties about their sexual orientation (Quarshie, Waterman, & House, 2020). Rimes et al. (2019) observed an increased suicide rate among LGB learners who were victims of stigma-based victimization.

In the case of South Africa, irrespective of the constitutional rights that were documented with the intent of protecting previously marginalized sexualities, including LGB groups, homophobic bullying is still extensive to a prodigious level (Reygan, 2016). The reason underlying this endless discrimination, stigma, and demonization of learners who conform to LGB identity may be the fact that the South African constitution did not document laws that directly focus on minority groups. However, it included them in Section 9, which includes all South African residents (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2017). This has resulted in a couple of the most common forms of discrimination, namely: verbal bullying as well as violence threats (Roxburgh, 2022) and vulnerability to heterosexism on a daily basis (Nicholls, 2021), where LGB learners are still perceived as inferior compared to heterosexual learners. As much as there is no concrete evidence or indication of higher levels of bullying among LGB learners when compared to heterosexual learners, the Legal Resource Center (2022) observed that LGB learners across the country encounter homophobic bullying, not only from their peers but also from their teachers, who were supposed to maintain classroom safety for each individual learner without considering gender diversity. This causes LGB learners to avoid talking about being bullied, as Rhodes University (2017) mentioned that LGB learners have no role model to talk to and no teacher to offer support, so they end up being suicidal, anxious, and depressed, which negatively affects their self-esteem and academic performance. In efforts to diminish LGB-based bullying in South African schools, the Department of Basic Education implemented an inclusive school safety framework that aimed to challenge bullying in general (Department of Basic Education, n.d).

The fist-tightness of scholars conducting research on LGB-based school bullying in the Eastern Cape Province resulted in limited literature about the phenomenon. However, Staff Reporter (2017) on IOL reported that the Eastern Cape is the most homophobic province in South Africa, yet violence against LGB individuals is more prevalent. Rumormongering is a form of bullying that targets LGB learners, as a learner was being rumored and accused of being capable of raping other learners since she identified herself as a lesbian (Iguale, 2019). On the other hand, most educators and administrators were brought up in a society where LGB was perceived as sodomite, traditionally inappropriate, and transgressive.

Although all these proposals have been instigated, cases of LGB-based school bullying and its effects are severe. The above literature divulges that the root of the stigma, misconceptions, misjudgments, and biases towards LGB learners that lead to their victimization is the lack of sexuality education, especially based on sexual orientation. Furthermore, people are still holding onto the beliefs and laws that were enacted to marginalize LGB instead of embracing the modernized era. As the key to nearly everything, several studies observed that teachers could play a vital role in combating LGB-based bullying with proper training and adequate resources since they will offer the education necessary for learners to understand various sexualities, speak against homophobic comments, and instil morality among learners. As much as South Africa prides itself on its constitution being the “first in the world to prohibit unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, hence guarantees lesbian and gay equality” (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2017), literature revealed that cases of bullying that lead to severe effects, including suicide, are still prevalent among LGB learners.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Numerous studies conducted recently in various countries concluded that LGB learners experience a disproportional amount of bullying when compared with their heterosexual peers. This results in them experiencing lower life satisfaction (Cup, 2022), physical health problems (Zou, Andersen, & Blosnich, 2013), intolerance, discrimination, harassment, and violence regarding their sexual orientation (Subhrajit, 2014). American Psychological Association (2008) believes that these hitches lead to learners’ negative psychological effects, including depression, which hamper their classroom concentration and academic performance. On the other hand, Richardson (2021) and Wallstead (2021) highlighted that a lack of discussions based on LGB lifestyles

in the classroom contributes to LGB-based bullying, which is blamed on discriminatory curriculum and textbook chapters that do not contain adequate information for teachers to facilitate learners with. That is, curriculum planners' refusal to include LGB-based sexuality education in the curriculum only enhances the escalation of homophobic behaviours towards learners whose birth sex is not in line with their gender specifications. Furthermore, teachers' fist-tightness in conversing or talking about important aspects of homosexuality, including LGB, endangers LGB learners since heterosexual learners will continue to embrace prejudice and misconceptions about their sexual orientation. To this end, it is significant to investigate issues that limit schools from combating LGB-based school bullying and seek methods to combat it.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

For the researchers to successfully analyze LGB-based school bullying, the following research objectives were implemented:

- To investigate the limitations of schools in combating LGB-based school bullying,
- To determine methods of combating LGB-based school bullying among senior-phase learners.

### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For researchers to thoroughly analyze LGB-based school bullying, this study was underpinned by two theories. Social Stigma Theory (SST) entails an in-depth nature of stigma-based bullying and the Anti-Bias Education Approach, which fosters learners to familiarize themselves with gender diversity and speak against prejudice-based discrimination.

#### 4.1. Social Stigma Theory (SST)

Erving Goffman (1963) Social Stigma Theory (SST) elucidates stigma as the slandering of someone's character through unpleasant name-calling. Among the three forms of stigma that were detailed by Goffman (2009) is blemished individual character, which includes LGB-based stigma. When revealed, this form of stigma may result in anxiety, a ruined reputation, and lifelong negative effects on the stigmatized individual (Goffman, 1963). Nyasulu (2020) observed that qualities regarded as triggers of stigma are inculcated in societal members, leading to discrimination should one reveal those qualities. In a similar vein, Earnshaw et al. (2018) asserted that influences that result in stigma-based bullying descend from the societal level to the interpersonal level and down to the individual level. That is, stigma-based bullying does not emerge from a random internal motive but is a descendant of a societal perspective that is meant to instil a certain doctrine among its inhabitants, which is the wheel that rotates from ancient humans towards the present generation.

This theory is relevant to this study because LGB-based school bullying is a social phenomenon that is influenced by the societal indoctrination of qualities and responsibilities that are perceived to be normal for a certain gender, which induces heterosexism and results in learners' disapproval of LGB relationships. For instance, people resembling the dominant cultural group in the Eastern Cape Province believe that a man is responsible for the continuity and preservation of his clan by marrying a woman who will eventually bear children. So by identifying as LGB, they are convinced that a man is transgressing this social doctrine as men cannot bear heirs, which will probably inculcate the extinction of that particular clan. By exhibiting gay qualities, society concludes that one is no longer a man and does not deserve their respect, and they constantly remind them in a vulgar manner, which is imitated by children and practiced among LGB learners at school. This results in social exclusion, name-calling, assaults, and other forms of bullying, including spreading rumours about LGB learners. This incites self-doubt and self-hate for the stigmatized to the extent of make them anxious, depressed, drop out of school, and even consider ending their lives. This gap further led to the adoption of an anti-bias education approach to encourage learners to accommodate gender diversity.

#### 4.2. Anti-Bias Education Approach (ABEA)

Anti-Bias Education Approach was proposed in 1989 by Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019) with the intent of creating and maintaining a tranquil school environment by nurturing learners to understand and demonstrate positive personal and social identities, familiarizing learners and promoting comfort with human diversity, encouraging them to recognize unfairness, and empowering them to stand against discrimination (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Sparks believes that young schoolgirls are cognizant of privilege and power-connected factors,

including gender. Hence, they proposed ABEA and encouraged teachers to embrace and facilitate learners with Anti-Bias Education to create a community that will be supportive of all scopes of human variables, including sexual orientation (Lesley University, n.d). This approach is relevant to this study because, when applied to senior-phase classrooms, it will not only introduce the concept of diversity to learners. However, it condemns LGB-based school bullying since the levels of misconceptions and discrimination targeted at LGB learners will be neutralized by encouraging learners to understand, accept, and support various sexual orientations, most importantly LGB. Furthermore, the application of ABEA will enable learners to be proud of who they are. It is, therefore, imperative for curriculum planners to include Anti-bias education in the curriculum for teachers to introduce it at learners' lower phases of education. This will disarm heterosexual learners' minds from misconceptualizing LGB and holding on to the mentality that LGB is among the minoritized group while fostering their ability to speak against LGB-based discrimination in their respective schools and communities.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, an interpretivism paradigm, and a case study design. Data were elicited from purposively sampled participants using in-depth interviews, and researchers analyzed raw data in the form of recordings and notes with Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis to classify emerging themes and make sense of the data. Researchers acknowledged and adhered to the principles of research ethics.

### 5.1. Research Approach, Paradigm, and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to collect detailed non-numerical data and to understand the perceptions and experiences of the sampled participants. Researchers aim to utilize participants' LGB-based school bullying perceptions and experiences to produce new concepts and themes (Bhandari, 2022) and to observe participants' feelings and behaviour to make sense of their experiences for research purposes (Liamputtong, 2019). This study is lensed through the constructivism paradigm because the researchers seek to elicit various descriptive self-constructed ideas and perceptions about LGB-based school bullying from participants since constructivists believe that each individual constructs reality based on experiences and feelings regarding a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, researchers' intent is pinned on analyzing LGB-based school bullying, which can be done by placing themselves in the participants' thinking to reconstruct the intended meaning (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This study is designed as a case study since researchers aimed to investigate an indistinct phenomenon within its actual setting (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, researchers employed a case study design to explore LGB-based school bullying through the views and reactions of participants who live their daily lives in the setting where the phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2009). This design also helped the researchers dig through the phenomenon at hand to gain an in-depth insight that later enabled us to identify ways in which the study objectives could be accomplished.

### 5.2. Sampling and Instrumentation

For researchers to elicit data that served the purpose of this study, a non-random purposive sampling technique was utilized. This technique allowed researchers to identify and hand-pick samples that possess rich knowledge or experience regarding LGB-based school bullying (Creswell & Clark, 2011). 09 participants, consisting of 4 senior phase (grade 8 & 9) teachers, 2 female learners identifying as lesbians, and three male learners identifying as gays from one Secondary School, were selected to participate in this study by responding to a series of interview questions. Researchers conducted one-on-one, in-depth interviews with 09 purposefully sampled participants. The objective for the utilization of this instrument was to elicit detailed and authentic data based on participants' perceptions and experiences about LGB-based school bullying (Boyce & Neale, 2006) in a relaxed and unhostile atmosphere (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022) and without being influenced by others. Moreover, this instrument enabled probing for more detailed enunciations to avoid researchers' assumptions and preconceptions.

### 5.3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The thematic analysis technique was utilized since it enabled researchers to code raw qualitative data gathered from the participants into analogous themes to construct a coherent theoretical elucidation of the phenomenon. These themes were then aligned with the study objectives (Omodan, 2020). Analysis and interpretation of the primary data were done by adopting the universally acknowledged (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-steps thematic analysis techniques. These steps, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), involve reading through the data for

familiarization, encrypting the data into themes, identifying related themes, revising themes, naming themes, and constructing theoretical elucidation. Creswell (2013) asserted that researchers are bound to respect participants' rights, desires, and values. Therefore, to be in line with the scholar's assertion, researchers recognized and followed Walter Sisulu University's ethical considerations, which include valuing the rights of the participants, confidentiality, anonymity, consent, and permission for participation. To ensure this, it was thoroughly explained to each individual participant that they were not obliged to participate and that they were free to withdraw their participation from the study should they need to Omodan (2021). Moreover, each participant was assigned a fictional name to ensure his or her anonymity. A male teacher was coded as LM; female teachers were coded as TF; female learners were coded as LF; and male learners were coded as LM. Lastly, minors were given consent forms to be signed by their parents.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper were discussed based on the study objectives and themes that arose from the data elicited from sampled participants.

### 6.1. Limitation of Schools in Combating LGB-Based Bullying Among Senior Phase Learners

To respond to the first objective, which is the limitation of schools in combating LGB-based bullying among senior-phase learners, the following themes emerged: Ignorant and Unsupportive Teachers; LGB is not recognized; Consistency to religion; Indistinct and no LGB-based bullying reports; Usage of same facilities as heterosexual learners.

#### 6.1.1. Ignorant and Unsupportive Teachers

Teachers' unwillingness to intervene in LGB-based school bullying is identified by their ignorance when learners log LGB-based bullying cases. LGB learners and parents entrust teachers with the responsibility of being the primary protectors and conflict-resolution mechanisms among all learners in the school environment. If this protection is unilateral, that is, it is only applied to the heterosexual group, this indicates that the LGB populace will suffer all the consequences of having their claims ignored, which include continuous harassment. LF2 and LM1 shared the same emotion:

*LF2: "No one cares about us here. For example, I reported that learners say I have a snake, and some teachers asked if I really have it. I said no, I don't have it, and they told me to go back to the class and don't mind what they say. At least they should have called them and said something or punished them for that, but they never did, and those learners never stopped saying, I have a snake."*

*LM1: "Even if we report, some teachers just joke about those things and never punish or call the learners that bully us to explain why they are saying those things."*

Participants demonstrated dissatisfaction with teachers' ignorance of their reports. The statements above indicate teachers' unwillingness to intervene and take necessary steps to follow up on LGB-based bullying cases logged by LGB learners. In the accusation reported by LF2, one can conclude that heterosexual learners link LGB with witchcraft, which according to South African law is a criminal act since an accusation of this nature mutilates one's reputation, especially if the accuser has no concrete evidence. She further claimed that no action was taken to discipline such behaviour. Instead, teachers told her to ignore such wicked allegations. In a similar vein, LM1 told us that teachers joke about their reports instead of intervening.

Despite all the dreadful allegations made by heterosexual learners towards LGB learners, teachers remain unbothered and reluctant to apply rational procedures to the culminate misdemeanor behaviour exhibited by heterosexual learners; instead, they find amusement in it. It is also evident that teachers do not even confront and punish learners who spread rumours about LGB learners. This might be the result of teachers' shortsightedness in spotting the severity of verbal bullying (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000). Hence, due to a dearth of support and protection, school stakeholders are unknowingly inspiring never-ending episodes of LGB-based school bullying since heterosexual learners will not consider their actions unacceptable. These findings are compatible with the claim of Mueller, James, Abrutyn, and Levin (2015), who discovered that teachers ignore their claims when LGB learners log incidents of victimization.

### 6.1.2. LGB is not Recognized

Participants informed the researchers that school stakeholders do not acknowledge LGB, which results in the school community forgoing anything regarding LGB. DePalma and Atkinson (2009) and McShane and Farren (2023) observed that the dearth of dialogue among school stakeholders about LGB-based matters indicates stakeholders' passive behaviour. This observation is evidenced by several participants:

*TM: What really challenges us in addressing this type of bullying is the fact that we do not want to admit that here at school, we have learners who associate themselves with LGB. It is not even easy for us to talk about it because, to me, it feels like we will be introducing them to it or motivating them to become lesbians and gays, and parents will see us as bad people as we are supposed to be moulding their children and not introducing them to something that is not acceptable to them.*

*TF1: The school treats all learners as they are, like males are treated as males and females are treated as males. We never considered treating LGB learners differently.*

*TF2: To be honest with you, I have been here for four years, and I have never heard any mention of LGB learners, so I can say that the school is not playing a remarkable role in protecting them from being bullied by straight learners.*

*TF3: The school only addresses general bullying, not bullying that is specific to a certain group. For example, last year, the principal called all parents and guardians to discuss the bullying that was happening here. They only mentioned a few forms of bullying but never mentioned LGB bullying. No one has ever spoken about it at school, even though some of our learners bring cases of LGB bullying to us.*

According to these assertions, participants affirmed that teachers avoid discussing LGB-related matters at school among the plethora of challenges they encounter in their attempts to manage LGB-based school bullying. This divulges the fear that teachers may be galvanizing learners' inquisitive minds into adopting these previously minoritized genders, which will intensify the number of LGB learners in their respective schools. Moreover, this school only addresses all other forms of bullying except bullying that involves LGB.

The school's silence concerning LGB-based school bullying indicates that LGB is still considered one of the minoritized groups and treats it as if it was never supposed to exist in their respective school, especially since the school is situated in a rural area. Even if there is one empathetic school stakeholder who would consider intervening in LGB-based school bullying, she/he will be demotivated since other stakeholders will not be supportive of his/her attempts. The school will continue to be a hotspot for LGB-based bullying since Atkinson (2002) affirmed that silence about LGB conveys the message that LGB is not recognized.

### 6.1.3. Consistency to Religion

Adaptation and consistency to certain religious beliefs are unveiled as another obstacle for stakeholders to manage LGB-based school bullying. This is because their religious beliefs prohibit them from protecting and supporting genders believed to have been cursed hundreds of years ago. These beliefs, according to Street (2016), are covertly allowing LGB-based perpetration. Participants said:

*TF1: "Juliet, most of the teachers here are churchgoers; they believe that Jesus destroyed Sodom because of issues, including this LGB thing. It is against their religion to stand for something Jesus Himself considered a sin and intended to destroy. So, I can say that is one of our difficulties. They cannot condone something that they preach against at church."*

*TF2: "The school still has old teachers who think that LGB is Satanism, so if I speak to them about anything related to LGB, they do not consider it important."*

Participants complained about old teachers' unwavering consistency with Christianity, which precludes them from intervening in LGB-based bullying among senior phase learners. As stated by TF1, these teachers are absolutely against homosexuality since they believe in a hypothetical Bible interpretation stating that Jesus destroyed Sodom because it was home to sinful acts, same-sex coupling included. Hence, they relate LGB with Satanism since they associate sinful acts with Lucifer, who is believed to have a bad influence on people. These views are similar to those of an expelled East London teacher who, according to Milton (2022) report on Pink News, claimed that LGB learners have Satan's deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA).

The fact that teachers put their religion first instead of learners' welfare is surprising. It has been unleashed that teachers repudiate standing up for victimized LGB learners because their religion forbids same-sex relationships, while the South African Council for Educators ordered teachers to uphold and promote basic human rights as

embodied in the South African Constitution. These rights include offering uniform support and protection from maltreatment to each individual learner without a second thought. In the professional world, teachers must be the main stakeholders who fight against discrimination and maltreatment of any learner, irrespective of any circumstance, instead of putting their personal interests first.

#### 6.1.4. Indistinct and No LGB-Based Bullying Reports

Limiting schools endeavors to manage bullying among senior-phase learners is indistinct, and there are no LGB-based bullying reports. Inadequate information produced by the victims of bullying is reported to be limiting school stakeholders investigation grounds in the cases brought to them. On the other hand, learners blame their teachers for being judgmental. Below are participants' statements:

TF1: *"The other thing is that these learners do not usually come to us and report what happened to them, but we hear rumours that lesbian or gay learners were involved in a mass fight after school or before school. So, it is not easy for us to deal with hearsay."*

TF2: *"Learners do not give us full reports of what happens to them or what has been posted about them, irrespective of how hard we try to interrogate them. Some don't even report the case, making it difficult for the teachers to intervene in such issues because we do not have the main problem to work on."*

LF1: *"Most learners who are among the LGB community are still scared of expressing themselves because of what others will say at school. At school, learners are judged of their gender. We are not only bullied by learners in our grade and in our age bracket; for instance, I was bullied by a grade 11 learner, and when I said I was going to report him, he said maybe I was going to use an underground tunnel when um going home should he be punished for that. I did not report him because I was afraid of him and was not even sure he would be punished because no one takes LGB seriously at school."*

LF2: *"I can say that we are limiting the school because most of the time we don't report bullying to the teachers because they can be judgmental, they gossip about us liking things, they can just even call you to fetch them water kanti they want to show others that it is you that they were gossiping about. If we were not going to be judged, it would be easy for us to approach our teachers, and if they would be more open about anything that happened to us."*

LM2: *"Some bullying cases happen on social media ma'am, so we don't take that to school; we only attend it on social media unless some learners confronted others here at school and teachers saw them or someone went to report. Otherwise, most of us do not report things that happened on social media because they are too rude."*

Participants echoed the first tightness of learners in reporting LGB-based school bullying, resulting in teacher's inactivity in intervening in LGB-bullying cases. TF1 and TF2 elucidated that it is difficult to intervene in cases they are not so certain about because LGB learners are even more difficult to interrogate. They do not want to reveal the nature of the incident. As affirmed by LF1 and LF2, schoolteachers' judgment induces the fear of giving full reports about bullying instances because they believe they will be exposing themselves to never-ending gossip and attitudes exhibiting bias and prejudice by teachers towards them. Similarly, [Ngcobo \(2021\)](#) reported that learners do not have confidence in being transparent about LGB-based issues to their teachers since they fear being judged. On the other hand, learners do not report cyberbullying because exchanging vulgar comments on social media is a misdemeanor, which may be embarrassing when shared with teachers. This is one of disadvantages of learners' accessibility to mobile phones, especially at immature stages. LF1, on the other hand, articulated that she did not report bullying because she was threatened by a higher-grade learner and thus feared further perpetration. Based on this analysis, LGB learners corroborated teachers' affirmations that they do not report LGB-based bullying. However, the reason for LGB learners to encapsulate almost all the LGB-based bullying incidences is to point at teachers' reactions towards learners who identify as LGB. Misjudgments and endless gossip about LGB learners, which result in a dearth of trust towards teachers, discourage them from reporting this bias-based bullying since they believe that their cases will not be investigated and resolved. These findings support [Kolbert et al. \(2015\)](#), who observed that learners are short at reporting bullying cases because they are anxious about being victimized, and their teachers are incompetent at intervening in bullying cases.



### 6.1.5. Usage of Same Facilities as Heterosexual Learners

The absence of LGB facilities in school is evidenced to induce LGB learners' feelings of being in a non-inclusive and unsafe environment, raising insecurities about their identities. Kosciw et al. (2020) also affirmed that LGB learners avoid utilizing school bathrooms because of their hostile nature. Hence, sharing the same bathrooms with heterosexuals is among schools' limitations in managing LGB-based school bullying. This is exemplified by LM3's statement:

LM3: *"The thing is, we are using the same toilets with straight boys who always tell us, "You gay, you were not supposed to be relieving yourself with us because we are men, and you are supposed to be wearing skirts".*

Sharing bathrooms with heterosexual learners exposes LGB learners to bullying to a great extent, as LM3 revealed discriminatory comments made by heterosexual learners when they are out to relieve themselves during break times. He went on to express his feelings towards being feminized by heterosexual male learners.

One can conclude that school bathrooms are one of the most popular hotspots for LGB-based bullying, especially among gay learners. We consider this a continuing phenomenon because of their daily physical contact, which results in heterosexual learners uttering unfavorable comments about gay learners. To this end, it is excruciatingly challenging for the school to manage LGB-based bullying because it may not be able to instantly provide toilets only meant for LGB learners.

## 6.2. Methods to Combat LGB-Based Bullying among Senior Phase Learners

The second objective, which is the methods to combat LGB-based school bullying, has the following themes: avoid gender disclosure, create awareness of gender diversity, provide bathrooms for LGB learners, and follow up on LGB-based bullying cases.

### 6.2.1. Avoid Gender Disclosure

Circumventing being transparent about one's gender is believed to be one of numerous effective methods of combating LGB-based school bullying among senior-phase learners. TF1 stated:

TF1: *"If learners can stop making noise about who they are, that is, their LGB status, others will not have the reason to bully them."*

Remaining silent about one's identity is believed to be one of the methods that will end LGB-based school bullying. The more learners do not divulge their identity, the less heterosexual learners will have motives to victimize them. As per this articulation, "making noise" expresses that LGB learners seem not to be hideous or ashamed of their identities, irrespective of how the school community feels about them.

Based on the above analysis, motivating LGB learners to stay in the closet and avoid demonstrating qualities that will make it easy for other learners and teachers to identify them as LGB will result in dropping rates of LGB-based school bullying. This is because of the sentiment that sexual orientation disclosure constitutes harassment, discrimination, and victimization since one's gender varies from that of the majority. However, this study conforms to the findings of D'augelli and Grossman (2001), who divulged that after lesbians and gays disclosed their sexual identities, they became vulnerable to being attacked and physically threatened.

### 6.2.2. Creating Awareness on Gender Diversity

Participants demonstrated imperativeness in addressing learners and teachers about the nature of LGB so they would be comfortable engaging in an open conversation about it and encouraging learners to refrain from LGB-based bullying. Hence, Domínguez-Martínez and Robles (2019) recommended that schools have awareness programs to promote respect and counteract discriminatory attitudes towards sexual orientation. Reality supported this recommendation:

TM: *"The best solution I have in mind is to convince the school principal to organize special days, maybe Fridays, to talk to all school learners, not only senior phase learners, because this does not only happen among senior phase learners but to Further Education and Training (FET) too. Tell them to stop bullying LGB learners for who they are because it's not like they will change or stop being what they are. They have to accept them the way they are."*

TF3: *Encourage learners not to be silent about this kind of bullying because some of them don't even come to report it, so they become daily victims of bullying.*

LM2: *“If there was someone who talked to us about different genders and some learners loved us dearly without judging us. If other hateful learners can learn from them, it will be easy to get along with us because we don’t have a problem with anyone.”*

LF1: *“I would suggest that the school host talk shows where learners are going to be taught about different genders and made to understand that being a lesbian, gay, or bisexual is natural, like being a male or a female. There is nothing to hate in it, and LGB learners are not dangerous and do not do nasty things as they always assume.”*

The first statement demonstrated the inarguable imperativeness of encouraging teachers to accept and uniformly treat every bullying case before encouraging learners to report LGB-based bullying. On the other hand, TM, advocated by TF3, proposed that there must be days set aside to have a word with learners to refrain from bias-based school bullying and encourage LGB learners to report all the bullying incidents distinctly. LM2 and LF1 advised the school to have awareness sessions where LGB specialists will capacitate learners with every important detail about LGB and, most importantly, to encourage them to understand that LGB is natural, just like any other gender. Talking sessions will broaden positive school stakeholders’ perspectives on diverse genders, prepare them to speak freely about LGB, and plant the belief that these genders are not as dangerous as they are rumored to be. Moreover, this will persuade the demarginalization of LGB in rural schools, and at least the school-going population will have remarkable influence in their communities regarding the demarginalization of LGB. Furthermore, this will decrease the rate of bias but improve LGB learners’ freedom to participate in schools’ extramural activities and their academic performance since they will no longer be anxious about bullying. This finding conforms with [Cymru \(2022\)](#) study suggesting fostering transparent discussion with learners and teachers to meet the needs of LGB learners, enabling teachers to deal with sexual orientation-related issues honestly and without judgement, and providing opportunities for heterosexual learners to understand diverse genders.

### 6.2.3. Providing Bathrooms for LGB Learners

Decision for rural schools to construct bathrooms for LGB learner’s sounds like a clever method to separate LGB learners from heterosexual learners and give LGB learners the desired safety and security. Thus, the [Council of Europe \(n.d\)](#) considers learners’ inclusion in policy-making a virtuous method since they will be able to address relevant issues, including choosing appropriate bathrooms. LM3 suggested:

LM3: *“I think if we can be separated from straight learners like we have our own toilets that will make LGB bullying better because it will be the only way to avoid them because they mostly bully us in the toilets and in break times.”*

Segregating heterosexual learners from LGB learners through the provision of special facilities for LGB learners is believed to be one of the bullying management methods since, according to LM3, when they use their own toilets, there will be no conveyance of biased comments since they will avoid physical contact with heterosexuals. The provision of special facilities for LGB learners is perceived as a long-term solution. However, its implementation may take years, especially in public schools, since school stakeholders must first file requests with the government and explain the undesirable effects of not having these facilities. The provision of these facilities will not only be a management strategy for LGB-based bullying but also a welcome note and sign of acknowledgement for all LGB learners.

### 6.2.4. Follow-up LGB-based Bullying Cases

Courage for school stakeholders to intervene and act towards disciplining learners that engage in LGB-based bullying will be advantageous for LGB learners as they will be almost free from victimization based on their gender identity. That’s the reason [Cymru \(2022\)](#) suggested consistent and effective responses to LGB-based bullying cases, which will assure LGB learners that their cases are taken seriously. LF2 articulated that:

LF2: *“The school needs to take LGB bullying seriously by following up on the cases and not letting learners just go without punishment so that they will know that bullying is wrong for everyone.”*

LF2 observed that the school does not consider LGB-based bullying a crucial phenomenon that requires the school’s attention. Hence, she suggested that this type of bullying must be thoroughly addressed and punishable. This will serve as a lesson for all heterosexual learners who intend to bully LGB learners: whatever bullying method is used, it is unacceptable. Based on this analysis, there is undying trust and belief that teachers can play a crucial role in freeing learners’ minds from misconceptions and biases towards LGB learners. This can be achieved by

practicing their power and adhering to government laws that enforce them to protect and advocate for learners when necessary. Similarly to this finding, the [Department of Basic Education \(n.d\)](#) recommends immediate intervention, an investigation of the nature of the incident, and disciplining those involved.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the limitations of schools in managing LGB-based bullying and investigated methods for combating LGB-based school bullying in secondary schools. Using the principles of interpretivism paradigm, the study concluded that inadequate teacher support and protection, LGB not being recognized, consistency with religion, indistinct and no LGB-based bullying reports, and usage of the same facilities as heterosexual learners are limitations that hinder schools from combating LGB-based school bullying. On the other hand, it was concluded that methods such as avoiding gender disclosure, creating awareness about gender diversity, providing bathrooms for LGB learners, and following up on LGB- based bullying cases are strategies to combat LGB-based school bullying. This study has the following recommendations:

- Encouraging frequent and transparent catalogues about gender diversity to familiarize school stakeholders with the existence of LGB learners.
- Demotivate learners from engaging in LGB-based school bullying by clearly elucidating the consequences they may encounter should they be resilient.
- Foster teachers to intervene in LGB bullying cases regardless of gender identification.
- Lastly, encourage LGB learners to distinctly report LGB-based bullying reports to enable teachers and other school stakeholders to intervene and resolve their encounters.

The researchers suggest further studies that will focus on exploring teachers' attitudes towards LGB learners, which may reveal the root of LGB learners' dearth of recognition and advocacy in their schools.

## 8. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The sensitive nature of this study made it difficult for some participants to participate in it. The researchers aimed to have at least 10 participants; unfortunately, some refused to share their opinions with us, especially teachers.

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## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

The Ethical Committee of the Walter Sisulu University, South Africa has granted approval for this study with the protocol number BEEC 2-09-22.

## TRANSPARENCY

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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