




Foundation Phase teachers' diverse sexual orientations and job experiences: A South African study



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Background: Sexual orientation discrimination impacts teachers' well-being in school environments. The *Prevention of Discrimination and Promotion of Equality Act* of 2002 prohibits discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, granting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals many of the same rights as their cis-gender, heterosexual peers. Despite this, many LGBTQ teachers still face problematic, uncomfortable, and tension-filled experiences in schools. Traditionally, the Foundation Phase (FP) of education was gendered, but this is changing. However, there is a perception that male FP teachers are primarily queer with a "gay agenda." The authors used the Class Psychological Stressor Strain theory to explore the negative experiences of queer-identifying teachers.

Objectives: This article examines the effects of Foundation Phase teachers' sexual orientation on their work environment experiences.

Methods: This qualitative study, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, explored the lived experiences of three queer-identifying teachers in the Gauteng Province through individual face-to-face interviews.

Results: The findings reveal that schools are not adequately addressing discrimination. Teachers often face marginalisation and discrimination.

Conclusion: This article explored a sensitive issue faced by teachers whose sexual orientation differs from society's norms. It highlighted the discrimination and harassment LGBTQ teachers face in the Foundation Phase in public schools in South Africa.

Contribution: By unveiling these issues, the article aims to reduce the stigma, bias, and prejudice commonly faced by LGBTQ Foundation Phase teachers in the teaching profession.

Keywords: discrimination; foundation phase; harassment; job experiences; LGBTQ teachers; wellbeing; workplace.

Introduction and literature review

Discrimination based on sexual orientation persists in most schools and adversely affects the wellbeing of teachers in South African public schools. Sears et al. (2021) state that discrimination and harassment targeting diverse sexual orientation employees impact their wellbeing and health negatively, thus leading to decreased job commitment and satisfaction. The *Prevention of Discrimination and Promotion of Equality Act* of 2000 prohibits discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation (Department of Justice Amendment, 2000). Therefore, Meer et al. (2017) state that many individuals who identify as queer can enjoy similar rights and privileges as their cis-gender, heterosexual peers. Tompkins et al. (2019) found that many queer-identifying teachers continue to face problematic, uncomfortable, and tension-filled experiences in schools. This article aimed to explore the workplace experiences of queer-identifying Foundation Phase (FP) teachers in Gauteng Province. Bhana (2012) states that most South African schools and communities are homophobic, and these homophobic attitudes have filtered into the school environment. Ferfolja and Stavrou (2015) reported that many queer-identifying teachers have experienced some form of discrimination, silencing and invisibility. Drydakis (2019) agrees with Ferfolja and Stavrou (2015) that negative attitudes towards employees with different sexual orientations are concerning for the workplace. They agree that discrimination affects individuals' wellbeing, workplace costs, productivity, and the development of a queer-positive culture.

Ferfolja and Stavrou (2015) found that individuals identifying as queer experienced workplace discrimination significantly in comparison to heterosexual individuals. Furthermore, Gujjarro-

Note: Special Collection: Care and Support for Queering the Role of Educators in the Workplace.

Ojeda et al. (2021) stated that there has been widespread interpersonal and institutional discrimination against teachers, generalist educators, and academics who identify as queer. In their studies, Drydakis (2019) and Owens et al. (2022) found that participants faced ridicule, verbal abuse, physical and sexual assault, property damage, demeaning actions, homophobic jokes, and unequal access to employment rights. Furthermore, Drydakis (2019) found most queer-identifying employees report incidents of harassment and discrimination. This finding concurs with that of Sears et al. (2021) who pointed out that 45% of queer-identifying workers in the USA experience unfair treatment, including being fired, not hired, or harassed because of their sexual orientation. Over 30% of them claimed to experience ongoing discrimination and harassment, while 57% state that discrimination was motivated by religious and cultural beliefs. To avoid discrimination and harassment, Ullman and Smith (2018) found that many queer-identifying individuals claim to engage in behaviours to avoid discrimination and harassment in the workplace. In a British study, Edwards et al. (2016) reveal that lesbian teachers are cautious about coming out at work, as these teachers feel it is unwise and dangerous. Therefore, Ortillo and Ancho (2021) propose that there is a need to implement employee wellness programmes in schools to ensure the psychological wellbeing of teachers.

Teachers play an essential role in teaching and learning, and for too long, the FP in South Africa has been a gendered phenomenon (Moosa & Bhana, 2017). Moosa and Bhana (2017) state that women are over-represented in the FP as females are perceived as more nurturing, motherly, and affectionate compared to males. Until recently, South African males were allowed to teach in the FP (Msiza, 2021). However, there exists a perception that male teachers in the FP are mainly homosexuals or bisexual (Petersen, 2014). De Beer (2020) states that most queer-identifying teachers work in a difficult environment because they are often wrongly perceived as having perverse intentions or promoting a gay agenda. She found that queer-identifying teachers are often viewed negatively by colleagues, students, and school management, resulting in low confidence, poor work performance, and potentially being overlooked for promotions.

According to Mashiya et al. (2017), there exists a perception among African people regarding child-rearing practices that females are the best educators for young children in the FP. Therefore, male teachers are negatively viewed as they believe that males in the FP are either homosexuals or bisexuals (Petersen, 2014). For this reason, Sears et al. (2021) state that queer-identifying teachers are targets of workplace discrimination and harassment from different stakeholders. For this reason, the authors aimed to explore the lived experiences of FP teachers who identify as queer in Gauteng schools and who experienced discrimination or harassment.

Theoretical framework

Individuals may be subjected to discrimination and harassment from various sources and individuals in the

workplace. This study applied the classic psychological stressor-strain theory. This theory highlights the intense detriment to victims' wellbeing which causes psychological stressors and impacts their lives (Lazarus et al., 1985). Discrimination, harassment, and prejudicial treatment of individuals identifying as queer within the workplace often lead to detrimental psychological effects resulting in low self-esteem and confidence. According to Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010), workplace discrimination can take various forms such as passive and active bullying, victimisation, verbal abuse, and incivility. As a result of these psychological stressors, individuals' health and wellbeing are affected, thus leading to low workplace productivity. Therefore, Hershcovis and Barling (2010) assert that workplace discrimination can significantly stress victims, and it includes systemic denial of rights based on gender, religion, sexual orientation, race, and culture. As this article focuses on workplace discrimination and harassment of FP teachers who identify as queer, this theory is significant in exploring their lived experiences.

Methodology

Research design

The authors used a qualitative approach within an interpretative paradigm to uncover the lived experiences of queer-identified FP teachers. Their study aimed to illuminate the discrimination and harassment these teachers encounter (Creswell, 2018; Maree, 2020). This methodological framework enabled an exploration of how these teachers navigate daily life within school settings interacting with colleagues, students, and other stakeholders.

Participants

In this case study, purposive sampling was employed to select teachers who self-identify as queer (Maree, 2020). Only those participants who reported experiencing discrimination and harassment were included. Three participants from FP schools in Gauteng Province met these criteria. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, the authors chose individual face-to-face interviews to protect participants' identities and capture rich detailed information about their experiences. For reporting purposes, participants were anonymised as P1M (Participant 1; male), P2M (Participant 2; male), and P3F (Participant 3; female).

Data collection and analysis

The authors employed a semi-structured interview approach with an open-ended schedule to gather data, ensuring sessions took place after school hours. Data analysis followed an inductive approach with themes identified directly from the raw data. Prior permission was obtained for audio recording and its use in the article. Transcriptions of the recordings ensured no details were overlooked (Maree, 2020). The data were analysed and used to inform the discussion (Creswell, 2018). The researcher cross-referenced multiple data sources including policy documents, audio

recordings, and interview schedules to identify common themes (Creswell, 2018).

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 30 November 2021. The ethics approval number is EC19/20/02.

Results and discussions

This section presents the results and discussion of the findings.

Experiences of homophobic innuendoes from work colleagues

Schools are public spaces that should be safe, non-threatening, and conducive to teaching and learning (Venketsamy & Hu, 2022). People who identify as queer often experience harassment or discrimination in their workplace (Sears et al., 2021). According to P1M:

'I experience homophobic innuendoes from my colleagues in the staff room. I often feel stressed and isolated and try not to go to the staff room to avoid these colleagues.'

This statement concurs with the findings of Hershcovis and Barling (2010) who also found that workplace discrimination is a significant cause of psychological stress on individuals. They therefore isolate themselves and often become reclusive. P2M mentioned: 'my colleagues do not communicate with me and see me as a "contamination"; that I will make them "gay." These teachers perceptions caused me to see a psychologist'. De Beer (2020) found that queer-identifying teachers are negatively viewed in their schools, thus affecting their self-confidence and esteem. 'My behaviour is seen as unnatural; deviant and not according to social norms', said P3F. Because of their sexual orientation, many teachers experience negative attitudes and behaviours from colleagues, resulting in poor confidence levels and a lack of enthusiasm to teach confidently. For this reason, Ortillo and Ancho (2021) believe that schools should implement employee wellness programmes and psychosocial support to their staff.

According to Bhana (2012) and Sears et al. (2021), homophobia can take many different forms including negative attitudes and beliefs about aversion to or prejudice against queer-identifying individuals. P1M stated: 'The staff questioned me as to why I became an FP teacher. They always said that only "ladies and mothers" teach in the FP'. He further mentioned that he had to defend his career choice constantly about being a male in the FP. This statement concurs with Msiza (2021) who states that females were known to be motherly, nurturing, and loving in comparison with males and therefore dominated the FP. Furthermore, Mashiya et al. (2017) state that the African culture does not support males in the FP and therefore resorted to victimisation of male FP teachers. Name-calling has become a common form of insult and harassment within the work

environment. P2M said, 'I was called moffie; coffee; gay-bitch; bean queen; faggot and queer'. M3F mentioned that her colleagues called her a, 'dyke, baby-butch and lessie'. Furthermore, P2M was told, 'you dress fashionable; but very effeminately and flamboyantly'. As a result of these name calling and comments, participants experienced much distress and psychological stress. The psychological stressor-strain theory highlights the fact that workplace stress can affect the wellbeing of individuals, causing psychological harm and often leading to suicide ideation.

Edwards et al. (2016) believe that people who engage in harassing and discriminating against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people are scared or uncomfortable with these identities. They further state that it is often based on irrational fear and misunderstanding. Furthermore, De Beer (2020) states that some people's homophobia may be rooted in their conservative religious beliefs and culture. In this study, the authors found that all three participants were victims because of their sexual orientation. They experienced the use of 'mean' language and name-calling in their schools.

Learners and parents impacting the emotional and psychological wellbeing of gay and lesbian teachers

Teachers' wellbeing has received increased attention from the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU, 2018). Many teachers have reported to have become victims of passive and active bullying from learners and parents in their schools and communities. Multiple studies have underscored the psychological and wellbeing challenges that LGBTQ individuals face (Moya & Moya-Garofano, 2020). The participants in this study reported that they experienced emotional and psychological torture in their schools. They stated that they were exposed to continuous discrimination, harassment, ill-treatment, and exposure to inappropriate behaviours. One of the participants in this study, P1M, mentioned the following:

'I am a target to the intermediate and senior phase learners in my schools. They show no respect and often "giggle" or "mock me" while I am on ground duty.'

P3F said:

'I received notes with verbal abuse and picture of "lesbians" under my door." I feel that this is coming from more senior learners or even colleagues. These notes and pictures have left me humiliated and sad.'

P2M stated:

'my grade 1 learners would come to me and say; "teacher a bad word is written about you in the toilet." This was very embarrassing to me as a teacher'.

P3F mentioned that she taught, 'Creative Arts in the Intermediate Phase' and that the learners in her class would often ask her if she was a 'man' or 'woman'. P3F said she had to repeatedly inform her learners that she is a 'woman'. One learner brazenly asked her if she liked to 'kiss girls only'. P3F

indicated that she felt nauseous at these questions and remarks from the learners. When such questions are posed, other learners often laugh, and the lesson is disrupted. She indicated, 'I hate going to school on a Thursday. School is no longer a happy place for me'.

P1M, P2M, and P3F also mentioned that the parents were also traumatising and harassing them. According to P1M:

'[A] group of Grade 1 parents came to school and slandered him with abuse. They said that he was a paedophile and that they did not want their children to be taught by him. They want to him to resign or his life will be threatened.'

P2M also had similar experiences. The parents from his community said that African males do not have a right to teach young children. It is a job for the 'females'. They said that he is an 'Isitabane' and should not be with their children. He will make all their young children to be 'Isitabane'. P2M also mentioned that:

'Their parents told him that according to their religion and culture; "Isitabane" is a deviant behaviour. It is a sin; therefore; he does not have a right to work with children. These parents also told him that Christianity condemns homosexuals and labelled homosexuality as an abomination.'

All three participants mentioned that they were emotionally and psychologically traumatised. They regretted their decision to become FP teachers. Furthermore, they stated that they felt like running away from their schools or resigning from teaching because the emotional and psychological trauma was becoming challenging to them. Apart from dealing with face-to-face issues on a daily basis, all participants (P1M, P2M and P3F) mentioned that they received anonymous disturbing cell phone messages. They suspected the parents and learners were sending these messages to frustrate and torment them. P3F said: 'One night; I received about ten messages about my sexual orientation and that if I did not resign; they would post pictures of me on the internet'. This caused P3F to experience extreme anxiety, stress, and fear as she had no control over who was sending her these messages.

According to Guijarro-Ojeda et al. (2021), teachers identifying as queer often feel unsafe at work thus affecting their wellbeing and destabilising their key psychological traits. They frequently experience insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, and persistent anxiety and fear in their daily lives. South African Democratic Teachers' Union (2018) states that teaching is classified as one of the professions with the highest stress levels and attrition rate. South African Democratic Teachers' Union (2018) states that this situation is worsened for those whose sexual orientation differs from the community. In some African communities, religion and culture play a significant role, and therefore, parents are intolerant of gays and lesbians (Mashiya et al., 2017). Mashiya et al. (2017) further state that some religious scriptures and doctrines are interpreted to forbid any form of homosexuality. Therefore, the tension between the parent community's beliefs often leaves queer-identifying individuals with

psychological stressors such as depression, continual fear of damnation, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness. P1M and P2M both indicated that suicide ideation crossed their minds. For this reason, they had to seek psychological help from professionals to deal with the trauma.

Bias in professional and career development opportunities

South African Democratic Teachers' Union (2018) states that sexual discrimination is a person's way of treating or behaving towards individuals or groups of individuals unequally based on gender or sexual orientation. School can be a hostile place for lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers, as many of them experience victimisation, discrimination, and marginalisation regularly (De Beer, 2020). Discrimination against FP teachers' sexual orientation is becoming prevalent in most public schools. The study participants noted that they were denied access to professional development opportunities such as training sessions, workshops, school excursions, and leadership roles like head teacher, programme coordinator, and subject heads.

P1M, P2M, and P3F experienced professional and career development bias. According to P1M:

'My principal refused to allow me to go on a training workshop. He said that his parents have been complaining about his sexual orientation and lifestyle. Therefore; he will not be employed for long at his school. He also indicated that the workshop is mainly for female teachers and that he can get information from the teachers who attended the workshop.'

From the above statement, P1M is discriminated against because of his sexual orientation and complaints from his parents. It appears that he is not receiving support from the school principal.

P2M teaches Life Orientation to the Grade 7 class. His school manager refused to allow him to attend a workshop on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) organised by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The principal mentioned that he would resist any form of CSE education in his school. He noted that the parents are against the teaching of CSE, and therefore he does not need to attend the training. P2M told the principal: 'In the Life Orientation curriculum; we need to teach CSE content; which is important for me to attend'. His principal responded: 'You were not supposed to teach CSE content to Grade 7 learners. You will be promoting sexual activities among these boys and girls'.

This study's findings concur with Sears et al. (2021) that teachers who are discriminated against in their career development because of their sexual orientation experience reduced job commitment and satisfaction. In this study, all participants indicated that they lost confidence in their school leaders to support them with harassment and bullying and in their application for professional and career development. Moya and Moya-Garofano (2020) found that individuals who prefer to avoid job satisfaction often leave the organisation to pursue other careers and job opportunities. Venketsamy and

Hu (2022) argue that the school principal is responsible for ensuring a safe, conducive, and a productive work environment for all staff irrespective of their sexual orientation.

Conclusion and recommendation

This article explored the lived experiences of teachers identifying as LGBTQ in the FP. The findings revealed that teachers experienced significant distress, harassment, discrimination, and bullying in the workplace from colleagues, learners and parents. The findings also revealed that these challenges have negatively impacted their social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. This study also found that schools are not doing enough to address discrimination. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer teachers are often marginalised and discriminated. It is envisaged that by unveiling some of the issues, this article will help to ease the stigma, bias, and prejudice so typically attached to LGBTQ teachers teaching in the FP.

Based on the findings, the following is recommended:

- The Department of Basic Education should ensure that all schools have implemented the Policy of Discrimination in the workplace.
- All schools or districts should have an 'Employee Wellness Programme' to ensure the wellbeing of teachers so that they can perform their roles and responsibilities in a safe and conducive environment (Ortillo & Ancho, 2021).
- Tolerance and acceptance education should form part of the school's philosophy of respecting each individual's uniqueness.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

R.V. was responsible for conceptualising, analysing, and writing of this article, while Z.H and N.N. contributed by analysing, reviewing and editing. Z.H and N.N. also provided critical guidance in strengthening the arguments.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, R.V., on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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