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To advocate or assimilate: Lessons of queer educators navigating their high school space

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Background: In South African high schools, queer educators face a unique set of challenges as they navigate the delicate balance between advocating for queer identities and assimilating into institutional norms.

Objectives: This article delves into the experiences of three queer educators, examining the complex dynamics of performing their professional roles as educators, advocating for queer identities while navigating institutional, cultural, and personal constraints. This article endeavours to address this gap by delving into the lived experiences of queer educators navigating their roles within the high school landscape of South Africa.

Methods: The method of the study involved in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The study employed a qualitative exploratory multiple-case study. This article is based on data that were collected from a broader study that looked at the care and support of queer learners in a variety of high schools.

Results: This article helps uncover the complexities of advocacy, assimilation, and the intersectionality of identity.

Conclusion: Queer educators understand that their visibility in schools benefits LGBT school youth. Queer educators desire true acceptance and inclusion amongst their colleagues.

Contribution: Building on the insights shared by the three educators, the study offers recommendations to enhance the care and support of queer educators in high school settings.

Keywords: advocacy; assimilation; moral dilemmas; support; care.

Introduction

In the post-apartheid South Africa of 1994, the promise of a new era brought with it the hope for equality and inclusion across all facets of society (Msibi, 2019). Yet, the echoes of the apartheid regime continue to reverberate through the socio-cultural fabric, manifesting in nuanced forms of discrimination and marginalisation that can play out in schools (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). While extensive research has illuminated the experiences of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) school youth within educational settings (Bhana, 2014; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Francis, 2018; Francis & Reygan, 2016; Mostert et al., 2015), the narratives of queer educators have not experienced a similar amount of attention. This oversight is striking, given that educators play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and influencing school social dynamics. By neglecting the voices of queer educators, we risk overlooking crucial insights into the complexities of identity negotiation and advocacy within educational spaces. This journal article endeavours to address this gap by delving into the lived experiences of queer educators navigating their roles within the high school landscape of South Africa. Central to our exploration is the moral dilemma faced by these educators: the tension between advocating for the rights and visibility of queer individuals and assimilating into a hyper-professional ethos that often demands conformity and neutrality.

Theoretical framework

Queer theory critiques the norms and assumptions surrounding heterosexuality and binary gender constructions and aims to deconstruct and destabilise these power structures (Calvard et al., 2020; Dilley, 1999; Green, 2007). The queer theory emphasises fluidity, diversity, and the intersectionality of identities, rejecting fixed categories and advocating for social justice and equality for all individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Msibi, 2019). Queer theory provided a lens through which I could understand the experiences of queer

educators navigating high school environments. These educators must negotiate between advocating for queer students' rights and assimilating into heteronormative school cultures. Queer theory assists in understanding the complexities of this navigation by highlighting the fluidity of identities and the power dynamics at play within educational institutions (Francis, 2019; Msibi, 2019).

Intersectionality pairs well with queer theory, as it highlights the interconnected nature of social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, and how they intersect to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege (McCall, 2005; Moradi, 2017; Simon et al., 2022). It recognises that these identities are not experienced in isolation but rather influence and compound each other, leading to unique and complex forms of discrimination and marginalisation (McCall, 2005; Moradi, 2017; Msibi, 2019). Intersectionality provided insights into how the experiences of queer educators were shaped by intersecting identities such as race, age, gender, role, and professional experience (Ahmad & Gomez, 2023; Butler et al., 2016).

Research methods and design
Research design

The study employed a qualitative exploratory multiple-case study. A case study is described as the study of a phenomenon without the researcher influencing or impacting the subject that is being studied (Gustafsson, 2017). Creswell (2013) explains case studies as a research method that:

> [E]xplores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information … and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

The study aimed to provide queer educators with a platform to share their experiences in navigating the high school space. The choice to conduct multiple case studies instead of one was to vary the diversity of culture, age, race, and professional experience to provide rich data to analyse and bring to the fore how intersectionality plays a role in how queer educators navigate the high school environment.

Sampling

Convenience purposive sampling was used for the study. This article is based on data that were collected from a broader study which looked at the care and support of queer learners in a variety of high schools. Convenience purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because of its ability to focus on knowledgeable participants about an issue that is under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). In the case of this study, it required queer educators, and in the broader study, the three participants worked in the same school and provided key insight that inspired this article.

Participants

This article focuses on the experiences of three participants who work at Jozi High School. It is a state-run school, with a learner and staff cohort rich in diversity (race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, class) in a suburb south of Gauteng, South Africa. The three participants were Sipho, Mandla, and Greg. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity, as per the agreements made when receiving their informed consent. The following brief descriptors provide the necessary context that explains their positionality when completing their day-to-day responsibilities at Jozi High School.

Mandla

Mandla is a black queer teacher in his mid-twenties, working in his first school since graduating with his teaching degree. Mandla lives alone and remains connected to his family who have grown to accept his sexual orientation since disclosing it to them in his teens. Mandla self-identifies as non-binary, and his pronouns are he and/or him. Mandla teaches English to Grades 8–9.

Sipho

Sipho is a black gay male teacher in his early thirties and is part of the school management team at Jozi High School. Sipho has managerial responsibilities and a teaching load, where he teaches Life Orientation to Grades 10–12. Sipho disclosed his sexual orientation to his family while in high school and they have accepted him and fully support him.

Greg

Greg is a white gay male teacher in his late forties. He is a father of one child, who has completed his university education. Greg is a qualified medical doctor and practised as a medical doctor before later pursuing and completing his teaching qualifications. He has worked as a teacher for more than 10 years and teaches Mathematics and Afrikaans across Grades 8–12.

Data collection and analysis

The primary data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews. The participants all work at Jozi High School, which is located in the south of Gauteng, South Africa. The interviews formed part of a broader study that examined the care and support of LGBT school youth. The interviews with Sipho and Mandla were conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams at their request, and Greg's interview was conducted face-to-face. All interviews adhered to ethical considerations, and informed consent was obtained from all three participants. Jozi High School is a state-run school, rich in diversity (race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, and class) and situated in a typical Gauteng suburb.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify the key themes that will form the basis of this article's discussion. I used an inductive approach to data collection by allowing the content of the data to drive the codes and themes, thus creating new

knowledge emanating from the raw, unordered data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Forman & Damschroder, 2008). I started by familiarising myself with the data, generating initial codes to label meaningful segments, and then I organised these codes into overarching themes based on patterns and relationships. In this process, I ensured that I reflected on my thoughts, biases, and subjectivity, with the express aim of ensuring that I am accurately capturing the essence of the data and not my own prescribed thoughts.

Ethical considerations

This article is based on interview data with Sipho, Mandla, and Greg (confidentiality was ensured with these pseudonyms), which formed part of a more comprehensive study. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Education Research Ethics committee (No. 1-2022-043). This approval indicates that the study underwent rigorous scrutiny, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and safeguarding human rights and dignity.

Findings and discussion

The thematic analysis produced the following themes for discussion: Intentional visibility despite the cost, Hyper-professionalism versus advocacy, and Going beyond tolerance.

Intentional visibility despite the cost

In the broader study, Jozi High School proved to be an interesting school for the study. The school had a diverse learner and school staff population in terms of race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, class, gender, and sexual orientation. I asked Greg if Jozi High School, in terms of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, was the most diverse staff room that he has ever experienced in his teaching career; he shared:

> 'It is the most diverse absolutely. Not sure if it was intentional. The people who have been there have been there for years. They were hired by the previous regime almost, so it was not intentional, just to say, "We are inclusive". I think people were hired due to.' (Greg, Male, Teacher)

Greg speculates how Jozi High School became the most diverse staff room that he has ever worked with. He was still relatively new to the school and did not have the institutional knowledge to give an accurate historical account. However, studies suggest that it is possible that some staff members may have withheld their sexual orientation or were able to pass as heterosexual, only to disclose it later. Withholding your sexual orientation was seen as a preventative measure against workplace discrimination, ensuring that one was not a victim of unfounded stereotypes that are imbued in homophobic belief systems and as a decision to have job security (Govender, 2017; Lineback et al., 2016; Msibi, 2019; Russell, 2010). Increased visibility of queer educators in a school can provide LGBT school youth with relatable role models and fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance

(Msibi, 2019; Vega et al., 2012). This visibility challenges stereotypes and stigma, creating a safer environment for students to express their identities authentically (Brown, 2020). Greg and Mandla affirm this observation:

> 'I think it is the example we set for them that it is okay to be gay.' (Greg, Male, Teacher)

> 'I think there is a group of learners, the seniors especially, who have a sense of openness. I know the kids who are seniors that I teach know that it is a privilege to have me standing in front of them.' (Mandla, Male, Teacher)

Mandla, Sipho, and Greg's determination to openly embrace their queer identities in the school environment exemplifies the core tenets of queer theory and intersectionality. By refusing to conform to heteronormative expectations, they challenge the systemic structures that seek to enforce heterosexuality by marginalising queer individuals. Their visible presence serves as a political statement (Msibi, 2019), underscoring the importance of diverse identities in school settings and providing a powerful affirmation for LGBT school youth. This intersection of queer theory and intersectionality highlights how the visibility of marginalised identities can disrupt dominant narratives and foster inclusivity, empowering students to embrace their authentic selves (Lineback et al., 2016):

> 'I think schools need queer teachers to be themselves entirely so that kids can see queer people as role models and as people who are valuable enough to contribute into their lives in a meaningful way.' (Mandla, Male, Teacher)

> 'I have nothing to hide about my sexuality, but I do understand that there are some people who might find it a bit odd or may disagree, but I am protected legally by legislation to sort of be accepted and be included within this system.' (Sipho, Male, Teacher)

The data showed that queer educators at Jozi High School who were being intentionally visible did this at a cost. Sipho's reflection suggests that he is aware of opposition to his sexual orientation. He is not under the illusion that his role in management precludes him from being judged for his sexual orientation. There was resistance to their intentional visibility through varied levels of homophobic rhetoric and behaviour:

> 'Bullying, not amongst the classes or in the school itself, but cyberbullying. Especially gay kids. They have shown me posts where kids have said horrible things, "You are going to hell," that sort of things because they live openly. These are matric learners. I support them and tell them to forget the haters.' (Greg, Male, Teacher)

> 'I know there are kids who I taught who, for example, there was a time where they had to discuss sexuality and a lot of those responses were so scary for me as a queer person and I had to be objective.' (Mandla, Male, Teacher)

In all three interviews, the participants did not report any instances where a learner expressed homophobic language or violence towards them. These educators were shielded from explicit homophobia by their learners because of the power dynamics inherent in the educator–learner relationship. This power dynamic, alongside their ability to build a strong rapport with their learners, dissuaded learners

from expressing hateful words towards them, as doing so would likely render them unpopular and they would undergo disciplinary measures. However, this protective dynamic does not extend to LGBT school youth. The intersection of queer theory and intersectionality highlights how systems of power and privilege create varying experiences of homophobia and discrimination (Francis, 2019). For queer educators, their authoritative role and adult status provide a buffer against direct homophobia. In contrast, LGBT school youth, lacking this power, become easy targets for homophobic rhetoric and violence, as the power differential exacerbates their vulnerability to marginalisation and othering (Bhana, 2012; DePalma & Francis, 2014).

Hyper-professionalism versus advocacy

Msibi (2019) explains how queer educators may adopt hyper-professionalism as a means of gaining power and protecting themselves from discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

In environments where queer individuals may face prejudice or discrimination, hyper-professionalism can serve as a shield, allowing them to focus on their work without fear of being judged or marginalised because of their identity (Msibi, 2019; Russell, 2010). Mandla shared the desire to be seen beyond his non-binary identification, especially as he begins his career as a teacher:

> 'We are definitely queer people, but my sexuality does not define me when I'm doing my job. And not that I intentionally separate the two but at the end of the day, I want those kids to say, this person is really good at their job, and you need to see me for my job and how well I'm able to support your time … When I first started working this job, I was hiding so many parts of myself, not just my sexuality. I kind of had to filter myself in the beginning, always maintaining professionalism and that I am viewed as an adult and that I am viewed in a specific way.' (Mandla, Male, Teacher)

Schools privilege heterosexuality by normalising it at the expense of homosexuality (Francis & Kuhl, 2022; Msibi, 2019). It is not surprising that Mandla would equate professionalism with denying parts of himself, including his sexuality. Newly employed queer educators may grapple with the fear of jeopardising their employment or facing discrimination if they present themselves fully, thus indirectly advocating for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities by normalising them and aligning them with excellence (Lineback et al., 2016). It is as if being non-binary serves as a distraction to his professional identity and thus excelling 'professionally' will redirect attention away from his personal life (Nichols & Brown, 2021).

Sipho, too, has to perform hyper-professionalism in his role within the school management team. His positionality and power place him in the best position to advocate for improved conditions for LGBT school youth; yet when he was asked about LGBT school youth and their inclusion in the school, he stated:

> 'With that, we need to look at the demographics of our school. Our school is majority Indian Muslim, which already has ideas behind it. So, we can't have an aggressive approach to accommodating those learners, but what we have done is to slowly integrate it.' (Sipho, Male, Teacher)

Sipho responded by sharing the school's position rather than his own, reflecting hyper-professionalism. This behaviour illustrates the pressure on him to appear 'fair' and 'considerate' to avoid using his power to advocate for LGBT school youth, a community with which he identifies. This expectation is not imposed on heterosexual educators, highlighting the pervasive influence of heteronormativity in educational institutions (Francis & Kuhl, 2022; Msibi, 2019). Queer theory and intersectionality reveal how the experiences of queer educators, such as Sipho and Mandla, are shaped by the intersecting oppressions of sexuality, race, and professional expectations. These educators often feel compelled to prove their competence and professionalism more than their heterosexual peers (Calvard et al., 2020; Lineback et al., 2016). For black and white queer educators, the intersection of race and sexual orientation adds layers of vulnerability, making them more cautious in their advocacy efforts to protect their jobs and maintain their professional standing. Greg is acutely aware of the need to be an excellent educator, but this has not prevented him from actively positioning himself as an advocate for LGBT school youth by wishing that the school would acknowledge and publicly affirm diverse sexual orientations and gender identities:

> 'We had a discussion about it and she said that if a parent asks "do you support LGBTQ whatever" we have to say we support all learners. We are not allowed to say yes directly, which pisses me off quite frankly. Because if a gay kid comes to school and he knows he is gay and wants to express that, you have to be accepting of that and open, even if the parents hate it. This should be a safe space for them … The first time I walked into class I said that I am a gay guy. So, no funny things, I don't wanna be your friend, I am here as your teacher, but I am also here as your companion.' (Greg, Male, Teacher)

Greg has more experience than Sipho and Mandla and has confidence, allowing him to be free and open to positioning himself as an ally to LGBT school youth. Although he may face judgement for his sexual orientation, the context of Jozi High School affords him the privilege of whiteness, which shields him from the compounded marginalisation faced by black queer educators. Queer theory illuminates these power dynamics by highlighting how intersecting identities, such as race and sexuality, create different experiences of privilege and oppression. While Greg's whiteness mitigates some of the stigma attached to his queerness, Sipho and Mandla must navigate both racial and sexual marginalisation, illustrating the complex layers of power and privilege within their school environment (Francis, 2019; Moradi, 2017; Simon et al., 2022).

Going beyond tolerance

Jozi High School is making strides towards being an inclusive and safe school for LGBT school youth and educators. All three participants acknowledge that the school is not working

towards discriminating against those who do not conform to heteronormative standards of identity. They acknowledge the attempts made to be inclusive and progressive of the complex ways that identity is lived out by learners and staff. However, a common theme showed itself when it came to discussion about their relationship with colleagues:

> 'I would say tolerance. There is no acceptance amongst colleagues. That is not what I have experienced … I find that people kind of avoid me from time to time. Not time to time, they avoid me mostly. The only way I socialize with them is when I go to the smoking area and there is a discussion going on there. But no one comes up to me and says you wanna have coffee?' (Greg, Male, Teacher)

> 'I think the school is better because of the number of queer teachers, and perhaps if we left, maybe it might not change, but it won't be as progressive. I know we have staff who feel we are too progressive and that they are tolerating enough. We still need to bridge that gap between us as colleagues and figure out how to broach the subject of sexuality with one another.' (Sipho, Male, Teacher)

Unsurprisingly, most staff at Jozi High School would believe that tolerance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities is sufficient. It is a commonly held belief because it at least means 'no one is homophobic'. However, Berg and Kokkonen (2022) state that:

> Tolerance contains an assumption that there exist those who differ from the norm – that something 'different' exists that is tolerated. This has to do with power: those who are defined as belonging to the 'majority' define what/who should be tolerated and what criteria for tolerance 'minority groups' should fulfil. (p. 373)

Tolerance allows distance to remain, an elephant in the room that needs to be avoided, yet the person being avoided notes it, feels it, and can be hurt by it.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the experiences of Mandla, Sipho, and Greg, three queer educators navigating Jozi High School. It highlighted the significant benefits of having queer educators in schools, as their visibility helps affirm the identities of LGBT school youth and dismantle stereotypes. However, it also revealed that queer educators often feel compelled to define their professionalism in ways that exclude their sexual orientation. While heterosexual educators do not typically deny aspects of their identities to be seen as competent professionals, queer educators face this expectation, which indirectly privileges heterosexuality. Consequently, the progress in supporting LGBT school youth is hindered despite the increased visibility of queer educators. The study found that queer educators feel tolerated rather than accepted by their peers, affecting their sense of equality and belonging.

What does this mean for those involved in education? Hiring queer educators does not equate to transforming a school. It is crucial to integrate and normalise queer educators into the fabric of school life. School leaders must engage in conversations with queer educators to understand their experiences, identify their support needs, and affirm their value to the school community. This shift from tolerance to acceptance and celebration requires comprehensive and actionable recommendations.

The first recommendation starts with school leaders and the school governing body, challenging them to receive comprehensive diversity training and support. Comprehensive training equips school leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to create supportive environments for queer educators and challenge existing biases. This recommendation is motivated by the need to move beyond mere tolerance to genuine acceptance and celebration of queer staff. They will set the tone for staff to follow and allows school leadership to have the necessary empathy and compassion towards the journey their staff take from forced tolerance towards genuine acceptance of their queer colleagues and LGBT school youth. Having undergone diversity training, school leaders and school governing bodies should extend this training towards staff. This training should include components on recognising and addressing implicit biases, creating inclusive environments, and supporting queer staff.

The second recommendation gives attention to policies. Schools should develop and enforce anti-discriminatory policies that specifically address the needs of queer educators. These policies should include procedures for reporting discrimination, support mechanisms for affected staff, and consequences for discriminatory behaviour. Structured and formal policies ensure that issues are handled consistently and fairly. The third recommendation is that, schools like Jozi High School should assist in *establishing mentorship and support networks for queer educators*. These networks would offer queer educators working in schools the support and resources needed to navigate their professional challenges. These networks help reduce isolation and enhance professional development. Queer educators who are working in challenging schools that do privilege heterosexuality can benefit from mentorship and support networks like these.

Lastly, this article zeroed in on a specific school, with a small group of participants. There is a need for *larger-scale research* to deepen the understanding of queer educator experiences in schools. Researching queer educator experiences in rural school contexts, schools in homophobic communities, and schools that publicly and privately embrace the queer community would provide a holistic understanding of queer educator experiences.

These recommendations aim to create a more caring and supportive environment for queer educators and provide actionable steps for stakeholders to follow.

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S.N.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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