


Positive inclusive experiences of a same-sex desiring male Foundation Phase teacher

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Background: Much work has been done to realise the discourse of diversity and gender equality in the perceived feminised Foundation Phase (FP) of teaching and learning. Part of the work was done through the inclusion of males in FP teaching to provide learners and teachers alike with diverse learning experiences. In South Africa, most research focuses on why FP teaching remains a feminised space, the marginalisation of few male FP teachers. However, less is known about male FP teachers' positive inclusive experiences.

Objectives: To contribute to the discussion by presenting Camagu's case study, a same-sex desiring male FP teacher, and his positive inclusive experiences in a conservative context in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa.

Methods: A qualitative single case study methodology employing photovoice to elicit Camagu's positive inclusive experiences in FP teaching.

Results: Findings revealed positive inclusive practices implemented by the school, discussed under two themes: Finding a sense of belonging through school structures and 'It's nice to have someone as different as you in the school ...' - Learners' perspective.

Conclusion: The study suggests a need for increased support for school leadership and teachers to promote inclusive policies and practices affirming diverse identities of all learners and teachers.

Contribution: Camagu's experiences offer new research dimension by sharing best practices for fostering inclusive school environments. The study challenges deeply rooted gender norms in South African education, particularly in FP teaching. It advocates for inclusion and acceptance of male teachers, regardless of their diverse gender and sexual orientations, promoting gender diversity.

Keywords: inclusive experiences; male FP teacher; single case study methodology; same-sex desiring; queer theory.

Introduction

In South Africa and globally, gender equality remains a priority, and creating a gender diverse equitable professional environment is essential. Three decades later within a democratic South Africa and globally, we have experienced a shift in the inclusion and celebration of women in previously traditional occupations suited for men (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Brownhill et al., 2015).

However, for men, it is still frowned upon for them to occupy previously female professions, especially in spaces such as education, particularly in the learning and teaching of young children between the ages of 5 and 9 years, where males are underrepresented globally (Bhana, 2016; Bhana et al., 2022; Msiza & Kagola, 2023). Moosa and Bhana (2018) together with Msiza (2020) postulate that the teaching of young children in the Foundation Phase (FP) is a guarded space that reinforces heteronormativity because teachers themselves reinforce the idea that childhood education is gender-specific work. Bhana (2016) and Msibi (2019) argue that FP learning and teaching as part of the larger schooling system is no acceptance to the fact that schools are microcosms of societies in which they are located, where gender is an important marker that determines individual positionality. For instance, Msiza (2020) found that males who participate in the teaching of young children in FP in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa reproduce hegemonic masculine behaviour and practices, through distancing themselves

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

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from any activity that is perceived to be feminine. Msiza's findings show how FP male teachers reinforce the females as feminine and males as masculine and anything that is in between as deviant and positioning schools as unsupportive structures for diverse genders and sexual orientations (Msibi, 2019). This is notable in Kagola and Notshulwana's (2022) study in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa and in Martino's (2008) study in Canada; these scholars in their respective studies regarding same-sex design FP male teachers had to construct their professional identities within heterosexual ways of being because of the fear of being marginalised or violated. For instance, in Kagola and Notshulwana (2022), the same-sex FP male teacher distanced himself from any curriculum topic that required him to engage in sexuality-related issues, fearing to be perceived as recruiting learners to non-normative ways of being. According to Davies (2021) and Warin (2018), openly same-sex desiring men within the feminised context of FP are caught between failing to embody hegemonic streams of masculinity because of their perceived feminine gender identity, while in most contexts, the recruitment of males in FP learning and teaching is premised on 'masculinising' the female-dominated FP settings. Interestingly, with this dilemma of how male teachers construct their identities in FP contexts, it has been argued that the placement of male teachers in FP irrespective of their sexual orientation opens possibilities of a diverse and inclusive learning environment (Bhana et al., 2022; Davies, 2021; Msiza, 2020). Providing a window of opportunity to construct a different stream of masculinity that is caring and nonviolent in a world faced with gender-based violence (Martino, 2008; Ratele, 2014). While in South Africa much work has begun to explore facets of how FP male teachers have been recruited and retained in this educational phase.

Within the South African context, much of the research done focused on why there is still under-representation of males in FP, male teachers sustaining heteronormativity to reproduce hegemonic streams of masculinity and how it is socially unacceptable for 'real men' to teach in FP by in-service teachers (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Bhana et al., 2022; Moodley & Moosa, 2023; Msiza, 2020). There is still a dearth and unevenness in the South African literature and globally, as the current research touches on certain aspects of the holistic inclusion of males in FP teaching. However, there is a need to create a balance through research that explores positive inclusive experiences of FP male teachers irrespective of their sexualities. Therefore, this article fundamentally explores positive inclusive experiences of a same-sex desiring male FP teacher to counter the current narrative surrounding the phenomenon of FP male teachers by shedding light on the positive inclusion experiences of FP male teachers.

Using queer theory in Camagu's case study

This article uses queer theory as its theoretical lens, as it offers a valuable lens through which to interpret the positive inclusion experiences of Camagu, a self-identifying same-sex

desiring FP male teacher, within a conservative context in the Eastern Cape province. Queer theory, as defined by Stein and Plummer (1994), challenges the traditional conceptualisation of sexuality, emphasising its fluidity and the problematisation of sexual and gender categories. It recognises the dynamic nature of sexual identities and desires, intertwined with power relations, and acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of gender performativity (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Camagu's experiences of positive inclusion are subjective and situated within his specific schooling context. Therefore, queer theory enables a nuanced understanding of his experiences by acknowledging the fluidity of sexual identities and the intersections of power dynamics within institutional spaces (Msibi, 2019). It allows for the analysis of how power informs subjective experiences and circulates within wider institutional contexts, beyond limiting binary constructions of sexuality and gender (Grzanka, 2019; Stein & Plummer, 1994).

Moreover, queer theory highlights the contestation and resistance present within schooling cultures, challenging the normalisation of heterosexuality and problematising the essentialisation of sexual orientation as the sole governing feature of identity (Grzanka, 2019). It makes visible the performed nature of identification, encompassing intersections of sexuality with race, class, disability and other forms of identification (Grzanka, 2019; Msibi, 2019). By adopting queer theory, this article aims to shed light on Camagu's positive inclusion experiences, acknowledging the complexities and fluidities of identity construction within a conservative educational setting. It underscores the importance of understanding issues of sexism, racism and heterosexism as intersecting factors that shape experiences of difference and inclusion. Moreover, queer theory emphasises individual agency and perceives schools not merely as sites of normalisation but also as arenas for contestation and resistance against hegemonic norms (Grace & Benson, 2000; Grzanka, 2019). In navigating these spaces, Camagu's experiences elucidate the intricate interplay between restrictions and possibilities inherent in fostering inclusive environments within conservative educational settings such as FP teaching. Furthermore, queer theory rejects the essentialisation and prioritisation of sexual orientation as a sole determinant of identity, advocating for a more holistic understanding that encompasses intersections with race, class and disability (Rudoe, 2010).

Research methods and design

This article emerges from a broader qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) aimed at exploring how male FP teachers in the Eastern Cape province construct nurturing masculinity (Kagola, 2023). Here, I focus on data generated from the photovoice presentation by one participant who identifies as same-sex desiring, aligning with the special issue theme of promoting queer representation and positive messaging within contexts. The article introduces Camagu, a Grade 3 FP male teacher, who shared positive experiences about his

inclusion as a same-sex desiring FP male teacher. Camagu works in a primary school in the Sarah Baartman District, an urban-rural area in South Africa's Eastern Cape province.

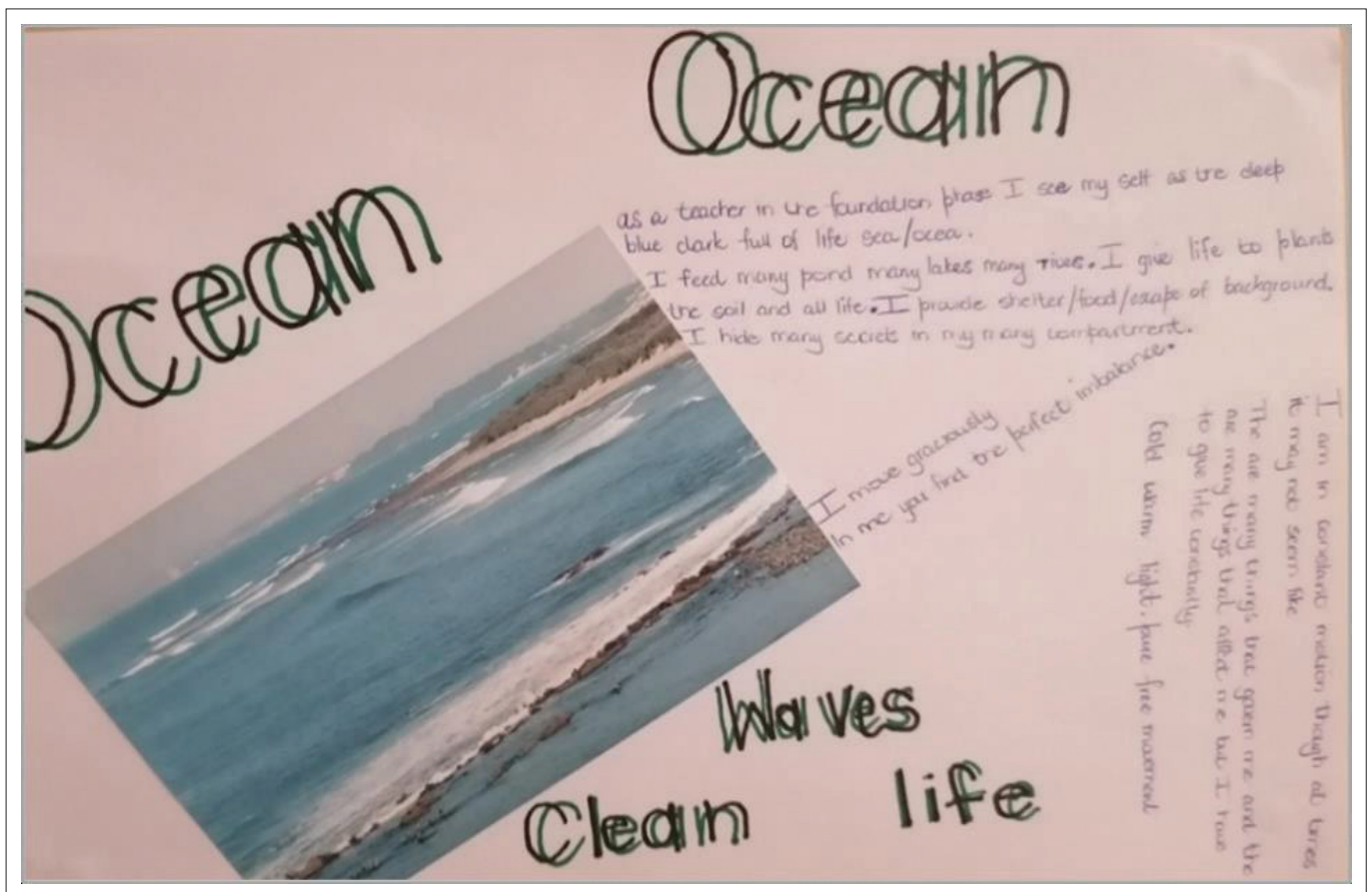
This article adopts a single case study methodology to delve into Camagu's inclusion experiences within the conservative schooling context of the Eastern Cape. A single case study methodology involves exploring an individual's experiences in their own words and visualisations (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Plummer, 2001). It is important to note that the findings of this study cannot be generalised, as it employed a single case study methodology (Plummer, 2001). This approach is deemed necessary for this study because my approach to research is based on understanding that methods provide insights into the ways we can see social identity as a tool people use to create personal narratives. These narratives give meaning and a sense of continuity in individual lives. Situated within the transformative paradigm, according to Flanagan and Christakis (2010), multiple realities exist. For instance, there are various gendered versions of reality, and therefore these realities should be critiqued as they might perpetuate inequality. This study aims to advance social justice practices and foster change in conversations around positive inclusion experiences of FP male teachers.

Camagu and other participants gave consent to record, with assurances of confidentiality. The methodology employed

multiple data generation methods, including photovoice and semi-structured focus group conversations (FGCs). Focus group conversation data were transcribed and translated from isiXhosa to English, with systematic thematic analysis conducted to extract Camagu's inclusive experiences. My reflection on the methodology revealed a wealth of data, leading to challenges in data selection. As such, the article presents large vignettes to capture the richness of Camagu's experiences. Vignettes were selected to succinctly convey Camagu's inclusive experiences and address the research question: What are the inclusive experiences of a same-sex desiring FP male teacher?

Results

The data generated for this study used a photovoice method and a semi-structured FGC, which created space for further probing and allowed Camagu to further explain what his photovoice meant. Figure 1 shows Camagu's photovoice and caption of what it means. In the two themes, namely, (1) Finding a sense of belonging through school structure and (2) *It's nice to have someone as different as you in the school...* Learners said, explained in the subsequent sections, I focus on the photovoice and its meanings because it illustrates Camagu's positive inclusive experience as a self-identifying FP male teacher and then uses some of the vignettes from the FGC data to add to the photovoice meaning:



Source: Kagola, O. (2023). *A participatory visual exploration of nurturing masculinity amongst Eastern Cape-based Xhosa male foundation phase teachers*. Doctoral dissertation. University of the Free State

FIGURE 1: Camagu's photovoice and what it means.

'As a male teacher in the Foundation Phase, I see myself as the deep blue dark full of life sea/ocean.... I give life to plants, the soil, animals, and people...I hide many secrets in my many compartments. I move graciously, in me you find the perfect imbalance. I am in constant motion, though at times it may not seem like it... Many things govern me and many things influence who I am, my spirituality, my fluid sexuality, and my manhood... through the support and encouragement I get from the community at school, and the community...I am content with my everchanging identity....' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

Theme One: Finding a sense of belonging through school structures

Understanding how guarded that space of FP is, Camagu positions himself as the ocean that provides many positive benefits to the people around it. He posits, 'I hide many secrets in my many compartments', meaning that just like Msibi's (2019) participants, he develops ways of managing his gender performance and possibly his sexuality by hiding parts of himself that do not fit into the heteronormative schooling systems such as being same-sex desiring. According to Martino (2008) and Msiza (2020), FP male teacher identity has been centred around positive role modelling to reproduce compulsory heterosexuality, which means that within conservative heteronormative contexts, any non-normative identities stand the chance of being marginalised. In the FGC, Camagu further explained:

'Many things govern me and many things influence who I am, my spirituality, my fluid sexuality, and my manhood...through the support and encouragement I get from the community at school, and the community...I am content with my everchanging identity....' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

Camagu further elaborated on his photovoice caption by sharing how his self-perceived hidden sexuality was embraced by the principal of the school where he was employed as a novice FP teacher, he said:

'As a young gay teacher, it was very difficult for me to fully embrace who I am including my sexuality at work...that's why I say I hide many secrets in my many compartments... but one thing I realised about the principalship of my school is they are very supportive...one day was a general meeting, teachers were being introduced... some male parents started to do whistle when I was to be introduced...my principal was so angry at those parents but he managed to contain himself and used that opportunity to talk to parents about diversity and how we need to respect and acknowledge that we are all not the same... ever since that moment I felt like I belong....' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

Camagu here shares an incident that exemplifies the challenges faced by non-heteronormative bodies in social settings such as schools, homes and churches (Msibi, 2019). To some extent, the whistle can be interpreted as an act of homophobia, reinforcing the notion that same-sex individuals are not fully accepted or respected within society (Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022). However, the response of the principal to the incident offers a moment of resistance against homophobia and heteronormativity (Bhana, 2016; Msibi, 2019). By using the

opportunity to educate them about diversity and respect, the principal challenges the dominant social norms and advocates for a more inclusive school environment (Rudoe, 2010). This intervention not only affirms Camagu's identity but also signals to the school community that discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation will not be tolerated. Part of the responsibilities of the school principals as outlined in the South African Standards for Principals (2015) is to promote inclusion and work with and/or for the community in acknowledging diversity as part of creating an enabling environment that respects individual differences. Camagu's subsequent feeling of belonging provides possibilities for the transformational potential of inclusive leadership within the school setting. When school leaders actively support and advocate for non-heteronormative teachers, it creates a sense of safety and acceptance that is essential for personal and professional growth. However, it is important to recognise that while individual acts of support are valuable, systemic changes are necessary to address the root causes of discrimination and marginalisation faced by same-sex desiring teachers. Camagu's aforementioned vignette illustrates the realisation of policy implementation and positive inclusion practices that open possibilities for courageous conversations that sometimes might be difficult to conduct:

'My school's SMT comprises of old people many of them do not understand this LGBT+ issues and what they mean.... but they are learning my HoD in FP and deputy principal would sometimes ask me about how some girl and boys behave like the opposite sex and what could that mean... my HoD she would seek advice on issues of inclusion...like when we discuss themes in the curriculum like "my family" and the like we also had to change the admission form on parents details....' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

The queer theory offers us the possibility to understand the dynamics at play in Camagu's experiences described in the aforementioned vignette, particularly how he has navigated the institutional structures and cultural norms concerning gender and sexual diversity (Grzanka, 2019; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Moreover, Camagu's vignette also highlights a process of learning and adaptation within his school's leadership. For instance, courageous conversations with him, the Head of Department (HoD) in FP and the deputy principal when seeking advice from Camagu regarding issues of inclusion suggest a possible willingness to engage with and learn from diverse perspectives. Moreover, these courageous conversations represent a shift from the rigid structures of power that often characterise educational institutions, offering opportunities for collaboration and dialogue across hierarchical lines to create inclusive learning and teaching environments (Davies, 2021; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022; Msiza, 2020). The discussions around learners behaving '*like the opposite sex*' and themes in the curriculum such as 'my family' reveal how aspects of gender and sexuality intersect with broader educational practices. Moreover, rigid curriculum materials and institutional forms may reinforce binary understandings of gender and family structures, which can marginalise same-sex desiring learners and families (see Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022). However, the

willingness of the school to adapt, such as by changing admission forms to be more inclusive of diverse family structures, demonstrates a commitment to challenging normative assumptions and promoting greater visibility and acceptance of diverse identities. In essence, this vignette illustrates the tensions and negotiations that occur within educational institutions as they grapple with issues of gender and sexuality. It underscores the importance of ongoing dialogue and education within school leadership to foster environments that are inclusive and affirming for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Theme two: It's nice to have someone as different as you in the school...learners said

Msibi (2019) and Bhana and Moosa (2016) postulate that the policing of identities to conform to heteronormativity has the potential to deny learners the opportunity to experience the perceived inclusive nature of the schooling systems, meaning that schools should embody the diverse nature of the society within which it is situated. Camagu in the following vignette shares how his presence and advocacy for the acknowledgements and respect for diverse gender and sexual identities have provided positive inclusive experiences for the learners in his school:

'Hee yazi (you know)... at the school few older learners came and said... we like you and its nice to have someone as different as you in the school...you dress differently, talk gentle and you always stand up for us...I didn't think that being a prefect coach could contribute that much to my learners...Most of the time I treat learners the way I wished my teachers could done with me...I was always a joke in their eyes...I wished they could have looked or treated me just like a normal learner in the school...so I try to be kind and caring for learners questioning their sexuality in my school... they need to know it's okay not to know your sexuality.' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

Learners' acknowledgement that Camagu is 'different', and their positive experiences and reception of him underscore the importance of visibility and representation for marginalised identities. Camagu's nonconformity to traditional gender norms, expressed through his different sense of dress and gentle demeanour, disrupts normative expectations of hegemonic masculinity within the school environment. This is in opposition to Msiza's (2020) FP male teachers who distance themselves from homosexuality through embodying superiority as a stream of masculinity. In doing so, Camagu challenges the binary constructions of gender and the perpetuation of heteronormativity that often dominates educational settings, illustrating the potential for same-sex desiring bodies and expressions to subvert normative structures. Bhana (2016) states that teachers often reproduce their childhood experiences in their teaching practices and possibly work towards changing the narrative by doing things differently.

This is visible in Camagu's vignette; through his embodying kindness, care and acceptance, Camagu provides a counternarrative to the experiences of marginalisation and ridicule that he endured during his time as a learner.

This pedagogy of care not only fosters a sense of belonging for learners questioning their gender and sexual identities but also challenges heteronormative assumptions about who belongs and who is deserving of respect within the school community.

Camagu's experience of being a joke in the eyes of his teachers remains in his memories, and he is determined to ensure that no student ever feels that way in his classroom. Because of his childhood experience, Camagu argues that in his classroom, there is no such thing as 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Instead, every identity is celebrated and affirmed, and he said:

'In my class learners sit in alphabetical order...even when it's line-up time...Yhooo I was once in trouble but was worth it...we were doing the topic "the jobs people do" and one boy child said he wanted to be a girl, so I asked him what he meant by being girl. I indirectly affirmed to him it's okay to want to be a girl... but asked him and the class about what it means to be a girl or boy? Is it a job?...a few days later two parents came to me seeking advice because their children who are in my class are asking a lot of uncomfortable questions so they needed advice on responding to those questions....' (Camagu, FP male, Teacher)

Camagu's decision to arrange learners' sitting arrangement in alphabetical order reflects an attempt at organisational fairness, yet it also highlights the rigid structures that often govern educational environments. According to Stein and Plummer (1994), queer theory encourages the interrogation of such structures, questioning how they may reinforce normative expectations and restrict the expression of diverse identities. Moreover, Camagu's inclination to challenging norms becomes evident when he recalls a moment of 'trouble' that was 'worth it'. When a student expressed a desire to be a girl during a class discussion on 'the jobs people do', the teacher seized the opportunity to engage with the topic of gender identity. By asking the student what it means to be a girl and inviting the class to reflect on gender roles, the teacher subtly affirmed the validity of the student's feelings and opened a dialogue about gender diversity. Kagola and Notshulwana (2022), in their study, found that same-sex desiring male teachers tend to distance themselves from conversations that are centred around issues of gender and sexual diversity, fearing to be perceived and marginalised for recruiting learners to their non-normative behaviour. However, in Camagu's case, the intervention reflects the principles of queer theory, which advocate for the recognition of all identities as valid and deserving of respect (Grzanka, 2019). Subsequently, parents seeking advice on responding to their children's questions further highlight the importance of inclusive education, where stakeholder participation is important for the holistic development of learners. Moreover, the occurrence of parents seeking guidance from Camagu suggests some form of recognition of his expertise in navigating issues of gender and sexual diversity in his classroom and the school community. This collaboration between teachers and parents is essential for creating a supportive environment for all learners, irrespective of their diverse gender and sexual orientations.

Conclusion

This study aimed to shed light on the positive inclusive experiences of Camagu, a self-identifying same-sex desiring FP male teacher, in order to shift the narrative in research about the phenomenon of FP male teachers in conservative and often under-researched provinces such as the Eastern Cape. The finding highlights the importance of supportive leadership and inclusive practices in fostering a sense of belonging for same-sex desiring teachers. The narratives shared by Camagu underscored the transformative potential of inclusive leadership in challenging heteronormativity and creating environments where all individuals feel valued and respected. The second theme about positive inclusion for gender and sexually diverse learners emphasises the crucial role that teachers play in creating safe and affirming spaces for learners to explore and express their identities. Through their advocacy, empathy and willingness to challenge normative assumptions, teachers like Camagu contribute to the creation of inclusive learning environments where every student feels seen, heard and valued. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made to support the positive inclusion of gender and sexually diverse learners in educational settings:

- Leadership support: Foster supportive leadership at all levels, focusing on promoting inclusive policies and practices that affirm the identities of all learners and teachers alike.
- Community engagement: Schools to create partnerships with parents, caregivers and community organisations to promote understanding and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity and provide resources and support for families of gender and sexual diverse learners.
- Learner support: Create workshops for school-based support teams (SBSTs) to support gender and sexually diverse learners, including peer support groups, and access to affirming resources and literature. Moreover, Life Skills and Life Orientation teachers can implement curriculum revisions, for a more contextual and culturally sensitive curriculum implementation.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can work towards creating environments that are welcoming, affirming and inclusive for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Through collaborative efforts between teachers, leaders, learners and communities, we can strive towards a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

O.K. is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

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

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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