Strategic steps in promoting gender diversity in South African high schools: A parental perspective on queering cisnormativity

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Abstract—It is important to note that transgender learners experienced gender discrimination, misgendering, and bullying at South African High Schools. Based on parental perspectives, this paper presents the strategies that can be used in South African high schools to promote gender diversity. This considers reconceptualisation of gender to enable parents to challenge the factors that act as barriers to the promotion of gender diversity and ensure that the schooling environment is an inclusive one for both trans and cis learners. This paper thus suggests a strategic step that can be used to queer religion and culture to promote gender diversity. This study provides strategies in a three-step guide that parents can use to transform South African high schools into more inclusive environments and to queer cisnormativity.

Keywords: cisgender (Cis), cisnormative schooling, cisnormativity, gender diversity, high schools, queering, transgender (Trans)

I. INTRODUCTION

A cisnormative schooling culture promotes the view that there is a synonymous relationship between someone's gender and the sex they were assigned at birth (Chaka, 2024). In other words, cisnormativity is the idea that the sex of a person is the criterion that determines a person's gender (Roy & Singh, 2024). From a cisnormative point of view, gender determines the perceived acceptable ways by society in which females and males should behave (Jule, 2022; Leaper, 2023). Yet, the approach of using a person's sex to determine their gender has created an unwelcoming schooling environment for trans learners in most South African schools (Bhana, 2022; Francis, 2023; Reygan, 2019; Ubisi, 2021). The term 'transgender' (or trans) is an umbrella term used in this paper to refer to all learners who do not conform to the binary gender system or who identify with a gender that does not align with the sex assigned to them (Barnhart et al., 2023). The understanding of gender as synonymous to the sex of a person has created an unwelcoming and unsafe schooling environment for trans learners in most High Schools. This paper presents strategic steps to create an inclusive schooling environment for trans learners in South African high schools.

II. STRATEGIC STEPS IN PROMOTING GENDER DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOLS

Parental involvement in queering of cisnormativity

Globally, parents' involvement in schools and their queering of cisnormativity have played a role in creating an inclusive schooling environment (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). In line with this global trend, this paper presents strategies that can be used to guide the promotion of gender diversity in South African high schools. It has been developed to enhance parents' involvement in schools and improve teachers' understanding of how gender diversity can be promoted. These strategies were developed using the responses of parents who participated in a doctoral study titled "*Queering Cisnormativity: Exploring Parental Understanding of Gender Diversity in South African High Schools*" by the first author of this paper. The strategies are likely to have an impact and sustained effect that will alter cisnormative schooling cultures to include gender-diverse learners in South African high schools.

The focus of these strategies is to provide an approach to shifting school environments by focusing on gender discrimination, bullying, misgendering, and all other forms of prejudice against trans learners. Furthermore, these strategies aim to prevent a cisnormative schooling culture from dominating schools because such a culture creates an unsafe space for trans learners. Promoting gender diversity is essential not only for creating a safe schooling environment but also for fashioning an atmosphere in which effective learning can occur for both trans and cis learners.

The Department of Basic Education can also use these strategies to promote gender diversity in South African high schools since it includes a step to encourage parents (as well as teachers) to reconceptualise their understanding of gender and gender diversity. Two subsequent steps aim to challenge the existing barriers to the promotion of gender diversity in South African schools and queer schools to be accommodative of transgender. The strategies in this paper are not necessarily meant to be followed in the sequence presented. Their application will depend on the depth of the cisnormative schooling culture at the school. Having said this, however, ensuring that parents have reconceptualised their understanding of gender must be the first step before religion and culture can be queered. Religion and culture are the main barriers to the promotion of gender diversity. Parents must be willing to queer schools and transform them into environments that are inclusive of gender diversity.

Step 1: Reconceptualising gender

This strategy requires that parents or anyone who intends to promote gender diversity must have a reconceptualised understanding of what gender is. In Africa, gender is traditionally synonymous with sex (Bond, 2016; Torgrimson & Minson, 2005; Unger, 1979). This traditional view of

gender must be transformed, and gender should be understood as a performative act constructed by society (Butler & Trouble, 1990; Roy, 2024; Ton, 2018); a learner's sex cannot be used to determine their gender.

Gender as binary

Understanding gender as a binary construct (only male and female) is an established gender classification system. This system relies on using a person's sex to determine their gender. Using this classification means that all learners at schools are expected to behave and act per the gender that aligns with their sex. This understanding of gender encourages cis learners to see themselves as normal and trans learners as not normal. As a result, cis learners and sometimes teachers discriminate against trans learners to the extent that trans learners feel the cisnormative schooling environment is unwelcoming and unsafe. Research has shown that an unwelcoming schooling environment can enhance a trans learner's gender dysphoria (Bottoman, 2021). Gender dysphoria is a mental health issue caused by a feeling of incongruency between one's gender identity and the sex assigned to them at birth, which leads to depression and suicidal ideation (Clayton, 2023; Guzman-Parra et al., 2023; Mason et al., 2023). The reconceptualisation of the traditional binary view of gender can enhance the creation of an inclusive schooling environment.

Gender as a social construct or performativity

As previously discussed, research has shown that a person's gender and sex have traditionally been seen as synonymous (Garofalo & Garvin, 2020; Wilson, 2023). According to medical science, a person's sex is determined by their chromosomes (Mauvais-Jarvis et al., 2020; Solari, 2024). However, this is not to say that a person whose sex is male will automatically behave in a way that is socially acceptable for men. I mention the science of sex here to respond to the question of whether transgender is a person's choice or whether it is who trans learners are innate, meaning that they can perform a gender that does not align with their sex (Butler, 2004). Some of the South African parents from the doctoral study on which this paper draws considered transgender to be a phase that some learners go through. The parents also thought it could be a reaction to having been hurt in a previous relationship with a person of the opposite gender. In other words, they do not see transgender as something real. But, evidence from a longitudinal study reported that transgender individuals can socially transition as early as the age of three (Olson & Gülgöz, 2018). This confirms that being trans is not the result of being hurt from a previous relationship or the exploration of different genders as a teenager.

Research has also proven that society is responsible for determining how individuals should behave. In other words, individuals should perform their gender according to their sex (Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Tadjimatova, 2023). To elaborate, if a boy grows up among girls and is not taught to urinate standing, he will most likely do it sitting down. It is, thus, society, not the sex of an individual, dictating that girls should wear pink and play with dolls while boys should play with toy cars. This influence of society is why we argue here that parents can significantly support high schools in promoting gender diversity. Therefore, in helping parents to reconceptualise their understanding of gender, it is necessary to explain to them the fact that gender is not synonymous with sex but is a performative act. This reconceptualised understanding can help parents help trans learners, as many of them struggle with feeling different.

This paper does not seek to change the established gender binary system nor use medical science to redefine gender and sex. Rather, we aim to argue that gender is performative. This knowledge can help parents understand that trans learners are not in control of their gender identities and create an inclusive schooling environment by promoting transgender as something normal. Ultimately, when parents understand that gender is a social construct, they can challenge the barriers that exist to the promotion of gender diversity, which contribute negatively to the mental health of trans learners.

Step 2: Queering religion and culture

This strategy, therefore, requires parents to queer or question their religious and cultural views to promote gender diversity in schools. However, research revealed that people largely rely on their religious and cultural beliefs in understanding gender as a binary construct (Baker et al., 2024; Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999; Bowers & Whitley, 2020; Campbell et al., 2019). We must note that we aim not to change or undermine religion or culture. Instead, we explore the role they can play in creating inclusive environments since a key principle, especially in most religions and cultures, is preserving life, which should include preserving people's mental health (Galek et al., 2015; Park, 2005). This strategy is the argument that queering religion and culture will lead to the understanding that transgender is real and not a myth.

Religion is believing in and worshipping a superhuman power considered God or gods (Crawford, 2003; Feuerbach, 2024; Jensen, 2019; Smith, 2017). Culture is constituted by a group of people or society's ideas, social behaviours, and customs (Gafurov, 2023; Sewell, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). The understanding of religionists and culturalists is that there are two sexes and that these sexes determine a person's gender. Hence, according to religion and culture, there are only two genders (male and female). Anyone who does not conform to this is considered immoral and to be questioning the ways of God. This view is the main reason for gender discrimination, misgendering, and bullying against trans learners at both schools and in society.

However, almost all religions and cultures have a similar belief that people should treat others how they would like to be treated (Gensler, 2013; Singer, 1963). The question then is: "Would we be happy if the misgendering and discrimination of trans learners is done to us?". This strategy, in step 2, thus encourages the promotion of humanity (Ubuntu) amongst all individuals regardless of their gender identity. The argument made here is to suggest an amicable strategy that can be used to challenge religious and cultural barriers to transgender without changing the basics of religion and culture. In other words, the main aspect of this step is that schools should not be grounds for maintaining religious and cultural precepts and rules but for maintaining what religion and culture are all about: preserving life. Insisting that all learners should be cisgender when trans learners feel that they are inside bodies that do not represent their gender identity may lead to gender dysphoria, one of the causes of depression and suicidal ideation (García Vega et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2021; Surace et al., 2021). Understanding that life is important regardless of whether a learner is cis, or trans may help parents understand that schools should be environments that promote the good mental health of all learners. Focusing on the essence of religion and culture (i.e., preserving life) paves the way for transgender to be understood as something that is real and not a myth.

In conclusion, the aim of step 2 is to focus on what beliefs are at the core of religion and culture to create an inclusive schooling environment. Focusing on the essence of religion and culture without imposing a binary understanding of gender on trans learners can improve the gender-inclusivity of schools. Once parents can begin to queer religion and culture, the cisnormative schooling culture will be transformed into an inclusive schooling culture.

Step 3: Transforming the cisnormative schooling culture

Once parents' understanding of gender has been reconceptualised and all barriers to transgender, such as religion and culture, have been queered, then the school's infrastructure and policies can be queered to accommodate all gender-diverse learners.

Queering infrastructure

Research has shown that most trans learners are discriminated against and bullied by their cis peers in school toilets (Francis et al., 2022; Ubisi, 2021) since the toilets at most schools are segregated in terms of the binary gender system (only male and female). The cisnormative idea of gender, influenced by religion and culture, as discussed in step 2, gives cis learners the power to mistreat trans learners. This mistreatment mainly takes place in school toilets since it is one place that teachers generally stay away from. Erecting new toilets that accommodate trans

learners would be a solution to the issue of bullying, but it involves an additional budget for the schools and the district. Unisex toilets have proven to be a great help in solving the issue of segregating toilets (Colliver & Duffus, 2021). Therefore, converting a school's existing toilets into unisex toilets can help mitigate bullying without additional cost. Alternatively, a school can convert just one block of toilets into unisex toilets while maintaining the others as segregated according to sex. Converting some toilets into unisex toilets is important because local schools in South Africa rely on the District Education Department for support. There are a series of channels to follow when schools request support for infrastructure from the National Education Department to the Provincial Education Department and the District Education Department (McLaren, 2017). This means allocating funds to adjust a school's infrastructure to include unisex toilets can take some time. The queering of school infrastructure is necessary for creating an inclusive school environment and for including both schools and the government in supporting trans learners.

This suggestion is not meant to change the binary establishment but to create an inclusive environment within a cisnormative schooling culture in a cost-effective way. However, this step relies on parents' mastering steps 1 and 2. As mentioned earlier, the steps within these strategies do not need to be followed in the sequence outlined here. Still, this sequence is more likely to yield positive results regarding queering cisnormativity in schools. When parents have gone through steps 1 and 2, they will be better able to queer the infrastructure of the schools to accommodate gender-diverse learners. Furthermore, these strategies for promoting gender diversity in schools can also be used by the National Department of Basic Education to amend their policies regarding how schools' infrastructure can be queered. Again, going through steps 1 and 2 of these strategies will enable anyone to generate ideas on how to queer the infrastructure of schools.

Queering policies of the school

Several schools' policies do not address the issue of misgendering trans learners. Misgendering is one of the forms of gender discrimination that is common in South African schools (Bhana, 2022; Chaka, 2024; Francis, 2024; John & Henry, 2024). Misgendering is when the wrong pronoun or any other gender-specific words are used when referring or speaking to a transgender person (Howansky et al., 2022; Pino & Edmonds, 2024). Parents who participated in the doctoral study on which this strategy draws used the terms "he-she" and "she-he" to refer to trans learners during their focus group interviews. Although these terms appear as if they gender discriminate, the intention behind using these terms was purely to avoid misgendering. By "he-she", the parents referred to trans girls who were assigned male at birth, while "she-he" referred to trans boys who were assigned female at birth. The purpose of raising the issue of the pronouns that parents use is to show that they acknowledge that using the proper pronoun promotes gender diversity.

Therefore, strategic step 3 to promote gender diversity calls for amendment of school policies, especially the learners' code of conduct, to include gender-diverse learners. Step 3 requires that schools amend their code of conduct and application forms to include an array of pronouns for transgender learners. These amendments will enable the acknowledgment and acceptance of trans learners. A school's code of conduct should also include a section that permits trans learners to dress according to their gender identity (while still being in line with the school's dress code). Since there is no policy at the national level that addresses these issues, the strategies in this paper can be used with discretion to queer schools and accommodate gender-diverse learners.

III.   CONCLUSION

This paper presents strategies that can be used as a guide when queering cisnormativity at a school level in South Africa. These strategies have been designed around the contributions of nine parents in the doctoral study mentioned in the introduction. Therefore, further research is necessary to validate these strategies. To make these strategies more

generalisable, future researchers should explore their use with parents and schools from different locations and races in South Africa. Nevertheless, the strategies presented in this paper are meant to help parents reconceptualise their understanding of gender. To clarify again, reconceptualising one's understanding of gender (i.e., moving from a binary view to understanding gender as a social construct) opens the path to discovering ways to challenge the barriers that hinder the promotion of gender diversity in South African high schools. This paper has presented the strategic steps in a particular order since step 3 is more likely to succeed if parents and teachers have gone through steps 1 and 2. However, schools can implement the steps in any sequence they choose when promoting gender diversity.

IV.   CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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