



Exploring experiences and challenges of LGBT learners facing at South African schools in the Sekhukhune district

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Abstract – This study investigates the experiences of LGBT learners regarding LGBT bullying in the Sekhukhune district. This study utilised a qualitative phenomenological study approach. It employed semi-structured interviews as technique for data collection. Five LGBT learners were purposively selected from three secondary schools in the rural village of Sekhukhune, Limpopo province, South Africa. Their ages ranged from 14 to 17 year-old and faced continuous bullying at school and in his community, ultimately leading to his tragic death. The results showed that even minor instances of bullying is crucial to prevent them from escalating. This study recommends raising the awareness, dispel misconceptions, and educate communities and schools about LGBT issues. It gives all stakeholders a platform on how to eliminate and manage bullying in schools. This study is significant because it includes learners' perspectives, which are often overlooked in prior research.

Keywords: LGBT bullying, Homophobia, LGBT learners, South African schools, verbal bullying, Physical bullying, Emotional bullying

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I. INTRODUCTION

LESBIAN, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) bullying is a major social problem in South African schools. It is a phenomenon that has also been encountered worldwide (Sikhakhane et al., 2018). Additionally, Al-Raqad et al. (2017) note bullying as a global problem affecting school-age children's emotional, social, and physical wellness. Given that it compromises children's rights to education and safety, the continuous prevalence of bullying and school violence is concerning. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2016) reported that school violence and bullying affect 246 million children worldwide yearly.

The study was carried out at three secondary schools, and its interest was triggered by the fact that LGBT learners in South Africa are regularly reported in the media for committing suicide due to LGBT bullying that occurs daily on school grounds and within our communities. For example, De Barros (2022) reported on a 14-year-old gay child who was constantly bullied at school and in his community. The bullying sessions were so intense that the child decided to end his life.

Understanding LGBT bullying

Literature offers various interpretations and definitions of bullying. According to Campbell (2023), the LGBT community, commonly called the gay community, utilises the term LGBT as an umbrella designation encompassing diverse individuals, subcultures, and organisations united by shared cultural and social movements. The acronym LGBT represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Campbell et al. (2020) contend that the categories of "lesbian, gay, bisexual" frequently pertain to the definition of sexual attraction and/or sexual orientation. Specifically, lesbian refers to women who experience physical, sexual, and/or emotional attraction to other women, while homosexual pertains to individuals who are attracted to individuals of

the same sex. In agreement, both Campbell et al. (2020) asserted that an attraction to individuals of both the same and opposite genders characterises bisexual individuals. In contrast, transgender individuals exhibit a gender identity and/or gender expression that deviates from the sex assigned at birth. Regrettably, learners identified as LGBT encounter an increased likelihood of experiencing bullying in educational settings due to prevalent societal intolerance towards homosexuality (Jones, 2019).

Olweus (2010) provides a concise definition of bullying, asserting that it entails one person deliberately targeting, harassing, or troubling another individual. At the same time, the effects of bullying vary depending on the context. Lake et al. (2022) emphasised that, in essence, it violates a child's integrity and dignity, leaving its victims insecure, anxious, confused, helpless, and disempowered, and that victims may be at high risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. According to De Wet (2005), bullying is frequently characterised by an imbalance of power because the perpetrator's primary goal is to target individuals with less power than they. This negative, harmful, antagonistic activity is intended to cause hurt or distress. However, within the realm of bullying, a distinct and concerning form arises when LGBT students are specifically targeted due to their sexual orientation, leading to the phenomenon known as LGBT bullying (Doty & King, 2018). In this context, the perpetrators are commonly characterised as homophobic.

Similarly, Kosciw et al.'s (2016) understanding of bullying aligns with the broader conceptualisation of the term. He defines bullying as negative behaviours characterised by repeated aggression, harm, or intimidation directed toward individuals or groups with less power. In the case of LGBT bullying, Kosciw's definition encompasses the targeted victimisation, harassment, and mistreatment of individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. This includes verbal, physical, and relational acts of aggression intentionally aimed at causing harm or distress to LGBT individuals (Kosciw et al., 2016). At the same time, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2020) investigated how

bullying contributes to the increased risk of adverse health outcomes among LGBT individuals. In contrast, Thornberg and Delby (2019) argue that students view bullying as a natural part of social life, where different social roles contribute to its occurrence. This perception blurs the line between joking and abusive behaviours.

Furthermore, former President Obama in 2011 emphasised the necessity of challenging the misconception that bullying is harmless or inevitable during one's transition to adulthood (Dale et al., 2019). Similarly, Maunder and Crafter (2018) agree that some students believe that when specific individuals seen as different or of low status are repeatedly treated unkindly by their peers, it may not consistently be recognised as bullying. Instead, these behaviours may be viewed as a normal part of social dynamics and people's roles in everyday life. The gravity of this LGBT bullying becomes apparent when considering the fundamental role of schools as crucial learning environments and essential platforms for shaping the future success of young individuals.

In this regard, Bohm et al. (2016) acknowledged that schools can pose challenges for LGBT students. It is then imperative to recognise that LGBT learners face additional adversities, including the pervasive presence of abuse, violence, and harassment. The significance of this concern is effectively supported by the compelling research of Earnshaw et al. (2017), who assert that the experience of considerable bullying among LGBT learners poses substantial threats to their mental and physical well-being. Hence, it is imperative to confront and mitigate the problem of LGBT bullying in educational environments, as it undermines the fundamental objectives of schools as nurturing and inclusive spaces.

Collectively, Bhom et al. (2016) and Rivers and Smith (1994) concur that students encounter bullying because of a hostile environment and that LGBT bullying presents considerable challenges that hinder the holistic development and academic success of LGBT learners. However, Salmivalli (2010) argued that LGBT bullying arises from social dynamics and peer pressure where one desires to gain social status or fit in with a particular group. The study indicates that individuals may bully to conform to peer expectations or exert power and control over others. Thornberg (2015) contended with Salmivalli (2010) by stating that bullying is socially constructed and is connected to status or position among peers. This means that the experiences of LGBT bullying are intricately connected to the socially constructed nature of bullying itself. Rather than being an inherent or natural behaviours, bullying is shaped by prevailing social norms, power dynamics, and cultural attitudes.

Additionally, in the context of LGBT bullying, Herek (2007) acknowledges that bullying arises from deeply ingrained prejudices, stereotypes, and biases against individuals who do not conform to conventional heterosexual or gender norms. Based on what literature assets, these norms are constructed and perpetuated by society, often influenced by cultural, religious, or familial factors, thereby establishing an environment in which those who deviate from such norms become targets of bullying. "LGBT bullying is a result of society's construction of gender and sexuality," adds (Doty & King, 2018). Therefore, society often has strict expectations about gender roles and what is considered "normal" behaviours in terms of being heterosexual. When someone identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and challenges these norms, they often face hostility and discrimination.

LGBT bullying in the South African context

Bullying in schools, specifically among members of the LGBT community, has received widespread attention in recent years. In South Africa, incidents of bullying targeting sexual and gender minorities have also been reported, prompting the need for a comprehensive understanding of these experiences. South Africa has a progressive constitution that protects the rights of all citizens, including those who identify as LGBT (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). However, acceptance of LGBT individuals remains a contentious issue in society, and discrimination and violence continue to be prevalent (Francis, 2019). Robertson (2019) highlighted that research has shown that the experience of bullying in schools is a significant challenge faced by

many LGBT learners, which can negatively impact their academic performance, mental health, and well-being.

Furthermore, several studies have explored the prevalence of bullying among LGBT learners in South African schools. Robinson et al. (2024) found that 45% of LGBT learners surveyed had experienced some form of bullying in the past year, compared to 27% of non-LGBT learners. The study also revealed that verbal abuse and name-calling were the most common forms of bullying experienced by LGBT students. Similarly, Reddy et al. (2019) investigated the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming learners in South African schools. Their study found that most respondents had suffered emotional bullying, and some reported experiencing physical bullying, while others reported experiencing sexual violence or harassment. Theodore and Chiasson (2021) argued that everyone's bullying experience is unique, as different identities and experiences influence it. They acknowledged that these experiences may differ based on the specific ways identities intersect because of intersectionality (Theodore & Chiasson, 2021). For example, research has shown that bisexual individuals face a unique set of challenges compared to exclusively gay or lesbian individuals because of biphobia (Theodore & Chiasson, 2021). This means that the challenges of LGBT bullying faced by a white gay individual will not be the same as the challenges faced by a black gay individual; hence, it considers the specific ways in which intersecting identities shape experiences of bullying. Balsam et al. contend with Theodore and Chiasson (2021) by indicating that intersecting identities may provide insight into the reasons behind the high levels of bullying challenges among LGBT learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature has also found that one of the primary challenges of LGBT bullying is traditional gender norms and expectations. In many parts of South Africa, strict binary gender roles are deeply ingrained in the culture, which can lead to discrimination and violence against those who do not conform to these norms. For example, a study conducted by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (2017) found that transgender women are often subjected to physical and verbal abuse, including rape and murder. This is due to the perception that they are deviating from traditional gender norms (SAHRC, 2017). Additionally, Kosciw et al. (2016) found that strict adherence to gender norms was associated with higher levels of bullying and victimisation. As mentioned, we can see how different problems can arise when considering intersecting identities. In the context of LGBT bullying in school, traditional and cultural norms can play a role. Bullying can occur in many different settings, but it is often rooted in underlying factors (Doty & King, 2018). These behaviours may be adopted from home, where learners learn about gender norms from their community or the people around them. According to Meeusen and Dhont (2015), certain adults, particularly parents, contribute to the continuation of LGBT bullying by instructing their children to embrace comparable ideological beliefs that align with their own biases against homosexuality. Poteat et al. (2013) contend that the main driver of homophobic and transphobic bullying lies in certain adults who impart prejudiced beliefs and instill heteronormative ideologies in children, subsequently prompting them to enforce traditional gender norms among their fellow students. The study highlights the importance of challenging gender stereotypes and promoting acceptance and respect for diversity to reduce bullying and discrimination against the LGBT community.

Prevalence of LGBT bullying in South African schools

Research studies have shown that there is a high prevalence of LGBT bullying in South African schools. The SAHRC (2017) found that 47% of students faced discrimination and bullying in school based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Another study published in 2020 in the Journal of LGBT Youth reported that 90% of LGBT students experienced some form of bullying in South African schools. This means that there is a significant issue of prejudice and discrimination against

LGBT students in South African schools. The high prevalence of bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity suggests that many LGBT students are facing daily struggles and challenges in their educational environment. Similarly, extensive inquiries have been conducted to determine the prevalence of LGBT bullying in South African educational establishments. Significantly, Reddy et al. (2019) contributed to the academic discourse through their seminal work on the implications for school victimisation and young adult adjustment, which explored the lived experiences of LGBT adolescents in South Africa. The study found that a considerable number of LGBT students reported experiencing bullying, harassment, and victimisation in school settings. It highlighted the negative impact on their well-being, psychological adjustment, and academic performance. However, South Africa has made significant progress in recognising and protecting the rights of LGBT individuals, including legalising same-sex marriage and enacting laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. Despite all these advancements, LGBT individuals, including students, still face significant challenges, including bullying and harassment in schools. DePalma and Artinson. (2009) have found that despite the progress the state has made in protecting individuals against LGBT bullying, the study has revealed that LGBT learners still experience bullying in South African schools.

The study further revealed that homophobic bullying is pervasive, with many LGBT students facing verbal, physical, and sexual harassment. It further emphasised the need for comprehensive anti-bullying policies and interventions in schools. The SAHRC (2017) has conducted research and advocacy work on LGBT rights and bullying. They have highlighted the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools and called for greater efforts to address this issue. The SAHRC (2017) has emphasised the importance of promoting inclusive school environments, implementing comprehensive anti-bullying policies, and supporting LGBT learners. Considering these, several researchers advise that while these studies and findings provide insights into the prevalence of LGBT bullying in South African schools, the extent of the issue may vary across different regions and schools within the country (Bhana, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Numerous scholars offer diverse interpretations of a theoretical framework. Van Meter and Garner (2005) and Patrón (2021) characterise a theoretical framework as the underlying structure that underpins and sustains a study. It is crucial to provide a concise definition of the theoretical framework to enhance the understanding and relevance of the study. This study employed Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism theory to delve into the experiences of LGBT learners being bullied in the Sekhukhune district. Gergen (1985) emphasises that the value of social interactions and constructions of your experiences play an essential role. Each new experience or interaction is incorporated into our schemata and shapes our perspective. Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) stated that social constructivism applies to our social environment, where people may exchange information. This indicates that when people exercise social interactions, they voice out their experiences of bullying, which would help in identifying strategies that would assist in resolving LGBT bullying in school. Because social interactions shape our perspectives, this means learners' perspectives on LGBT bullying are important because perpetrators of bullying are less likely to bully others (Gergen, 1985).

The theoretical framework of Gergen's theory of social constructionism provides a valuable lens through which to understand LGBT learners' experiences of bullying. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Doty and King (2018), social constructionism emphasises that individuals' knowledge and understanding of the world are shaped by their social interactions and the cultural contexts in which they exist. From this perspective, reality is not considered an objective truth but a product of shared meanings and agreements within a specific social group. Within the context of LGBT bullying, social

constructionism suggests that their characteristics or traits do not solely determine LGBT learners' experiences. Instead, "these experiences are shaped by the social constructions and interpretations surrounding gender, sexuality, and power dynamics within their particular community or educational setting" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hergenrather & Lee, 2019). Gergen emphasises the significance of language in constructing reality. In the context of LGBT bullying, language serves as a tool for labelling, stigmatising, and marginalising students based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. According to Doty and King (2018), these labels establish social categories and hierarchies that impact power dynamics and social interactions within the educational setting.

Moreover, Gergen's (1991) theory emphasises the importance of social relationships and interactions in shaping individuals' experiences. In the case of LGBT bullying, LGBT learners may encounter discrimination, exclusion, and harassment from their peers, educators, or administrators due to their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. These negative interactions can have profound psychological and emotional effects on affected students, resulting in heightened levels of stress, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and even disengagement from academic pursuits (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020).

Furthermore, Gergen's theory highlights the significance of considering multiple perspectives and challenging dominant discourses. In the context of LGBT bullying, it is crucial to acknowledge and validate the diverse experiences and identities present within the educational setting. For example, Doty and King (2018) highlighted that one dominant discourse is that LGBT learners are different and that they do not belong in mainstream society. This discourse can lead to bullying, as it can make LGBT learners feel like they are not accepted or valued. This is because, according to Hergenrather and Lee (2019) LGBT people are often marginalised, and their voices are not always heard. By fostering inclusive and accepting environments, educators and administrators can promote positive social constructions that challenge the oppressive norms and biases contributing to LGBT bullying (Doty & King, 2018).

In conclusion, Gergen's theoretical framework of social constructionism provides a valuable lens for understanding and addressing LGBT bullying. This framework posits that the experiences of LGBT learners affected by bullying are not predetermined or fixed but rather are influenced by collective meanings, language usage, social relationships, and power dynamics within the educational context. This means that by changing the social context in which LGBT learners live, we can change the way that they experience bullying. By adopting this framework, educators and stakeholders can strive to create supportive and inclusive environments that actively confront and mitigate LGBT bullying.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

This study explores the experiences and challenges of LGBT learners in South African schools.

V. METHODS

Research approach

The study used a qualitative approach, looking for participant perceptions and attitudes rather than scientifically measurable evidence (Maxwell, 2010). Creswell et al. (2016, p. 240) stated that the qualitative approach offers fresh perspectives on how people see their lives and the world around them. According to Salmons (2017), qualitative researchers work on the premise that people create their realities and view the world uniquely due to their dedication to these broad goals. Investigating and comprehending the meanings people give to their experiences is the goal of qualitative research (Tuffour, 2017).

In qualitative research, the researcher sought to elicit a thorough, in-depth, and flexible assessment of the issue under investigation and

understand why people behave in particular ways (Reeves et al., 2008). In this study, homophobic bullying was experienced by grade 11 students, and the researcher sought to understand this phenomenon by examining how these students perceived it (Al-Busaidi, 2008). By using a qualitative approach, the researcher was better able to comprehend LGBT learner behaviours, what they perceived as bullying, what they go through, and why it is so important to address this bullying among learners. Because qualitative research is intended to investigate people's lived experiences, the researcher researched the study by asking "what, why, and how" questions (Tuffour, 2017). The researcher used qualitative data, such as interviews, to comprehend and explain social phenomena. This also enabled the researcher to construct a final report or presentation incorporating participants' voices (Gill et al., 2008).

Qualitative research is the most appropriate research style for a researcher seeking to understand the perspectives of grade 11 LGBT students in various schools. A qualitative research approach was employed in the study because it allows the researcher to get information from various sources, including observation, interviewing, noting, describing, listening, and interpreting. Considering this, the researcher assessed the experiences of bullied students in grade 11. (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008).

Research design

A research design outlines how the investigation will occur (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The process comprises the circumstances surrounding how, when, and from whom the data were gathered. The research design is specifically a strategy to gather information. Because LGBT is a phenomenon that occurs mostly in schools, it needs to be investigated in schools, and the researcher employed a phenomenological research design to investigate the phenomenon. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger established the phenomenological approach, which aims to understand how objects are experienced and appear to consciousness as well as how people experience their lives (Smith et al., 2009; Finlay, 2011; Henriksson, 2012; Tuffour, 2017).

Makunika (2020) asserted that a phenomenological study focuses on articulating what all participants share when encountering a phenomenon and how those shared experiences have varied meanings for different individuals. When tackling structural or normative assumptions, phenomenological research is particularly effective at revealing people's experiences and views from their perspectives. It also ties to the study's primary objective, which was to examine participants' first-person reports of LGBT bullying from the perspective of those who had personally experienced the phenomenon.

The study of emotive, emotional, and frequently intense human experiences is well-suited for phenomenological design (Merriam, 2009; Worthington, 2013). Also, when questioning delicate subjects like the experience of bullying among learners, phenomenological research is appropriate for the current study (Makunika, 2020). According to Munhall (2013), phenomenology seeks to understand the experience rather than just the subject's response. This study learned more about how students perceive bullying, how they perceive it, and who contributes to it. Also, the researcher wanted to learn what the victim's thoughts were, crucial to stopping LGBT bullying in schools. According to the researcher, students could express their views regarding bullying in this study. The study was also used to show how students perceived and experienced bullying.

According to Alase (2017), an interpretative phenomenological approach interprets and amplifies research participants' lived experiences' stories; however, for those stories to make sense interpretively, the interpreter (researcher) of the stories must have a true and deeper understanding of the participants' 'lived experiences'.

Research paradigm

The current study's research methodology is the interpretivist paradigm. According to Saunder (2015), interpretivism is a paradigm that emphasises that humans are distinct from physical occurrences because they generate meanings, and Interpretivists produce these meanings. The study used a phenomenological research approach,

making it appropriate for an interpretive paradigm since, as Alase (2017) noted, the methodology amplifies and interprets participants' experiences. This suggests that the qualitative research approach and the interpretive perspective are closely linked (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This is due to the Interpretivism paradigm's ability to allow researchers to investigate and find the perspectives of persons in various circumstances (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

The main aim of this paradigm is to develop a rich understanding of interpretations of the social world and context. For this research, this means looking at LGBT bullying experiences from the perspective of Grade 11 learners. Alase (2017) explains that for the study under investigation to make sense interpretively, the researcher of the stories must have a true and deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Moreover, a way for a phenomenological researcher to understand the 'lived experiences' of the research participants is important for the researcher to put themselves in their shoes. The researcher's main aim in this regard was to comprehend the basic meanings of LGBT bullying. The researchers also collected and processed participants' interpretations of bullying stories to capture the participants' understanding of bullying, and the researcher also gathered and reviewed participants' interpretations of bullying stories, documented participants' comprehension of bullying, and ensured that participants' emotions were under check while also assuring empathy.

Some scholars believe the interpretive paradigm is an essential and relevant paradigm beneficial in this phenomenological research study because it believes that people have diverse backgrounds and generate distinct interpretations of experiences under different conditions (Crotty, 1998; Saunder, 2015; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The interpretive paradigm of Burrell and Morgan (1979) is compatible and appropriate for critically investigating and interpreting the impact of the phenomena of bullying experienced by LGBT learners in the Sekhukhune district. Fundamentally, the paradigm highlighted and recognised the problematic situation of bullying that was under investigation. It also assisted in interpreting how the issue affected the research participants' lived experiences and provided potential solutions for ending bullying in schools.

Research site

The research was conducted in three schools in the Sekhukhune district. The selected secondary schools were in the heart of the Limpopo Province, and the frequent recurrence of LGBT bullying characterises that. The researchers chose a school as a location to research because schools are where most bullying experiences occur, regardless of where learners have learned their bullying behaviours. The research focused on the schools, specifically the LGBT learners, because they are at the age where they can interpret their LGBT bullying experiences and voice their opinions.

Participants

The participants are chosen based on the research questions that the study will attempt to answer (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The researchers selected a group of LGBT students for this study who had similar experiences and were eager to share them. Purposive sampling was utilised in this study to identify people who could be essential to the research. This sampling uses specified criteria to select study participants for inclusion (Etikan et al., 2016). The researchers could collect participant data relevant to the investigation using purposive sampling. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling is easy to understand and use.

This makes it possible to identify and explain the similarities in their experiences. As a result, this study purposively chose five grade 11 learners from three high schools in the Sekhukhune district. These participants were LGBT and had knowledge and experiences of bullying. Their ages ranged from 16 to 17 years old. All of them were in grade 11 and lived in the Sekhukhune region in the Limpopo province, South Africa.

Procedure

Participants are accessed through the Department of Basic Education

(DBE). The researcher requested access to the school bullying records of bullying cases through the Limpopo Department of Education. As such, the school records of all bullying cases were able to help the researcher identify suitable participants for the current study. As such, the research had ethical consideration from the University of Free State (UFS), Research Ethics Committee, approval letter from the UFS General Human Research Ethics Committee, approval letter from the Limpopo Department of Education to conduct research from Sekhukhune East district, approval letter to research circuit offices, and permission from the principal, Assent form for the participant, and, lastly, Consent Form for the legal guardian. As such, researchers managed to access the participants in the study through face-to-face interviews.

Data collection instrument

The study used a semi-structured interview as a method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews collect in-depth relevant information (Kallio et al., 2016; DeJonchheere & Vaughn, 2019; Moser & Korstjens, 2018) on LGBT learners' perspectives of LGBT bullying in the Sekhukhune area. The semi-structured interview is appropriate as it allows the interviewee to discuss life experiences (Henriksen et al., 2021). Semi-structured interviews are the most effective technique as the open-ended questions prompt participants to formulate answers in their own words (Newcomer et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2021). According to Best and Kahn (2003) and Henriksen et al. (2021), the objective of an interview is to learn what is on someone's mind. As a result, the study aims to discover what participants think about concerns of LGBT bullying in school.

The researchers formulated the questions, and each participant had to answer all fourteen questions. Five LGBT learners participated in the individual semi-structured interviews. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007), semi-structured interviews allow for probing and clarifying answers. This made it suitable for my study as it would help expose what learners are hiding and experiencing in schools. The researchers were conscientious enough to keep the interview under control and steer the conversation because it was simple for the interview to wander off-topic. According to Jacobs et al. (2017), a researcher should pay close attention to participant comments to spot new lines of inquiry that are emerging and directly related to the phenomenon being studied. They should then explore and probe these new lines of inquiry.

I was also careful because this highly delicate personal study can provoke feelings. I had to pay attention to nonverbal signals that might have indicated that some discussions were difficult for the learners. Yet, during the interview sessions, not a single participant expressed any emotional discomfort in any way, and all the interviews went without a hitch. Sepedi, the language the participants understood best, was used for the interviews. This made it simple for students to convey their ideas without being constrained by words. The interviews were translated into English, later transcribed, and audio recorded. Every interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. I tried to keep the conversations on-topic and avoid drifting off-topic for an extended period. According to Flick (2006), a successful interviewer must have strong interpersonal skills to ask questions that will make participants feel at ease. Despite my brevity, I made it a point to get rich data. My questions were geared to be direct, concise, and understandable. Questions were also explained to students so that they could respond effectively.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as a fundamental technique for qualitative research because it imparts basic competencies for carrying out various kinds of qualitative research. "Thematic analysis was conducted using the NVivo 14 software. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software used to organise, code, and analyse qualitative data. It has several features that are helpful for thematic analysis. Such as creating coding frameworks, code data, and visualise data" (Welsh, 2002).

For my thematic analysis, researchers first imported the five participants' data after listening to the recordings of the interviews and transcribed them into my notebook in conjunction with the handwritten

notes hand-written during the interviews into NVivo. Researchers then created a coding framework based on the research questions. Researchers coded my data using the coding framework and then analysed my coded data to identify patterns and themes. Researchers used the code book and hierarchy chart to analyse my data.

Ethical considerations

The researchers obtained approval to conduct the study from the University of Free State and the Limpopo Department of Education, South Africa. The researchers sent consent forms to parents to allow their children to participate in the study; participants were also issued assent forms for consent. Application letters were also sent to the principals and the circuit office. Because the study involves a sensitive topic that may arouse emotional distress in other vulnerable participants, the researcher applied to the Limpopo Department of Social Development for a school Social Worker/Psychologist to be in place in case learners encounter any emotional distress during the interviews. Students were informed of the study's voluntary nature and allowed to discontinue their participation at any point if they felt it had a detrimental effect on them. The confidentiality of the information acquired was also guaranteed to the learners. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity and ensure that this data is solely utilised for the study's purposes.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical results

Table 1 Biographic results

Participants	Age	Gender	Grade levels
Participant A	16	Male	11
Participant B	17	Female	11
Participant C	16	Female	11
Participant D	17	Male	11
Participant E	17	Female	11

LGBT Learners' experiences of bullying in schools

Through this study, it became apparent that LGBT learners encounter varying bullying experiences. This reports how LGBT learners in schools A to C articulate and explore their encounters with bullying. It also highlights the learners' understanding of LGBT bullying and their personal experiences concerning its effects on both their social and academic lives. Consequently, the study brings attention to the diverse perspectives and impact of LGBT bullying among learners.

Many LGBT learners reported that they were being bullied by their classmates sometimes because of their sexual orientation. Such behaviours were associated with being ill-mannered and the age difference of being in the same class as learners younger than they are, which was frustrating for the perpetrator. They have personal problems at home, and therefore, they are being bullied because perpetrators have a misguided belief that bullying could rectify these behaviours. LGBT Learners described their experiences of bullying as:

"I have experienced emotional bullying where someone comes to you and insults you, and I am not okay with it. They will ask how you feel when you are a boy in a relationship with another boy. And this does not sit well with me. In some cases, they will physically bully you by poking fingers on your forehead to show that they look down on you. Sometimes, they will even tell you that you are a bisexual, which is uncomfortable because you have not decided to come out and tell the public about it" (Participant A).

"Many people judge me because some say you cannot be a boy while you are a girl" (Participant B).

"She said I cannot become a boy while I am a girl. She would publicly tell people that I am a lesbian, saying that I am a girl and that I am going to sleep with other girls. I am scared to report this matter to the teachers because I do not want this to go public" (Participant C).

"They say hurtful words towards LGBT learners; they make joke remarks about everything they do. Concentrating in the classroom is hard; even when teachers are not around, they tease me a lot. Teachers cannot speak to them because they do not have manners at school and home" (Participant D).

"And the parents are not happy about my sexual orientation, and my parents are not happy that I am a member of the LGBT. I am often looked down

upon, and this causes a lot of stress for me in such a way that I think of overdosing on pills and committing suicide because of the way society is treating LGBT people. People swear at you whenever they get a chance. They make you a classroom joke" (Participant E).

In the study, LGBT learners reported experiencing a similar form of bullying. They explained that they were questioned about their sexuality and asked about how they could be another gender while they were a certain gender. While some felt uncomfortable being confronted with that question, they faced it daily. Patterson (2017) attested that the truth is often uncomfortable but that it is important to face it head-on. On the other hand, one participant was rejected by her parents for being a Lesbian.

LGBT Learners also reported that their classmates made jokes about them; they made horrible remarks and even swore at them. Regardless, LGBT learners found a way to get back into reality.

Impact of bullying

Bullying generally has an impact on victims and leaves scars that one must deal with later. According to the Social Constructionism theory, "bullying can have a significant impact on victims. Victims of bullying may come to believe that they are worthless or deserve to be treated badly. They may also withdraw from social activities and become isolated. In some cases, victims of bullying may even attempt suicide" (Troop-Gordon et al., 2021). With that said, participants explained how the bullying has impacted their lives.

"I was not okay about the incident because you cannot expose my information without my consent. I felt embarrassed and stressed by the whole ordeal." (Participant A).

"Even when other LGBT learners made presentations in front of the class, they are no longer confident because they know someone will make fun of them." (Participant B).

"It made me feel very sad because everyone knew that I was the most bullied in the classroom, and then I became the laughingstock of not only the classroom but the entire school. And every time I pass the friends of my former friend, they laugh because it seems like making jokes about me is what they enjoy the most. And the most painful part is that they are stronger than me or more powerful, and you cannot fight with them because they will beat me." (Participant C).

"I feel embarrassed because this pulls down someone's confidence. It has affected me badly; I did not have time for my books because the bad things being said to me were affecting me mentally. I used to think a lot about painful things they say to me, and I would have a difficult time sleeping at night as well" (Participant D).

"I could not focus as I did in the classroom, and this delayed my schoolwork because I was forever thinking about things happening to me. Socially, I could not interact with other people?" (Participant E).

LGBT bullying had an impact on participants' lives; they faced challenges such as emotional distress, erosion of confidence, academic setbacks, social isolation, humiliation, and damage to reputation. The emotional toll of bullying is a common thread running through the narratives of the participants. Participant (A) voiced concern about their personal information being exposed without consent, leading to feelings of embarrassment and stress. Participant (C) shared their deep sadness, stemming from being labeled the most bullied in their classroom. The consistent theme of emotional distress highlights the enduring pain that bullying inflicts, leaving victims grappling with negative emotions and mental anguish.

Bullying has a profound impact on an individual's self-esteem and confidence. Participant (B) illustrates this by describing how learners' confidence wanes during classroom presentations, anticipating ridicule from others. Participant (D) speaks to the erosion of confidence as bullying led them to doubt their abilities, affecting not only their academic performance but also their mental well-being. This theme underscores the long-lasting effects of bullying on an individual's self-perception and belief in their capabilities. The toll of bullying on academic pursuits is evident in the narratives of Participants (D) and (E). Participant (D) articulates how hurtful comments affected their ability to focus on studies, resulting in academic setbacks. Similarly,

Participant (E) describes delayed schoolwork due to persistent thoughts about the bullying they experienced. These accounts emphasise the direct link between bullying and academic underachievement, demonstrating how the negative impact extends beyond emotional distress.

Bullying's insidious nature is further revealed through the social isolation experienced by victims. Participant (E) discusses the difficulty in interacting with others due to their preoccupation with their experiences of bullying. This isolation can exacerbate emotional distress and contribute to a sense of loneliness, making it challenging for victims to connect with peers and establish meaningful relationships. Participant (C) vividly recounts the profound humiliation they experienced because of bullying. The participant's reputation was tarnished in the classroom and throughout the school. The ongoing jokes and mockery from former friends compounded their pain, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of bullying on an individual's social standing and emotional well-being.

The experiences shared by participants underscore the devastating impact of bullying on individuals. Emotional distress, confidence erosion, academic setbacks, and social isolation are among the complex and interconnected outcomes of these harmful behaviours. Olweus (2010) cautions against the harmful behaviours of bullying by stating that it can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, academic problems, and social isolation. In some cases, it can even lead to suicide. These narratives serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive anti-bullying measures.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of LGBT learners regarding bullying in the Sekhukhune district. Through the qualitative phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews, the study delved into the nuanced dynamics of bullying within the classroom context. The findings illuminated the distressing reality learners face, shedding light on various forms of bullying, the factors contributing to its persistence, and learners' perspectives on potential solutions. The study's geographic delimitation to the Sekhukhune district allowed for a focused exploration of a community deeply impacted by this issue. The distressing incidents reported in the media served as a sobering reminder of the urgency to address LGBT bullying in schools. By giving voice to the LGBT learners themselves, this research underscores the significance of including their perspectives in the discourse on bullying, which has often been overshadowed. The recommendations emerging from the study hold the potential to inform interventions and policies that create safer and more inclusive school environments. As the findings resonate beyond the study's boundaries, it is hoped that they will contribute to wider efforts in South Africa and beyond to tackle LGBT bullying, fostering a culture of acceptance, empathy, and respect within educational institutions.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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