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A retrospective narrative exploration of sexually diverse people's identities and experiences in High School

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Abstract

The Constitution of South Africa provides protections to people based on their sexual orientation. Despite this there is a definite gap between this progressive rhetoric and the lived experiences of sexually diverse people. Designed within an experienced-centred view of narratives, the focus of this study is on the retrospective narratives of sexually diverse people's high schooling experiences. The aim of the study was to understand how sexually diverse people retrospectively narrate their experiences of high school life in relation to their sexual identities, and particularly to gain insight into the ways such people understand their identities in relation to space and place and how these issues may impact on their sense of belonging. Eight qualitative, in-depth, narrative interviews were conducted with self-identifying sexually diverse people who attended high schools in Johannesburg. Two inter-related analyses have been conducted on the data to create narrative portraits. The first analysis is an in-depth vertical analysis of each participant's narrative across time and the second analysis, embedded within each case-by-case analysis, is a consideration of the physical contexts of each participant's narrative aided by spatial heat-maps of safety and belonging. The findings show the centrality of coming out narratives to the development of sexual identity. However, coming out was not an all-or-nothing affair. The retrospective perspective of this study was advantageous as it revealed ways in which participants were able to create meaning out of their pasts in relation to their current understandings of themselves. Participants expressed a variety of different experiences regarding their families in relation to their sexualities. All participants had positive and negative experiences embedded within their overall narratives of their schooling experiences. Some schools were more accepting of sexual diversity while others were less so, and even within the same school different participants had vastly different experiences. Participants reported that there was no formal representation of sexual diversity in the curriculum but some were able to bring up

these issues in class. The importance of supportive teachers, peers, and friends to participants' sense of safety and belonging was found alongside an understanding that the intersection of race and sexuality mediated these feelings. The collective achievement of communities of belonging and the right to choose when to be open about one's sexuality was noted with the assistance of the heat-maps. These heat-maps helped demonstrate communities of belonging were collective achievements within particular contexts that made these spaces safer for participants, as well as demonstrating the bidirectional relationship between people and space. Taken as a whole, the findings of this study point towards the importance of the agency that sexually diverse learners had and how this culminated in an overall ability for these participants to resist the status quo, when they could, in order to work towards making the spaces and places that they occupied safer. However, it is clear that schools still have much work to do in order to foster inclusivity of sexual diversity. Several recommendations for future research have been provided as well as recommendations for schools in order to improve their inclusivity of sexual diversity.

Keywords: *belonging; identity in schools; queer geography; narrative identity; schooling experience; sexual diversity; sexual identity*