

Queering South Africa's protective school policy: Exploring School Management Team (SMT) responses to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in South African schools.



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DECLARATION

“I the undersigned, ***Roseline Ntsoaki Mokoena***

hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted elsewhere for any degree or qualification. All references and sources of information have been acknowledged."

- The research presented in this dissertation is my original work, except where otherwise stated.
- This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- It contains no data, images, graphs, or other materials from external sources unless explicitly acknowledged.
- All instances of using someone else's writing have been appropriately referenced and cited. In particular:
 - Information paraphrased has been properly credited to its source.
 - Direct quotes have been appropriately referenced and enclosed in quote marks.



Signed..... Date...30-06-2025.....

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my lovely niece, Rorisang Mokoena. I wish she grows to embrace her sexuality, understand gender diversity, and forever have a broad mind when it comes to equality and inclusivity.

ACRONYMS

APA	American Psychological Association
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DH	Departmental Heads
DEP.P	Deputy principal
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ISASA	Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex+
PEPUDA	Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SASA	South African Schools Act
SASP	South African Standard for Principalship
SEM	Socio Ecological Model
SMT	School Management Team
SGB	School Governing Bodies
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sexual Characteristics
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: School Demographics	45
Table 2: Participants' Profiles	46
Table 3: Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes	47

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model	27
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the views of South African School Management Teams (SMTs) towards policies designed to protect and integrate learners who have diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. By focusing on the intersection of policy interpretation, implementation, and cultural attitudes, this study investigated how SMTs handle the tension between inclusive policies and societal norms. The rights of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Intersex+ individuals are acknowledged by South Africa's progressive legal system, which includes anti-discrimination clauses in the Constitution and laws like the South African Schools Act. However, implementing these policies in schools remains a challenge due to entrenched societal biases, cultural norms, and a lack of training for educators and school leaders. The research explores the lived experiences of SMT members in navigating these challenges, examining how their attitudes, beliefs, and understanding of inclusivity impact the realisation of protective school policies. It also seeks to uncover the barriers and difficulties SMTs encounter in fostering an environment that affirms learners' identities and ensures their safety and well-being.

An interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative research design were used to address the concerns raised by this study. The study further employed semi-structured interviews with SMT members in two South African schools, one public and one private school. This method offers a thorough comprehension of SMTs' attitudes and behaviours as well as the institutional and social elements affecting their behaviour. The findings aim to inform policy recommendations and professional development programs that promote a more inclusive education system. By emphasising the practical realities of policy implementation at the school level, this study adds to the larger conversation on queering education policies. The study promotes a transformative approach to educational leadership in South Africa by highlighting the crucial role SMTs play in bridging the gap between legislative frameworks and the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ learners.

KEYWORDS

gender identity; oppression; perceptions; responses; right to equality; school management tea; sexual equality; sexual orientation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	ii
CHAPTER 1: AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	0
1. INTRODUCTION	0
1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	1
1.2 MOTIVATION OF THE STUDY	2
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	3
1.4 RATIONALE.....	4
1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	4
1.5.1 Primary Research Question.....	4
1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	4
1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	5
1.8 METHODOLOGY	5
1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	6
1.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	6
1.11 CONCEPTUALISATION OF TERMS	7
1.11.1 School Management Team (SMT).....	7
1.11.2 LGBTQI+	7
1.11.3 School Inclusion.....	7
1.11.4 Heteronormativity.....	8
1.11.5 Gender identity.....	8
1.11.6 Sexual orientation.....	8
1.11.7 Perceptions	8
Chapter 1: An Overview of the Study.....	9
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review	9
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	9
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion	9
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations	9
1.13 CHAPTER CONCLUSION.....	9
2. INTRODUCTION	10
2.1. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NON-NORMATIVE DIFFERENT GENDER IDENTITIES AND SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS IN AFRICA	11
2.1.1. Understanding Gender Identities and Sexual Orientations in South African Schools	13
2.1.2. South African Constitution and School Policy on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity Inclusion.	16
a) South African Bill of Rights.....	17
b) Role of the Department of Basic Education.....	18
c) School Structures	20
2.1.3. The Role of SMT in South African Schools.....	22
2.2. SMTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBTQI+ LEARNERS.....	24
2.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	25
a) The Microsystem	27

b)	The Mesosystem	28
c)	The exosystem	29
d)	The macrosystem	29
2.4.	CONCLUSION.....	30
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		31
3.	BACKGROUND.....	31
3.1.	RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	31
3.1.1.	Research Paradigm: Interpretivism (Constructivism).....	31
3.1.2.	Ontological Orientation.....	33
3.2.	RESEARCH DESIGN	34
3.3.	RESEARCH APPROACH.....	35
3.4.	TARGET POPULATION	36
3.4.1.	Sampling.....	36
3.4.2.	Sampling Techniques.....	37
3.4.3.	Sample Size	37
3.5.	DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND PROCEDURE	38
3.5.1.	Semi-Structured Interviews	38
3.5.2.	Data collection procedures	38
3.5.3.	Secondary data gathering	40
3.6.	DATA ANALYSIS.....	40
3.6.1.	Thematic Analysis	40
3.7.	TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	41
3.7.1.	Credibility.....	41
3.7.2.	Dependability	42
3.7.3.	Transferability.....	42
3.7.4.	Confirmability	42
3.8.	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	42
3.8.1.	Ethical Clearance.....	43
3.8.2.	Privacy, Confidentiality, and Anonymity	43
3.9.	CONCLUSION.....	43
4.	INTRODUCTION	44
4.1.	SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS.....	44
4.1.1.	School A.....	45
4.1.2.	School B.....	45
4.2.	PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	46
4.3.	THEMATIC PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS.....	46
4.3.1.	Theme 1: SMTs' Perception and response about diverse gender identities and sexual orientation in South African Schools.....	47
a)	Lack of Knowledge.....	48
b)	Factors that contribute to the SMTs' responses to LGBTQI+ inclusivity.....	55
4.3.2.	Theme 2: Challenges experienced by SMT members in addressing gender and sexual identities. 57	
a)	Challenges of LGBTQI+ policy implementation in schools.....	59

b)	Creating an LGBTQI+ inclusive school environment	60
c)	A need for school protective policies.....	61
4.4.	DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	63
4.4.1.	Individual level.....	64
4.4.2.	Interpersonal level (Micro-system)	64
4.4.3.	Institutional level (Meso-system).....	65
4.4.4.	Community level (Exosystem).....	65
4.4.5.	Policy level (Macro-system)	66
a)	Diverse gender identities.....	66
4.5.	CONCLUSION.....	67
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....		68
5.	INTRODUCTION	68
5.1.	OVERVIEW OF THEMES	68
5.1.1.	How do SMTs understand and interpret policies on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners? 68	
5.1.2.	What challenges do SMTs experience when implementing these policies?.....	70
5.1.3.	The Impact of School Policies on LGBTQI+ Learners.....	71
5.2.	SUMMARY OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS	71
5.3.	EVALUATION.....	72
5.3.1.	Credibility: Authenticity	73
5.3.2.	Stability: Consistency.....	73
5.4.	LEGAL FRAMEWORK.....	73
5.4.1.	Policy Implications.....	74
5.4.2.	Practical Implications.....	75
5.5.	IMPLEMENTATION GAP.....	75
5.5.1.	Policy vs Practice	75
5.6.	CRITIQUE OF THE CURRENT STUDY	76
5.7.	STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	76
5.8.	CONCLUSION.....	77
REFERENCES.....		78
APPENDICES.....		96
<i>Appendix A: TRREE Certificate</i>		<i>97</i>
<i>Appendix B: Clearance certificate</i>		<i>98</i>
<i>Appendix C: Approval letter from GDE</i>		<i>99</i>
<i>Appendix D: Request letter to Principals.....</i>		<i>100</i>
<i>Appendix E: Consent form for participants.....</i>		<i>102</i>
<i>Appendix F: Interview Schedule.....</i>		<i>104</i>
<i>Appendix G: Interview transcripts.</i>		<i>107</i>
<i>Appendix H: Turnitin report</i>		<i>116</i>
Appendix I: Certificate from Language Editor		117

CHAPTER 1: AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic principles are enshrined in the Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution, which supports and upholds the nation's claim to an inclusive democracy (1996: preamble). Equality is one of the principles of democracy, and it is included in the Bill of Rights as a human right (1996: sec.9). One of the forbidden grounds for unfair discrimination under the right to equality is sexual orientation (1996: sec.9(3)). As a democratic nation, South Africa has made it explicit in its Constitution that all its citizens are protected, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The Republic of South Africa's Constitution is violated by the notion of rejecting learners due to their varied sexual identities. The Constitution clearly states that the exclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals from society and discriminatory policies were abolished because they limited equality rights (Msibi, 2018). The South African Constitution, which expressly forbids discrimination against individuals based on their gender identity and sexual orientation, is praised for its progressive views on equality. Despite these legal rights, learners who identify as LGBTQI+ often experience marginalization in educational environments. The majority of School Management Team believe that everything related to homosexuality is wrong, which makes the marginalization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex+ individuals particularly noticeable on South African school grounds (Van Wyk, 2019). As important places for socialization, schools have a responsibility to put policies in place that guarantee safety and inclusivity for all learners.

By promoting and defending constitutional principles, the South African School Act No.84 of 1996 (DoE, 1996) requires all department heads and principals to take steps to guarantee the safety and security of every learner, including those with a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. According to Berkovich (2014), most SMTs believe that maintaining academic

success is their main duty, therefore neglecting to acknowledge their critical role in promoting and protecting social justice for all learners in their schools. However, Van Wyk (2019), state that SMTs fail queer learners' group due to their ignorance and inability to address gender and sexual inequality. This is corroborated by Qaqamba (2017), who state that SMT members demonize and mistreat learners who identify as gender nonconforming. Van Wyk (2019) further argues that there are laws that safeguard LGBTQI+ learners within the constitution, however these policies are not always applied consistently, and many teachers are still unclear of how to deal with the complex issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity.

Progressive laws like the South African Schools Act (1996), Promotion Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, White paper 6 (2001), Care and Support for teachers and learners, Western cape Gender and sexual orientation guideline (2020) exist, but there is inconsistency in how these safeguards are implemented in day-to-day school operations. In addition, the PEPUDA seeks to eliminate discrimination in various spheres, including education (PEPUDA, 2000). As the main forces behind school governance and policy implementation, SMTs are critical role-players in fostering inclusive learning environments. The purpose of this study was to investigate how SMT responds to the above-mentioned policies and further understand their perceptions of queer inclusivity in schools with an emphasis on their knowledge, perspectives, and behaviors. In this chapter, the researcher provides an overview of the SMT's experiences in the context of inclusive education and how schools have responded to the frequently despised non-normative presentations of sexual identity. The aim of the research, the objectives, and an explanation of the terms and concepts employed in the study are also provided in this chapter.

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Section 1(a) of the 1996 constitution states unequivocally that the advancement of human rights and freedoms, equality, and human dignity was of paramount

goals as soon as South Africa attained democracy in 1994 (Van Wyk, 2019). However, while laws and legislation promote these values, not all groups are afforded the privileges that go along with them (Singh, 2021). The inability of implementing the laws into practice becomes the main issue that hinders progress in schools. De wet (2016), argues that it is very important to maintain the same standard of implementing laws across all gender groups. It is evident however that queer group such as queer learners are still disadvantaged in schools when it comes being treated fairly. According to this study the above shows a gap between theory and policy implementation. Policies can be written and documented however if they are not practiced effectively, they become unusable and unreliable (Francis, 2018). In the case of this study, policies support LGBTQI+ individuals but the environment and spaces they are within do not practice those policies. In a school setting School Management Teams are responsible and obligated to preserving human rights, constitutional values, and a diverse and well-respected community in their school environment (De Wet, 2016). However, most current SMTs fail to uphold those standards as LGBTQI+ are still subjected to prejudice and discrimination. The SMT can accomplish the goals by treating all learners fairly and encouraging a secure learning environment for all learners, including those who identify as queer. This can be achieved through a good interpretation of policies and finding suitable ways of putting policies into practice.

Furthermore, the researcher believes that addressing these gaps requires an understanding of SMT perception about gender inclusivity in schools. This is corroborated by Francis (2017) who states that the gap between theory and practice of policies on the side of the SMTs impedes academic progress for LGBTQI+ learners. Reygan (2016) further alludes that lack of resources is one of the issues that hinders progress of diversity and inclusivity in schools. SMTs frequently lack the resources and expertise necessary to carry out protective measures in an efficient manner as they are not trained to deal with such issues. The rights of learners and their academic performance are compromised by this disconnect between legislation and practice, which sustains systemic exclusion. This draws on a conclusion that this research study must try to close on gaps of theory vs practice and come with ideas that

promote teacher development.

1.2 RATIONALE

As a novice teacher, the researcher learnt that schools are microcosms of society, reflecting its diversity, and it is the responsibility of teachers to acknowledge and affirm this diversity. Teachers need to ensure that they promote inclusivity and equality for all genders in the school society. This implies that all learners should be treated the same, including those who identify as non-male or non-female. During the researchers teaching experience years, she went to two different public schools in the same township and came to realize that the teachers, mostly the SMTs in those schools, were not well informed about gender diversity and sexual orientations. This lack of knowledge piqued the researchers' interest of wanting to understand the cause of the issue. When the researcher first experienced this homophobic behavior from the school, she thought it was only the individuals in that school; however, the following year, she went to another school and still observed a similar behavior pattern. The researcher realized that all schools in that township may share a similar attitude towards learners' sexual orientations and gender diversity.

Through these various incidents, the researcher became more interested in trying to understand the perceptions and views of the management team within those schools. The researcher became more concerned with understanding how does the school deal with gender identity issues if they come across them in the school. The school environment from the researchers' perspectives seemed to exclude queer learners as there was no evidence of inclusive policies being practiced. Brown and Buthelezi (2020) state that most learners are afraid to express themselves because they think their teachers will judge them. The lack of openly being inclusive about queerness impedes negatively on learners who are queer, they lose self-esteem and find it difficult to express themselves. To address such issues, the researcher believes it would be wise for SMT members to discuss these topics openly; in doing so, they challenge the exclusionary norms

that have historically marginalized LGBTQI+ individuals. Research by Kosciw et al., (2020) shows that inclusive curricula can positively impact learners' sense of belonging and reduce incidents of bullying. By addressing sexual orientation and gender identity, teachers contribute to creating a safer and more welcoming environment for all learners, particularly those who identify as LGBTQI+.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of LGBTQI+ studies is found in its capacity to advance inclusivity, confront oppression, and advance understanding. It advances social and legal progress, enhances our understanding of human diversity, and promotes the welfare of LGBTQI+ learners. The knowledge and insights gained from LGBTQI+ studies are vital as society works towards justice and equality. This area of study contributes significantly to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive world, in addition to advancing academic research. The significance of this study is to understand how SMT members perceive LGBTQI+ learners and understand how inclusivity and diversity is promoted in schools. This study is significant because it adds to the expanding corpus of knowledge regarding LGBTQI+ inclusion in schools. The research emphasizes the leadership required to successfully execute policies and create environments where all learners feel secure and accepted by focusing on the role of SMTs. This research contributes to understanding the role of SMTs in shaping inclusive educational environments. By highlighting the complexities of policy implementation, it provides practical insights for policymakers, teachers, and advocacy groups working towards equity in education.

1.4 RATIONALE

To safeguard and advance the rights of LGBTQI+ learners, the problem statement makes it abundantly evident that the SMT members must have a thorough understanding of human rights and be able to apply them in the classroom. The SMTs' responses will be examined considering the human rights policies, their beliefs, values, and their alignment with the constitution.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to find out how SMT members respond when learners at the school display a range of sexual and gender identities. It examines issues that will influence judgements on social justice, sexual equality, and preventing discrimination against LGBTQI+ learners in the classroom. The inclusive aim of the study is to provide insight into the attitudes and practices that foster an educational environment that embraces a gender- and sexually diverse learner body.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Maree (2020) asserts that a research question directs the selection of pertinent academic sources, and the decisions made about data collection. A research question is the cornerstone of sound research and should be precise, concise, executable, efficient and intellectually rich. Additionally, it should be grammatically correct and self-explanatory (Maree 2020). A well-written research question helps define the scope of the study and provides direction for addressing a specific problem or topic of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

1.5.1 Primary Research Question

The following primary research question was formulated to be the backbone of the study:

- How do School management team respond to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity?

1.5.2 Secondary Research Questions

- What is the perception or views of SMT members when it comes to queer inclusivity in schools?
- What challenges do SMT members experience when dealing with gender and sexual orientation issues in the school?
- How well does SMT members understand policies that promote inclusivity?

1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study's main goal is to understand the perceptions and views of SMT members related to sexual orientation and gender identities in schools. The study aims to explore the SMTs understanding of inclusive policies and how they should be incorporated In everyday school culture.

The specific objective of the study was to:

- Explore how SMT members respond to issues of gender diversity.
- Explore the perceptions of SMTs about diverse sexual and gender identities in their school.
- To investigate if SMT members have any challenges when trying to implement inclusive policies.
- To explore SMTs understanding of inclusive policies.

1.7 Conceptualization of concepts

The following ideas will be crucial to addressing the study's research questions; thus, they will be thoroughly described while keeping the context in mind. These words will give a thorough overview of non-normative sexualities as a typically suppressed discourse.

1.7.1 School Management Team

School Management Team is a chosen group of senior school leaders who serve as the school's leadership. It is primarily made up of the head of departments, the deputy principal, and the principal of the school (Herman, 2021). In addition to providing leadership, direction, and advice for the school, the management team is essential in ensuring policies that are set by the Department of Education are practiced by teachers within the institution. The SMT of the school bears the responsibility of guaranteeing that teachers possess instructional resources and that learners have equitable and unrestricted access to them (Molefe, 2013).

1.7.2 LGBTQI+

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex Plus (LGBTQI+) is an acronym that is used to refer to the larger category of non-heterosexual individuals (Perry & Franey, 2017). The acronym LGBTQI+ encompasses a range of diverse identities that fall under the umbrella of human sexuality and gender identity. Regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, the acronym encourages inclusivity, validation, and respect for all people by giving voice and exposure to those who may have been historically marginalized or invisible. Accepting the LGBTQI+ abbreviation is a step towards creating a more just and caring society for all people, not just to acknowledge diversity.

1.7.3 School Inclusion

This term describes schools that ensure that all learners have equal opportunity to engage in and benefit from education, irrespective of their backgrounds, skills, or differences. Being physically present in the classroom is only one aspect of inclusion (Van Wyk, 2019). It comprises a method and concept that seeks to satisfy each learner's unique requirements in the traditional educational setting, values diversity, and promotes a sense of belonging.

1.7.4 Heteronormativity

The concept of heteronormativity refers to the belief that heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation or the norm, and that behaviors and relationships that conform to this norm are normal or natural, while those that do not are stigmatized or marginalized (Smith, 2014b). It includes a collection of institutions, expectations, and societal conventions that support and uphold heterosexuality as the norm, frequently at the expense of alternative gender identities and sexual orientations.

1.7.5 Gender identity

Gender identity is a strong sense of one's gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth. It encompasses a wide range of gender-related experiences, feelings, and manifestations and is a fundamental aspect

of an individual's identity (Msibi, 2014b). Biological sex, which is often established by physical characteristics such as genitalia at birth, is distinct from gender identity.

1.7.6 Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation describes an ongoing pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of a specific gender or genders (Van Wyk, 2019). It is an essential component of human identity that encompasses a spectrum of experiences and inclinations. Sexual orientation is not the same as biological sex, which usually refers to physical traits like genitalia and reproductive organs, or gender identity (Msibi, 2014a).

1.7.7 Perceptions

The term perception, in this study, is used to describe the process of becoming aware of one's surroundings through bodily feeling, which indicates one's capacity for comprehension (Hague, 2001). The process of analyzing data about a phenomenon or another individual is sometimes referred to as perception.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework according to Grant and Osanloo (2016), is the foundation of a research study that provides structure and connects the research problem to existing knowledge. Additionally, Adom, Hussein, and Agyem (2018), emphasize that the theoretical framework provides a lens for interpreting data, ensuring the study is not just descriptive but analytically anchored in existing knowledge. This research study adopted Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. The socio ecological theory is very crucial within the education system as it highlights that development is shaped by interrelated systems of influence (Rosa & Tudge, 2016). This model situates learning within family, school, religion, society, and cultural contexts. For this study, this model becomes very important as it proves that the views and perceptions that SMT members have about LGBTQI+ learners may often

be shaped by their surroundings other than their own personal values. Francis (2017), supports the above as he states that SMTs' responses are often shaped not only by their personal attitudes but also by systemic cultural pressures and institutional policies. Through the stages of the Socio-Ecological-theory, the study's idea that SMT members act the way they do due to other factors that define them is supported.

1.9 METHODOLOGY

A methodology is a way or plan that a researcher has in mind to conduct the research. A methodology is a way or plan that a researcher has in mind to conduct the research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) further describe methodology as the researcher's framework that specifies the philosophical assumptions, overall approach (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), and logic that guides the choice of specific methods. For this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach.

1.9.1 Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research is defined as "research that produces findings without the use of any statistical procedures or quantification" (Rahman, 2017, p.103). Additionally, qualitative research is defined as "a type of research that is generally more explorative, versatile, data-driven, and context-sensitive" (Mason, 2017, p. 24). Qualitative research relies heavily on the lived experiences of the participants or their narratives (Maree, 2020). In this study, the researcher opted for a qualitative research approach, because she wanted to investigate the perceptions of SMTS about inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation. Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020) assert that qualitative research is adaptable, transparent, and context responsive. This flexibility enables researchers to make well-informed judgements about the number of units they analyze, the scope of their study, and their methodological choices.

1.9.2 Interpretative Research Approach

According to Creswell (2016), a paradigm is a basic set of ideas that direct behavior and

serve as a framework for comprehension and observation. This study adopted an interpretative paradigm. Dudovskiy (2018a) emphasizes that the interpretivist paradigm recognizes knowledge as socially constructed, making it particularly relevant for studies that explore diverse perspectives and lived experiences in specific cultural and social contexts (Pham, 2018). This paradigm was selected for the study because it enables an in-depth understanding of how SMT members construct meaning regarding sexual and gender diversity in schools. Pham (2018) asserts that interpretivism aims to uncover deeper meanings rather than generalize findings to entire populations. This aligns with the study's objective of understanding how different school stakeholders experience and respond to inclusive policies. Additionally, this paradigm provides SMT members with a platform to share their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward LGBTQI+ learners, fostering a richer understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to inclusivity in schools.

1.9.3 Phenomenological Research Design

A research design is the overarching plan or strategy that directs the execution of a study and guarantees that the techniques employed successfully tackle the research topic. Designing an organized strategy that guides the research process is crucial before starting a project. Research design, according to Hammarberg et al. (2016), is a methodical process a researcher uses to get reliable and correct responses to research questions. In this study the researcher opted for a phenomenological design. Phenomenology, according to Creswell (2023) has its roots in the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger and aims to reveal the essence or primary significance of the experiences that participants have in common. In this study, the phenomenology was used to understand the lived experiences of SMT members which may impede on their perceptions about LGBTQI+ learners.

1.9.4 DATA COLLECTION

According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data collection is the act of obtaining and assessing information on variables of interest in a methodical, planned manner that makes it possible to respond to research questions. One of the most important stages of the study

process is data collecting and maintaining research integrity requires correct data gathering (Clark & Vealé, 2018). For this study, the researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews and policy document analysis. According to Maree (2017), semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to get detailed, first-hand information from the participants.

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concepts and rules that guarantee the rights, dignity, and welfare of research participants are upheld during the entire process and are known as ethical considerations in research. Getting informed consent, protecting anonymity and confidentiality, preventing harm, and upholding honesty and integrity in data collection, analysis, and reporting are some of these factors. Maintaining credibility, respect, and confidence in research requires adherence to ethical principles (Resnik, 2020). The important concerns of respect, consent, and accountability for all research participants, as well as their protection and rights, are addressed by ethics in social scientific research (Makhubele, 2016) . An ethical certificate was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand, giving ethical approval to conduct the research (see Appendix B).

1.11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Ethical considerations in research are the principles and guidelines that ensure the welfare, rights, and dignity of study participants are maintained throughout the entire process. These include obtaining informed consent, safeguarding confidentiality, and anonymity, avoiding harm, and maintaining honesty and integrity in the gathering, processing, and reporting of data. Following ethical guidelines is necessary to preserve research's respect, credibility, and confidence (Resnik, 2020).

1.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 1: An Overview of the Study

Chapter 1: This chapter gives a background and an overview of the study. It describes the goals, problem statement, research questions, and justification for

the study. Included is a brief explanation of the theoretical framework that directs the study. Along with information on data collection, sampling, and analysis, the research paradigm, technique, and design are described. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed at the chapter's conclusion.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical underpinning supporting the investigation is explained in detail in this chapter. It also offers a thorough analysis of pertinent literature to place the findings in the perspective of what is already known.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The research strategy, paradigms, and techniques employed in the study are all described in this chapter. It describes the methods used for sampling, data gathering, and analysis.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The study's conclusions based on the data gathered are presented in this chapter. The findings are examined and evaluated considering the theoretical framework and research questions.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter reflects on the study's key insights, discusses its limitations, and provide conclusions. Recommendations for future research and practice are also presented.

1.13 SUMMARY

This first chapter concluded by providing an overview of the study and offering insight into its origins and goal. The goal of this study has been to better understand the perceptions and responses of SMT's experiences in mandatory heteronormative schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2. INTRODUCTION

South Africa has been widely praised for its commitment to democracy, as enshrined in its Constitution and for its constitutional focus on addressing historical injustices, which it has been undertaking since 1994 (Van Wyk, 2019). One of the key mechanisms for achieving this redress is the equality clause, which safeguards the rights of historically marginalized groups, ensuring their ability to participate in a democratic society free from systemic discrimination and unequal opportunities. As Smith (2014b) states, “Every South African citizen has a right to the equality clause, but it goes beyond that” (p. 609), emphasizing that the principle of equality is fundamental in advancing sexual equality. A deeper understanding of the legal implications of equality is essential to appreciating the strategies necessary to achieve sexual equality. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine how laws, regulations, and policies serve to promote, protect, and uphold equality for LGBTQI+ learners in the educational system (Smith, 2014b). According to the South African Constitution, all individuals, including sexual minorities, are entitled to equality, dignity, and bodily integrity (SA, 1996). This aligns with Msibi’s (2018) assertion that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, has a responsibility to advocate for and uphold equality.

Although South Africa's Constitution is praised for its progressive views on social cohesion, equity, and transformation, there is a conflict between its tenets and the attitudes that are currently prevalent in society. Realizing the goals of the Constitution is severely hampered by this dissonance (Butler, 2018). This study looks at how the SMT handles learners who have different sexual orientations and gender identities in the classroom. Considering this, this chapter examines previous and current research on SMT members' perspectives and reactions to creating an inclusive learning environment for learners with a range of gender identities and sexual orientations. Culture and society have an impact on people's attitudes and actions in a variety of situations. The

researcher looks at local and international inclusion policies as well as the SMT's attitude towards their implementation to comprehend how the SMT members perceive, comprehend, and uphold the inclusive policy inside the schools.

2.1.A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NON-NORMATIVE DIFFERENT GENDER IDENTITIES AND SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS IN AFRICA

Literature provides compelling evidence that non-normative gender identities have existed for centuries. What has evolved is how diverse cultures, legal systems, and religious institutions in Africa have influenced and shaped perceptions of gender and sexual orientation. Diverse gender identities and sexualities have always existed in African history, despite the difficulty of tracking non-normative histories back to their earliest beginnings. Socrates, Alexander the Great, Lord Byron, Edward II, Hadrian Julius Caesar, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Christopher Marlowe were among the historical individuals who "had or were focused on love and sexual relationships," according to Simon, Boyd & Subica, (2022). According to Mota (2022), historical evidence indicates that homosexuality was acceptable in many societies and eras, including Africa. Similarly, non-binary gender roles and a diverse of sexual orientations have long been accepted and incorporated into global cultural and social frameworks.

The idea of Two-Spirit individuals in many Indigenous North American cultures reflected a fluid view of gender and sexuality that went beyond the European colonial binary framework (Salway & Pruden, 2022). Gender differences have always existed; what has changed is how they have been perceived. According to Salway and Pruden, (2022), who claims that Two-Spirit identities were highly revered and frequently connected to spiritual duties. Likewise, in South Asia, the Hijra community has been recognised as a distinct gender group for millennia. Historically, Hijras have played significant roles in religious and social ceremonies (Hussain, 2024). While many are assigned male at birth, they may identify as female, transgender, or non-binary (Mota, 2022). The colonial era marked a turning point in the treatment of non-

normative identities worldwide. European colonial legal frameworks imposed rigid gender binaries and criminalised homosexuality (Hussain, 2024). For example, the British Empire introduced anti-sodomy laws in its colonies, many of which remain in place today as anti-LGBTQI+ legislation. Scholars such as Ashraf, Shafi and Ahmed (2023) highlight how these colonial laws disrupted indigenous traditions that had previously accepted gender and sexual diversity.

South Africa serves as a significant case study in the historical and contemporary discourse on gender and sexual diversity. Pre-colonial South African societies, including the Zulu and Xhosa, had customs that accommodated same-sex relationships and fluid gender roles (Mota, 2022). These practices, often rooted in religious and ceremonial traditions, reflect diverse perspectives on gender and sexuality before colonial intervention. Brown (2020) document these traditions, highlighting that they were not stigmatised in their indigenous contexts. In some communities, gender was viewed as relational, with individuals assuming roles based on social needs rather than rigid binary classification (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). However, the apartheid era saw the institutionalization of conservative Christian values, which further marginalised non- normative identities (Van Wyk, 2019). During this period, the state reinforced heteronormative structures, suppressing gender and sexual diversity. The democratic transition of the post- apartheid period, however, marked a significant shift. South Africa's transition to democracy not only dismantled apartheid but also redefined perspectives on gender and sexual diversity (Judge, 2018).

In 1996, South Africa became the first African nation to enshrine LGBTQI+ rights in its Constitution, a landmark moment in legal recognition and protection (Van Wyk, 2019). Notably, the 1996 Constitution was the first in the world to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, laying the foundation for progressive LGBTQI+ policies (Van Wyk, 2019). Judge (2018) argue that this inclusion was strongly influenced by the broader human rights ethos of the anti-apartheid movement, which emphasised equality and dignity for all citizens. When South Africa became the first

country in Africa and one of the few in the world to legalise same-sex marriage in 2006, it marked a turning point for LGBTQI+ rights in that country (Brown, 2020). LGBTQI+ people felt more included because of this legislative progress.

In addition to marriage equality, the constitution has clauses that shield LGBTQI+ people from prejudice, hate crimes, and other types of exclusion (Msibi, 2018). Despite these legal protections, the enforcement and implementation of LGBTQI+ rights in South Africa remain inconsistent. Msibi (2019) notes that public attitudes toward non-normative identities remain deeply divided, despite the progressive legal framework. Homophobia and transphobia persist, fuelled by cultural and religious conservatism. This is evident in violent practices such as "corrective rape," where women are assaulted to enforce heteronormative gender roles (Msibi, 2009; Nel and Judge, 2008, cited in Msibi, 2018a). Smith (2018) argues that this reflects a significant gap between policy and practice; legal protections alone do not guarantee safety, as societal acceptance remains a challenge. Brown (2020) concurs, pointing out that even in educational institutions, inclusive policies often exist only in theory and are not fully enforced. Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities, particularly in rural areas, exacerbate barriers to justice and equality for marginalised LGBTQI+ individuals.

To bridge these gaps and foster greater social acceptance, activists and scholars emphasise the importance of continued advocacy and education (Calvard, O'Toole & Hardwick, 2020). However, Jones (2018) highlights a critical challenge: South Africa remains the only African nation with explicit constitutional protections for LGBTQI+ individuals, making full implementation of inclusive policies difficult. The following discussion will define key terms related to gender, identities, and sexual orientations while exploring how these concepts are understood in South African schools.

2.2 Understanding Gender Identities and Sexual Orientations in South African Schools

Sexual orientation and gender identity are important facets of personal identity that affect how people engage with their environment. Many people in the social sphere view these ideas and definitions as contentious and ambiguous, and they are always changing (Bhana, 2016). According to Moleiro and Pinto (2015), many of the words used in the social and mental health fields to refer to sexual and gender-diverse communities are out of date and even derogatory. The researcher opines that the notion behind the consideration is that as the world is changing throughout time, the meanings that were originally associated with the concepts may have lost some of their significance and understanding in more recent times. This demonstrates that although if the LGBTQI+ group has been there for a long time, the understanding of the prior generation does not necessarily align with that of the current age (Mostert, Gordon & Krigler, 2015). According to Mota (2022), school leaders have changed their policies to allow for gender equality, including for non-binary people. This indicates a significant shift in school leaders from the Apartheid era. However, as much as some school leaders show interest in the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners, there is still a lack of understanding of what is required from them.

Many school leaders want to include learners who are LGBTQI+ in their policies, but many do not know what LGBTQI+ means, claims Govender (2017). Similarly, the country boasts a highly praised constitution that safeguards the rights of all people, including LGBTQI+ individuals but do not know what it means. Although all school leaders must implement an inclusive policy to comply with the Constitution, there are still disparities in how these rights are implemented in schools (Msibi, 2019). The idea and concept of LGBTQI+ in the gender identity and sexual orientation continuum must, in, my opinion, be given clarity and relevance in the current day. For this study, fundamental ideas like sexual orientation and gender identities were dissected to move closer to comprehending gender diversity and sexual orientation. Clarity is necessary because this terminology is derived from a particular cultural background and cannot be taken to signify the same thing to everyone.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2012, cited in Singh, 2022) defines sexual orientation as the sex of the people one is romantically and sexually attracted to. Sexual orientation is a dynamic and fluid component of human identity rather than a fixed binary. The conceptualisation of sexual orientation has changed dramatically in recent years, with a wider acceptance of identities that do not fall into conventional categories (Savin-Williams et al., 2021). The acceptance of pansexuality, for instance, which describes attraction irrespective of gender, emphasises how human preferences and attractions are changeable (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Social and cultural circumstances are closely related to sexual orientation and are important in determining how people see and express who they are (Francis, 2019). Social acceptance and affirmation of different sexual orientations have a substantial impact on mental health and general well-being, as shown by Woodford and Kulick (2023). People are more likely to feel free to declare their sexual orientation in inclusive settings without worrying about prejudice or condemnation. However, people frequently experience rejection and marginalisation in environments where heteronormativity is prevalent, which can result in psychological discomfort or internalised homophobia (Savin-Williams et al., 2021).

Gender theorist Judith Butler (2015) asserts that people who want to be accepted for their gender identity and sexual orientation consistently act out their gender roles. Butler (2015) made the case in their seminal work that gender is something that is put on via repeated behaviours and social interactions rather than an innate characteristic. Furthermore, he states that person's firmly held perception of their gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, is referred to as their gender identity. It includes how people view themselves and decide to display their gender through behaviours, duties, and appearances that are expected of them by society (Butler, 2015). Gender identity is a continuum that encompasses a diversity of identities, including non-binary, rather than being limited to the binary classification of male and female. For instance, someone may identify as transgender if their gender identification is different from the sex they were

assigned at birth (Butler, 2015). Gender identity must be distinguished from sexual orientation and gender expression. Sexual orientation, according to Saewyc (2020), is a person's emotional or sexual attraction to other people; gender expression is how a person presents their gender externally through roles, attire, or behaviour; and gender identity reflects their inner self. Therefore, Saewyc (2020) believes that understanding these differences is essential to comprehending the varied experiences of people of all genders.

Sexuality and gender activities are closely related to the exercise of power, regardless of the society (Foucault 1980, referenced in Msibi, 2018c). The above indicates that sexuality is still strictly regulated and closely monitored in many countries worldwide. How members of the LGBTQI+ community are kept in the closet and kept silent is a clear indication of this. When people are not heard or cared for, it becomes very difficult for them to express themselves fully (Butler, Das nair & Thomas, 2016). Many people, particularly school leaders, enjoy abusing their position of authority by infringing on the rights of others. LGBTQI+ learners in schools, experience humiliation at the hands of school leaders. As some leaders do not grasp what gender identity and sexual orientation are, they continuously remind queer learners that they do not belong, which causes them to suffer unendingly (Msibi, 2018c). An example is the Limpopo-based case of Nare Mphela, who experienced homophobic bullying by the principal, which was brought forward by the Human Rights Commission in November 2016 and was “reversed” when policies were not implemented (Qaqamba, 2017). Francis (2016) affirms this notion and suggests that school leaders would cease mistreating learners who identify as non-binary if they understood that education is one of the most significant socialisers in society and plays a significant role in helping learners build their identities.

Promoting equality and preserving sexual diversity is essential in schools (Msibi, 2018c). Smith (2018) asserts that to foster learning and development, schools lead individuals to share spaces and have social interactions. In these

contexts, the school leadership has a big role to play in promoting respect for human rights and diversity (DBE, 2018). To protect these rights, several laws have been created, such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, which forbids hate speech, and the Civil Union Act, which permits same- sex marriages to be acknowledged legally (Van Wyk, 2019). This illustrates the South African government's strong support for the country's LGBTQI+ population, which is why laws that do not discriminate against gender identities had to be passed. Notwithstanding the rules in place, SMTs usually help teachers engage in overt or covert homophobic behaviour in the classroom (Reygan & Francis, 2015). Francis and Kuhl (2022) found that the SMT lacked the knowledge and attitude required to address sexual diversity issues effectively, usually avoiding the topic or taking positions that promoted required heteronormativity. The South African Department of Basic Education requires principals to establish inclusive learning environments that encourage and accommodate learners who identify as LGBTQI+, as Nichols (2023) points out in his article. However, many principals continue to advocate for cisgender and heterosexual learners as the only sexual and gender groups permitted in schools.

Reygan and Francis (2015) found that in their teaching-learning and other educational activities, teachers frequently unwittingly and reflexively supported heterosexist and homophobic beliefs. The freedom of sexually different people to come out of the closet is in danger, which could negatively impact their right to privacy, freedom of speech, equality in education, and sense of personal safety (Govender, 2017). Even though there are many individuals at a school who identify as non-heterosexual or have gender identities and sexual orientations that deviate from the heterosexual paradigm, sexual diversity is not adequately represented in this social milieu (Smith, 2018). It is commonly recognised that schools are home to diverse groupings of people, including those who do not consider themselves heterosexual or who do not conform to traditional heterosexual standards in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Simon, Boyd & Subica, 2022). This does not imply, however, that sexual diversity is effectively integrated into this

social context (Smith, 2018). Teachers and school leaders often marginalise or ignore LGBTQI+ learners because they are unable to embrace or support activities that assist learners to acknowledge and comprehend sexual diversity. Below is a discussion of South African schools' policy environment regarding their social inclusion and protection school policy agenda, which welcomes learners with a diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations.

2.3 South African Constitution and School Policy on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity Inclusion.

The creation of South Africa's post-Apartheid Constitution, which is based on human rights principles and embraces diversity for all its citizens, was crucial in reorienting the nation's society towards democracy (Regan, 2019). After apartheid ended and the Nelson Mandela Administration established a multicultural democracy in 1997, same-sex relationships became legal, and the Constitution forbade discrimination based on gender, sex, or sexual orientation. This made South Africa the first nation in the world to declare homophobic discrimination to be unconstitutional and to tie its gender and sexual orientation policies to human rights (Moradi, 2017). People from lower socioeconomic classes found it difficult to be accepted at higher education institutions and other settings because of the new constitution's recognition of South African society's sexism and racism, which unfairly discriminated against people based on their gender, race, and economic status (Moradi, 2017). There was a need for reform, primarily in schools, because South Africa became stagnant and non- progressive due to the victimisation and prejudice that was occurring, which was generally caused by schoolchildren (Singh, 2022).

It is important to understand the meaning and goals of the constitution before delving deep into its advocacies and what it entails regarding the inclusion of gender identities and sexual orientations. According to Van Wyk (2019, p.353), "The Constitution is a transformative document that advocates for a

more democratic, open, and equal South African society founded on freedom, dignity, and human rights." Additionally, the constitution serves as a pledge to end apartheid's injustices and create a society founded on social justice, democracy, and fundamental human rights. The Constitution guarantees that all citizens have access to justice and equal opportunity by establishing a foundation for equality, accountability, and openness (Currie and De Waal, 2021). Francis (2017) argues that the constitution is the first South African victory to be celebrated as it included the protection of different gender identities and sexual orientations. With the above having been clearly outlined, it is important for the study to foreground its discussion focusing on the inclusive policies that were included in the constitution. Understanding different policies, including inclusive policies in the school, will make it easier to understand why it is important for school leaders to act as agents of change and implement inclusivity in their schools.

2.3.1 South African Bill of Rights

The South African Bill of Rights, found in Chapter 2 of the Constitution, which safeguards essential rights including equality (Section 9), freedom of expression (Section 16), and human dignity (Section 10), is in line with this study. Human rights related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sexual Characteristics (SOGIESC) are protected and upheld by the equality clause, which is in Section 9. It lays the groundwork for gender inclusion in South Africa's legal and social structures by outright forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation, sex, gender, race, and other characteristics (Naidoo & Singh, 2022). The equality clause also legalised same-sex marriage and established protective measures for individuals facing discrimination under this inclusive policy. All people, particularly public servants, should be aware of the diversity gender identities and sexual orientations. Therefore, school leaders must guarantee that LGBTQI+ learners are covered by school policies and are allowed to express themselves without worrying about prejudice or hate speech (Naidoo & Singh, 2022). There should be repercussions for failing to establish an inclusive school climate. Some contend, however, that school leaders ought to be free to run their

institutions however they see fit (Francis, 2020). However, as discriminating against LGBTQI+ learners would be a clear violation of constitutional safeguards, this should not be construed as approval. As Msibi (2018b) emphasises, no one is above the law, and school leaders must abide by the Constitution by fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all learners. Schools must actively strive to create socially inclusive spaces, ensuring that all learners are treated with dignity, respect, and equality. According to Brown (2022), the above can be achieved through the successful implementation of the policies that go against prejudice of LGBTQI+ learners. Therefore, it is important to investigate the role of the DBE in promoting diversity and inclusivity.

2.3.2 *Role of the Department of Basic Education*

The DBE has put policies, procedures, and guidelines into place at the school level to protect the human rights of individuals with different gender identities and sexual orientations, guaranteeing their complete integration into the educational system (Bottoman, 2021; Kinnear, 2018; Serero, 2021). A rights-based and inclusive approach to education is adopted by the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, which is one way the DBE shows its dedication to inclusivity (Bottoman, 2021; Kinnear, 2018). To promote equity and equality, the CSTL framework is based on six major pillars, such as encouraging gender awareness and creating safe, supportive, and protective school settings (Menziwa, 2019; Reygan, 2019). Furthermore, by maintaining a strong anti-discrimination position, CSTL makes sure that LGBTQI+ learners as well as teachers are shielded from prejudice and exclusion. The DBE introduced the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) to guarantee that all public schools in South Africa adhere to constitutional norms (DBE, 2018). This law aims to safeguard the rights of learners to a secure, welcoming, and affirming learning environment while shielding them from all types of discrimination.

The legal foundation for guaranteeing that every learner, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, has access to high-quality education is

provided by the SASSA of 1996 (SASSA, 1996). Public schools must admit learners and meet their educational requirements without unjust discrimination, according to Section 5 of SASSA. As stated in Section 9 of the Constitution, this clause upholds the equality principle. According to Dlamini and Mkhize (2020), SASSA serves as a legislative foundation for creating a safe and equitable learning environment for marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ learners. The Act also empowers School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to adopt policies that promote inclusivity and equality. As Naidoo and Singh (2022) note, the success of SASSA in fostering inclusivity often depends on the willingness of SGBs and SMT to embrace its principles and address issues of discrimination proactively. Therefore, while SASSA lays a solid foundation for equality in schools, ongoing efforts from the school leaders are required to ensure its effective implementation across diverse educational contexts.

Dlamini and Mkhize (2020), note that the DBE's policies emphasise the importance of creating environments where learners with disabilities, different gender identities, and other marginalised groups feel valued and supported. Access is only one aspect of inclusion; another is encouraging meaningful engagement and achievement for all learners. Another gender-affirming policy that the DBE supports is the National Policy (2017) on Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and Tuberculosis (TB) for learners, teachers, school support staff, and officials in all Primary and Secondary Schools. It recognises that learners with non-heteronormative identities are particularly vulnerable. By declaring that non-heteronormative identities "will enjoy the same support, protection, and freedom as their heterosexual peers in the system," this policy adheres to the socio-inclusive promise of DBE (Singh, 2022). Furthermore, gender, gender identities, and gender expression will be covered in the complete sexuality education curriculum.

With the support of the DBE, school leaders would find it easier to implement inclusive policies. While the DBE has introduced policies to protect the rights and dignity of all learners, gaps remain between policy, practice, and law

(Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). This disconnect is particularly evident in South African schools, where school leaders often struggle to integrate inclusive policies into their school conduct (DePalma & Francis, 2017). Many school leaders fail to uphold constitutional principles, overlooking the legal requirement to ensure the inclusion of all learners, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation (Simon, Boyd & Subica, 2022). In doing so, they violate official South African law, leaving affected individuals vulnerable to discrimination in their own school communities. The state has made efforts to establish legal frameworks such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) of 2000 to ensure that school leadership acknowledges diverse sexual orientations and fosters respect and tolerance for all individuals in the school environment by following the South African Policy on Principalship (DBE, 2015). However, despite these policies, many school leaders continue to reinforce heteronormativity through their institutional structures, school policies, and dress codes, making it difficult for LGBTQI+ learners to express themselves fully.

2.3.3 South African Policies

South Africa's progressive laws and regulations demonstrate the country's dedication to upholding and advancing the rights of people with a range of gender identities and sexual orientations. But in order to make these rights a reality, coordinated efforts in community involvement, policy implementation, and ongoing assessment are needed (Francis, 2019). South Africa may get closer to having an educational system that accurately embodies its constitutional ideals of equality and non-discrimination by tackling current issues and promoting inclusive practices. Several policies such as PEPUDA, SASA, White paper 6, care and support for teaching and learning have been introduced to ensure that there is diversity and inclusivity in schools. However, implementation of this policy is not effective in schools. Policies are there but practice of those policies is not there. According to Msibi (2019), there is a problem between policy and practice in most South African schools and that hinders progress.

Brown (2020) state that every province can achieve inclusivity and diversity if they put their mind to it. Effective resources and teacher training needs to be

provided to individuals in order for this policies to be implemented effectively without any issues. The western cape province is one of the good example of proving that progress is attainable if SMT members are willingly and read. In 2020, the Western Cape Education Department issued proposed rules on gender identity and sexual orientation in public schools. These principles seek to eliminate prejudice and encourage understanding and respect for LGBTQI+ rights in schools (Simon Boyd & Subica, 2022). They further gave a framework for promoting safe and inclusive learning environments while addressing issues such as homophobia, transphobia, and gender-based violence. While these principles are a significant step towards inclusivity, their effectiveness is dependent on their implementation and commitment from SMT.

Despite the fact the policy criteria wanted to eradicate discrimination, some SMT members in schools have failed to fully comply with these policy emphasising the need for improved training and accountability procedures (Brown, 2022). Govender (2017), provides a different view by stating that the government has provided training and support, however management of schools are reluctant in implementing policies that will bring change. He further alludes that the Care and Support for teaching and learning (CSTL) was launched by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2008, intending to offer learners with comprehensive assistance, including health, social, and psychological services. According to Govender (2017) CSTL has been integrated into the education system to address learning impediments, such as sexuality and gender issues. The initiative advocates for the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the Life Orientation curriculum, ensuring that students receive accurate information and assistance on sexual and reproductive health (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020).

A. *PEPUDA 2000*

One of the main pillars of South Africa's legislative initiatives to fight prejudice is the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair prejudice Act (PEPUDA) (Francis, 2017). PEPUDA, which was passed in 2000, complies with Section 9 of the Constitution, which forbids discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, and sexual orientation, among other grounds (Smith, 2015).

Through PEPUDA People are empowered to contest discriminatory practices and pursue remedies in the Equality Courts. However, LGBTQI+ learners still do not feel safe as the laws are just theories that are not practiced. Failure of putting this policies into practice hinders progressive change for queer learners. Brown (2020) corroborates the above by stating that PEPUDA's actual implementation frequently encounters obstacles, such as low public knowledge and uneven enforcement, which may reduce its efficacy in defending the rights of LGBTQI+ people. This is evident in a sense that most of the SMT members are clueless about this act and it does not gain the public traction that it requires.

B. White paper 6

White Paper 6, titled "Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System," was released in 2001 to address the dual apartheid of race and disability in the educational system. The policy brought some light into diversity and inclusive studies. The introduction of white paper 6 gave a lot of hope and signalled a new direction in the South African curriculum. The policy promotes an inclusive education system that meets the different learning requirements of all learners, especially those with marginalised sexual and gender identities (Nichols & Brown, 2021). It focusses on human rights, social fairness, and community responsiveness. White paper 6 promote diversity and inclusivity in school and communities. The goal was to eradicate all prejudices that queer individuals go through. However, the execution of White Paper 6 has not being fully effective. One of the main issues that led to white paper not being implemented in schools is lack of resources and training. This lack of teacher training and resources impedes full implementation of white paper 6 policies. In schools teachers complain about having to teach about sexuality while they are not fully equipped with knowledge. According to Russell (2018), the government is failing the nation as they do not prioritise issues of inclusivity and diversity but rather foreground other issues that do not affect human beings. The issue of inclusivity as stated in the white paper 6 is of paramount importance and requires attention.

2.3.4 *School Structures*

The researcher opines that young learners' sexual identities, which are strongly related to gender, are greatly influenced by their educational experiences. When given the freedom to express themselves in a secure and encouraging setting, learners flourish. However, many South African schools subtly perpetuate heteronormativity, making it difficult for LGBTQI+ learners to feel included (Nichols & Brown, 2021). Schools operate in a structural framework that dictates their policies, including regulations on dress codes, bathroom facilities, and acceptable behaviour. While most South African public schools are governed by constitutional principles, they also establish their policies, which must align with the Constitution. SGBs and school leaders hold significant authority in shaping these policies, ensuring they accommodate all learners (Nichols & Brown, 2021). This means they have the power to prevent the reinforcement of heteronormativity and instead create more progressive and inclusive environments for LGBTQI+ learners. According to Msibi (2018a), many school leaders fail to align their policies with the South African Constitution, thereby perpetuating exclusionary practices that reinforce homonormativity. Addressing these systemic issues requires school leaders to actively challenge discriminatory norms and commit to fostering inclusive educational spaces for all learners.

According to Bhana (2016), schools embody gender roles in familiar understandings of dress code, as they treat everyone as belonging to the same traditional gender. Schools have dress codes that are only for male and female learners, ignoring non-binary learners. SGB members and school leaders frequently overlook the fact that there are diverse sexual orientations in schools; as a result, they must accommodate the needs of every learner (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2022). One of the most obvious ways that heteronormativity is maintained in South African schools is through dress restrictions (Department of Education, 2006). These codes often enforce strict binary standards, requiring girls to wear skirts or dresses and boys to wear trousers. Learners who wish to dress in ways that align with their gender identity or express their individuality are often penalized (Msibi 2018b).

Mahlangu (2021), highlights that many schools cite “tradition” or “discipline” as justifications for rigid dress codes, ignoring the impact on gender-diverse learners. This imply that schools believe that by enforcing a certain dress code on learner they are improving discipline measures in the schools not being aware that they are supressing other learners.

Mofolo (2019) asserts that schools must adopt inclusive dress regulations and be progressive; this should be accomplished through the protective school policy. The South African National Guidelines on School Uniforms, which state that learners' school uniforms should not hinder or jeopardise them in any way particularly when it comes to bullying or harassment support this idea. Heteronormativity in schools is further evident in the existence of bathrooms in schools, the construction of this bathrooms in most schools is based on biological gender or binaries which is male or female (Sedibe, 2020). When SGB members and school leaders construct bathrooms in their schools they do not include non-binary learners and teachers but rather move with the ideology of two sexes (Mofolo, 2019). In cases like this, most learners who identify as non-binary feel excluded and left out. Sedibe (2020), states that most learners feel ashamed to use school bathrooms; they would rather wait until after school as they are mocked by others when found in the bathrooms. Bathrooms in schools are such a critical issue that needs to be addressed rigorously and given much attention to ensure that all parties equally benefit. Sanger (2014) stated that the feeling of bathroom exclusion plays a negative role in the health and well-being of LGBTQI+ learners.

Schools should implement protective policies to ensure the safety and inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners, particularly concerning bathroom access. According to Msibi (2018b), one of the most effective measures to address this issue is the introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms in school environments. Some progressive schools have already begun implementing gender- neutral facilities, though these efforts have not always been met with widespread acceptance (WaterAid, 2017). Many South African education leaders recognise the inequality created by traditional, binary bathroom structures and

have acknowledged the need for more inclusive facilities. Rather of being limited to non-binary individuals, the main objective of gender-neutral restrooms is to provide a secure and supportive environment for LGBTQI+ learners while maintaining accessibility for all learners (Saengmaneedech, 2024). Toilet bans, however, are still ingrained in school policies. The prospect of gender-inclusive restrooms is essentially eliminated by the Regulations Document), which specifically refers to "boys' and girls' toilets," without mentioning non-binary or transgender-inclusive facilities (Brown, 2018; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). In South Africa, the discussion on gender-neutral restrooms is rising despite these legal restrictions. There is growing evidence that both schools and higher education institutions are incorporating gender-neutral facilities as part of their progressive gender policies (Brown, Maseko & Sedibe, 2020; Brown, 2018). These policies aim to create a learning environment where all learners feel acknowledged, accommodated, and valued (Brown & De Wet, 2018).

The following discussion examines the role of SMT members in fostering protective policies that promote inclusivity in school environments.

2.4 The Role of SMT in South African Schools

The SMT is essential in forming the ethos, policies, and culture of educational institutions. In South Africa, where equality and inclusivity are encouraged by the Constitution, SMTs must convert these ideals into workable laws that create a safe and welcoming atmosphere (Constitution of South Africa, 1996). Moreover, SMTs serve as a bridge between the lived realities of learners and teachers and national educational frameworks, claim Dlamini and Mkhize (2020). This puts them in a position to play a crucial role in making sure that policies uphold the rights of all learners and represent diversity (Buthelezi & Brown, 2020). The foundation of an inclusive school policy is a dedication to equality and non-discrimination. SMTs are responsible for ensuring that policies cater to the unique requirements of learners who belong to marginalised groups, such as LGBTQI+. By examining and updating antiquated or discriminatory regulations, SMTs play a crucial role in promoting an

inclusive culture, according to Mahlangu (2021). To eradicate prejudices and advance equity, for example, policies pertaining to dress codes, lavatory usage, and extracurricular involvement must be reviewed.

Bhana (2016), stresses how crucial it is for school managers to create and implement thorough anti-discrimination rules that safeguard LGBTQI+ learners. According to Butler (2015), these policies ought to forbid harassment and discrimination based on based on identity and sexual orientation. The establishment of unambiguous policies and sanctions for biased conduct by school managers can contribute to the creation of a more secure and fair learning environment (Msibi, 2019). Anti-discrimination regulations, which expressly forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, are essential for safeguarding LGBTQI+ learners (Francis, 2017). These regulations provide equitable access to education and a secure learning environment for all learners. To end prejudice and advance equality, for example, South Africa passed the PEPUA in 2000 (South Africa, 2000). Policies of this kind are essential in establishing the legal structure that makes educational institutions answerable for discriminating actions (Butler, 2015). According to Mahlangu (2021), supporting the rights of LGBTQI+ learners require an inclusive school atmosphere. Bhana (2014) is an advocate for educational leaders to foster an inclusive and diverse school community. Campaigns for awareness, the use of inclusive language, and the celebration of LGBTQI+ occasions and achievements can all help achieve this (Bhana, 2014). Educational leaders can contribute to a decrease in stigma and the creation of a more inviting atmosphere for all learners by cultivating an accepting culture.

Research shows that schools still struggle to create safe and supportive settings for gender- diverse learners, even after being constitutionally affirmed and mandated by policy (Mugisha, 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2019). When discussing the nuances of gender identity and sexual orientation, SMT members frequently express emotions of inadequacy, dread, and worry. Furthermore, a lot of school administrators point to a dearth of university

curricula and training that thoroughly address gender diversity, identity, and binary constructions (Payne & Smith, 2014). As a result, they often feel ill-equipped to foster environments that promote social inclusion. The implementation of inclusive policies is further hindered by cultural and societal prejudices. According to Khumalo and Dube (2019), efforts to establish inclusivity in schools frequently experience resistance from parents, community leaders, and even some educators. To navigate these challenges, the researcher opines that the SMTs must engage stakeholders in open dialogue and work toward a shared understanding of the importance of inclusivity. Many schools, particularly those in underprivileged communities, lack the financial and infrastructural capacity to effectively implement inclusive practices. Tshabalala (2019) emphasises that overcoming these constraints requires SMTs to advocate for increased funding and support from educational authorities. This includes securing resources for teacher training programs, creating safe spaces for gender-diverse learners, and establishing gender-neutral bathroom facilities.

The discussion that follows looks at the attitude of SMT members towards LGBTQI+ learners.

2.4.1 SMTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBTQI+ LEARNERS

The attitudes of SMT members are important as they determine how LGBTQI+ learners are perceived. The behaviour of SMT members plays a role in creating a safe and positive environment for the whole school community, regardless of gender or position. In South Africa, school leaders are viewed as agents of change; they are recognised as key role players in bringing about transformative and protective inclusivity in the school environment (Constitution of South Africa, 1996). According to Tshabalala (2019), SMT members must ensure that they promote equality and ensure that every learner on the school premises is protected and feels safe. Nonetheless, it appears that the management team at many South African institutions disregards that criterion by discriminating against learners who are LGBTQI+. While SMT members are responsible for fostering inclusivity in the classroom, it is important to remember that they are individuals with their beliefs and

values that shape their interactions with LGBTQI+ learners. Francis (2019) supports the by asserting that SMT members have traditional, conservative, and prejudiced beliefs and attitudes at graduation from college, which are heavily influenced by social norms, gender stereotypes, culture, and religion. Because of their personal views and beliefs, teachers frequently encourage homophobic behaviour and attitudes in the classroom (Johnson, 2016).

School Management Team members in schools hold hostile attitudes towards LGBTQI+ learners, and this is based on the idea that they want to uphold their societal values and norms, while others' religion motivates their actions (Francis, 2019). Religion has a significant influence on people's attitudes in South Africa; school leaders who subscribe to strong religious convictions oppose LGBTQI+ people because they see them as demonic (Mota, 2022). Teachers' prejudices against diverse sexual identities often sprang from their religious beliefs, according to a South African study that looked at how educators position themselves on teaching learners about sexuality and homosexuality in the classroom (Francis, 2017). The results of the survey also showed that school administrators encouraged instructors to use their teaching strategies, and that no higher- up in the school would help teachers in educating learners about homosexuality because of the effect of their faith (Govender, 2017). Because non-normative sexualities are viewed by most of the society as abnormal, demonic, and un-African, some SMT members retain this belief and carry it to their schools, which has an impact on LGBTQI+ learners. The most significant individuals in the school are unable to defend LGBTQI+ learners due to the SMT's lack of support, leaving them exposed to violations and at risk (Brown, 2020). Prejudice among teachers is revealed by Msibi's (2019) research on township schools. According to one study participant, Mrs. Nhleko summoned me to the staffroom when I was at school. She began to yell at me and urged me to stop behaving like a guy. According to her, I should quit being a lesbian since I'll start making other learners like me (Msibi, 2012, p.524).

This clearly shows that not only do SMT members have an issue with

LGBTQI+ learners, but also teachers hold unfavourable attitudes about non-binary learners. Their attitude is likely to be influenced by the lack of support from the SMT towards LGBTQI+ learners. In her study, Bhana (2016) found that many public schools in South Africa prohibited learners from coming out since it was considered a personal and private matter. Their remarks regarding homosexuality and their responses to the harassment of LGBTQI+ learners reveal the attitudes of both the SMT and the teachers towards learners who are LGBTQI+ (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). A lot of learners are now afraid to report incidents of discrimination and humiliation as they know it will be treated as a joke and not taken seriously. This kind of behaviour is disruptive to LGBTQI+ learners, affecting their academic participation and output, truancy and at times, drop out (Moradi, 2017). As much as the constitution supports and legalised same sex affirmations, societal norms and religious beliefs are still against non-binary, making it difficult for SMT members to understand the importance of equality and acceptance (Mostert, Gordon & Kriegler, 2015).

2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

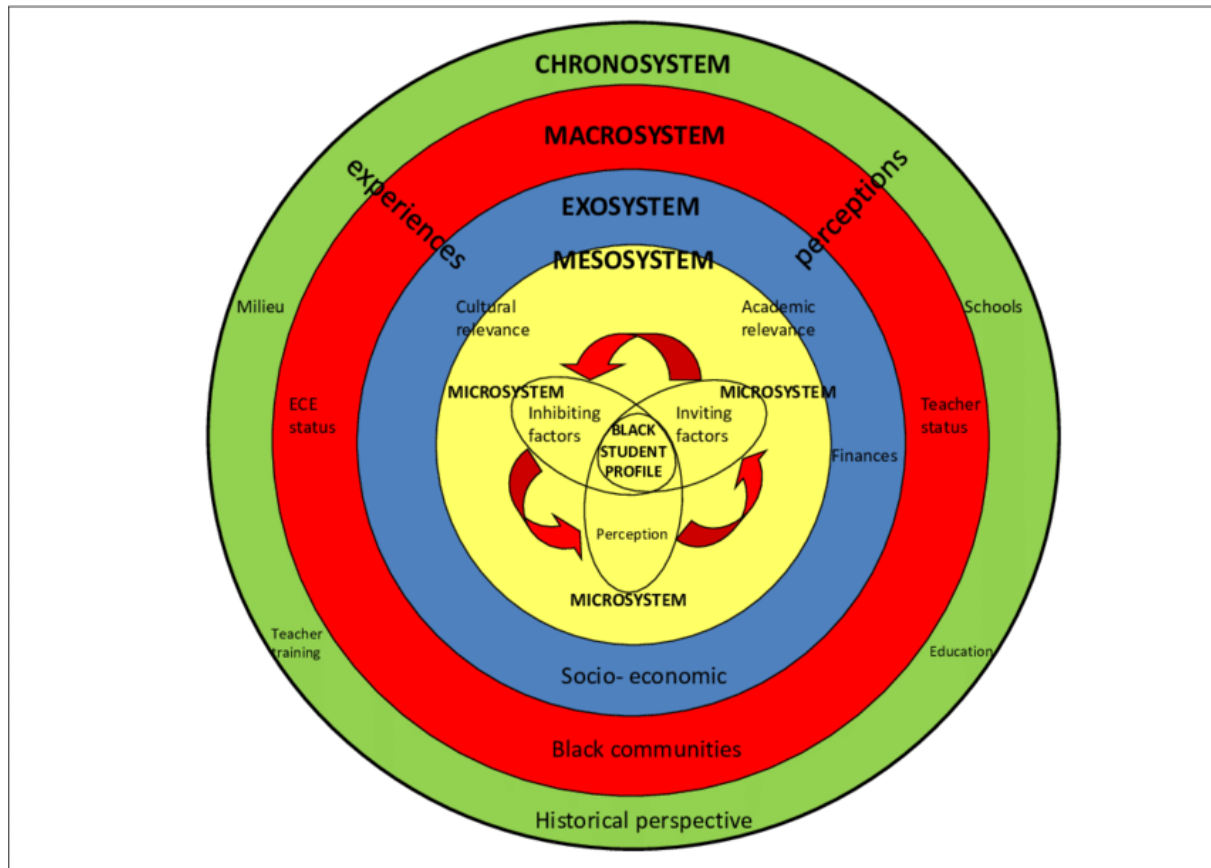
This section of the study outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the research. A theoretical framework serves as the foundational structure that guides a study by offering a clear lens through which a topic is examined (Kilanowski, 2017). For this research, the socio-ecological theory has been adopted to explore the attitudes and perspectives of SMT members in developing inclusive and protective policies for LGBTQI+ learners in schools. Originally introduced as a conceptual framework in the 1970s and later formalised as a theory in the 1980s, the socio-ecological model (SEM) was developed by Bronfenbrenner to explain human development in a complex system of interdependent social structures (Kilanowski, 2017). This theory highlights how individuals exist in dynamic, interconnected environments that influence their behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions (Godwin, Ashiabi & Keri, 2015). The socio-ecological model provides a contextual framework for understanding how interactions with family, society, and cultural environments shape perspectives, particularly in the context of inclusive education policies

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory asserts that an individual's attitudes are largely influenced by their surrounding environment. In the context of this study, the attitudes, and perceptions of SMT members toward diverse gender identities are shaped by their social, cultural, and institutional environments.

2.5.1 Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining how multiple environmental systems influence human development (Godwin, Ashiabi & Keri, 2015). The socio-ecological model emphasises that an individual's worldview is shaped by their interactions with their surroundings. In this case, the attitudes of SMT members toward LGBTQI+ learners are influenced by their broader social context, including family, religion, and societal norms. One eye is focused on the intricate layers of interactions in the society, family, and school, while the other eye is intensely focused on an individual. This makes Bronfenbrenner's theory appealing, according to Leonard (2015, p. 6). This implies that interactions between educators and school leaders and their surroundings greatly influence their attitudes and produce a vibrant cultural setting (Lade & Niiranen, 2015). Examining the external factors that influence SMT members' opinions is crucial to comprehending their attitudes and reactions regarding the integration of learners with diverse sexual orientations. According to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, people and their social systems are mutually dependent. Therefore, it is impossible to properly comprehend leaders' attitudes towards LGBTQI+ learners without considering their lived experiences.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model



Adapted

from:

<https://www.google.com/imgres?q=bronfenbrenner%20socio%20ecological%20theory&imgurl>

The diagram above illustrates Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model and its application in this study, focusing on school inclusivity for learners with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Each layer of the model highlights different systems, their interactions, and how they collectively shape attitudes and behaviours.

a) The Microsystem

Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2020), defines the microsystem as the immediate environment with which an individual has direct contact, such as home and school. In this study, the microsystem includes the direct interactions between SMT members, teachers, learners, and parents in the school environment. Since

their development is immediately impacted by reciprocal connections in their immediate environment, LGBTQI+ learners are at the centre of the microsystem (Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2020). Given that LGBTQI+ learners spend a large amount of time in school, their experiences and development are greatly influenced by this setting (Henderson & Baffour, 2015). SMT members, as key decision-makers in schools, are responsible for implementing inclusive policies that influence how LGBTQI+ learners navigate the school environment. The views of learners of their school as a hostile or safe place are directly impacted by their interactions with them. Msibi (2018a) emphasizes that SMT members are teachers first and foremost, interacting with learners before they become school leaders. According to Mota (2022), teachers' interactions in the microsystem hold significant power in shaping the school climate. Given the ongoing and frequent interactions between SMT members and learners, homophobic attitudes may persist if SMT members fail to implement protective policies for LGBTQI+ learners.

School leaders play a crucial role in shaping an inclusive educational environment. However, studies by Brown and Kuhl (2020), Bhana (2016), and Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2020) reveal that many SMT members demonstrate a lack of commitment to inclusivity for LGBTQI+ learners. This raises an important question: Why do SMT members in many schools resist implementing policies that safeguard LGBTQI+ learners? Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that teachers and school leaders do not exist in isolation; rather, their attitudes are shaped by the broader social systems to which they belong. To understand SMT members' perspectives, it is necessary to examine the societal norms and values that influence their views on gender and sexuality. For instance, Henderson & Baffour (2015), an SMT member from a community where religious beliefs strongly oppose same-sex relationships is more likely to hold negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ learners. By considering these contextual influences, this study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the factors shaping SMT members' responses to inclusive education policies.

b) The Mesosystem

The connections between two or more environments that include the developing individual at a specific stage of their life are referred to as the mesosystem (Kilanowski, 2017). The way the systems in the microsystem such as the family, school, and neighbourhood interact with one another and affect one another's attitudes and perceptions of homosexuality is referred to as the mesosystem (Masson & Nkosi, 2017). The quality of a learner's mesosystem is determined by the link between their home and their society or surroundings. It is critical that the two systems work together to create a secure environment for learners. However, to create an inclusive learning environment for all learners, it is crucial for this study to additionally examine how the surrounding environment and religion may affect the attitudes and responses of SMT members (Masson & Nkosi, 2017). Research indicates that many SMT fail to create inclusive and safe spaces for LGBTQI+ learners, primarily because of their religious beliefs and environmental surroundings.

Despite this, the school's SMT is tasked with making sure that all learners are protected and safeguarded by protective policies. In doing so, the school is violating the rights that have been provided by the Constitution if it promotes discrimination and violation of others' rights. According to Butler (2015), it is quite important to acknowledge that SMT members have private lives outside of the school. Their outside life influences their belief system, values and ideas; therefore, it becomes difficult for them to switch from their values to what they do not believe in (Francis, 2019). One's religion and belief system influence how they perceive and respond to things, and in this case, the SMT members are governed by their religion and belief system; hence, they act negatively towards LGBTQI+ learners.

c) The exosystem

Bronfenbrenner defines the exosystem as "An extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass

the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there," is how (1977, p.515). The exosystem allows the developing person's beliefs, customs, and culture context, values, and resources" (Rus et al., 2020, p. 246). Most religions and societies view same-sex sexualities as abnormal and immoral (Khau, 2012). Govender (2017), states that learners cannot contest this stereotyped misconception because they are not taught about same-sex sexualities in the classroom. Unquestionably, both directly and indirectly, curricular implementation affects SMT's attitudes and responses.

d) *The macrosystem*

The blueprints of a society, including laws and regulations, as well as unwritten conventions and rules, make up the macrosystem (Masson & Nkosi, 2017). To put it briefly, "societal and cultural values and influences are part of the macrosystem" (Kilanowski 2017, p. 295). SMTs' views and responses towards LGBTQI+ learners are influenced by society's values, beliefs, and practices, which are represented by the macrosystem in this study. The macrosystem "not only influences but is influenced by the other three systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-)" (Bronfenbrenner 1993, p. 47). For example, SMTs must encounter a culture through their microsystems (family and school) for it to affect their attitudes and responses to challenges relevant to LGBTQI+ learners (Kilanowski, 2017).

e). *The chronosystem*

In updated models, the impact of policy is included at this level, which includes both external and internal components of time and historical material (Kilanowski, 2017, p. 295). For this study throughout time, pre-service and in-service trainings that seek to enhance the attitudes of teachers and SMTs as well as their skills and comprehension of same-sex orientation should be considered. When implementing LGBTIQ-inclusive policies, which teach SMT members how to maintain a welcoming school climate for learners who are LGBTQI+ by providing equitable educational opportunities and promoting good attitudes towards same-sex orientation, time is of the essence (UNESCO,

2017).

2.6 SUMMARY

The literature on SMT members' opinions and experiences with LGBTIQ+ learners, both domestically and internationally, was evaluated in this chapter. The conversations shed light on the common challenges SMT members experience while implementing inclusive, protective policies for LGBTQI+ learners in schools. The chapter also adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as the theoretical underpinning for the study. The next chapter will look at the techniques used to conduct this research study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter examined existing literature research on how SMT members engage with learners of diverse sexual identities in South African schools. This chapter presents the research design and methodology employed in the study. To explore SMT members' perceptions of diverse sexual identities in South African schools, a research design was conducted. According to Nieuwenhuis, (2016), the research process is described in this chapter, along with the approach that was selected and the justification for it. The chapter further describes the important phases of the research, including data collecting, data analysis, and participant selection. It also looks at the researcher's position in qualitative research and talks about the terms such as validity, reliability, and trustworthiness in this paradigm. Table 3.1 below outlines the summary of the research methodology:

Table 1: Summary of the research methodology

Components	Category
Research question of the study	Main research question How do School management team respond to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in Schools? Secondary research questions • What is the perception or views of SMT members when it comes to queer inclusivity in schools? • What challenges do SMT members experience when dealing with

	gender and sexual orientation issues in the school? • How well does SMT members understand policies that promote inclusivity?
Research paradigm	Interpretivist paradigm
Research approach	Qualitative approach
Research design	Phenomenological design
Sampling methods	Purposive sampling
Data collection tools	Semi-structured interviews
Data analysis	Thematic analysis

3.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism (Constructivism)

Research paradigms are foundational beliefs or worldviews that guide research action or development within the social sciences realm (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). Paradigms play a fundamental role in shaping research by providing conceptual frameworks that guide inquiry in a specific discipline (Kankam, 2019). Christiansen et al. (2010), concurs with the above views and further define a paradigm as supplying the researcher with the type of questions to be asked, what can be observed and investigated. According to Creswell (2016), a paradigm is a basic set of ideas that direct behavior and serve as a framework for comprehension and observation. According to Kumatongo and Muzake (2021), Positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism (constructivism), and critical theory are the four main paradigms of philosophical study. Blumberg et al., (2016), describe the post-positivist and critical paradigms where the former is striving for objectivity, predictability, patterning and the development of laws and rules of behaviour and the latter is aware of the political and ideological context involved with change. This study does not aim to secure objectivity and predictability. Therefore, the paradigm selected

for this study is the interpretive paradigm as according to Dudovskiy (2018a) who emphasises that the interpretivist paradigm recognises knowledge as socially constructed, making it particularly relevant for studies that explore diverse perspectives and lived experiences in specific cultural and social contexts.

According to Pham (2018), interpretivist paradigm it is used in a study where the subjects of the research are people and is widely used in Social Sciences which includes education where it assumes that the purpose of educational research is to develop understanding and meaning informing human behaviour. This simply means that interpretative paradigm tries to get into the participant's situation to understand and interpret what they think or mean concerning their context. This paradigm was selected for this study because it is suitable for a qualitative research approach. The interpretative research paradigm appreciates people's personal and interpersonal views as they interact with the world around them (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Therefore, the researcher was able to interpret and explore the SMTs responses and experiences of incorporating inclusivity within the school environment. According to Pham (2018), this interpretative approach it is appropriate since it goes beyond cursory research and permits a more thorough investigation of attitudes, actions, and the elements affecting inclusion in schools. Furthermore, according to the researcher, the interpretivist paradigm facilitates an examination of the role of SMT members as school leaders in fostering an inclusive school culture. Pham (2018) asserts that interpretivism aims to uncover deeper meanings rather than generalise findings to entire populations. This aligns with the study's objective of understanding how different school stakeholders experience and respond to inclusive policies.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is the overarching plan or strategy that directs the execution of a study and guarantees that the techniques employed successfully tackle the research topic (Sileyew, 2019). Research design, according to Hammarberg et al. (2016), is a methodical process a researcher uses to get reliable and correct responses to research

questions. A research design essentially describes the course a researcher intends to follow during the investigation (Kumar, 2019). It offers a structure for gathering, analysing, and interpreting data. Asenahabi (2019) states that a research design is a basic plan for a piece of research that includes the conceptual framework that guides a study, the research questions, data collection tools, and procedures used for data collection and analysis. Therefore, a proper plan was executed by the researcher to communicate how the study would be carried out. Hence this research study adopted a phenomenological design.

Phenomenological research design aims to investigate and comprehend people's lived experiences in relation to a particular subject. Phenomenology, which has its roots in the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger, aims to reveal the essence or primary significance of the experiences that participants have in common (Redmore, 2024). As Creswell et al. (2023) states that a phenomenological design helps researchers gain insight into participants' lived experiences, particularly in relation to phenomena like sexual equality. The primary goal of phenomenology is to extract a general principle or understanding from people's experiences with a phenomenon, as further discussed by Van Manen (2014). According to the researcher, the phenomenological design was particularly appropriate for this study, as it focused on understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of SMT members as they navigate and implement protective policies in schools. These experiences are shaped by complex factors, including cultural, social, and institutional influences (Msibi, 2018). The design also emphasises the context of participants' experiences, making it ideal for studies conducted in diverse settings such as South African schools (Redmore, 2024). The researcher believes that by focusing on these contextual factors, phenomenology will allow for a deeper exploration of the challenges and opportunities for inclusivity in schools.

3.4 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employed a qualitative research approach in the interpretive paradigm to address the research issues. Qualitative research is defined as "research that produces findings without the use of any statistical procedures or quantification" (Rahman, 2017, p.103). Additionally, qualitative research is

defined as "a type of research that is generally more explorative, versatile, data-driven, and context-sensitive" by Mason (2017, p. 24). Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020) assert that qualitative research is adaptable, transparent, and context responsive. This flexibility enables researchers to make well-informed judgements about the number of units they analyse, the scope of their study, and their methodological choices. Comparably, qualitative research is described by Aspers and Corte (2019) as a multimethod methodology that prioritises a "naturalistic, interpretive approach in understanding a subject matter" (p.142).

The primary objective of a qualitative approach is to examine experiences, meanings, and perceptions from the perspectives of the participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016). According to Kumar (2019, p.14), qualitative research seeks "to describe and narrate feelings, perceptions, and experiences," whereas quantitative research is primarily focused on numerical data and statistical analysis. The qualitative methodology in this study allowed for a thorough investigation of the views, experiences, and reactions of SMT members towards LGBTQI+ learners in South African classrooms. One of the main advantages of qualitative approach in this research study is capturing rich, thorough accounts of how SMT members view sexual and gender diversity within learning environments (Kumar, 2019). A qualitative research approach is a suitable approach to investigate human experience through how and why questions (Kyngäs, 2020). Its core interest is on the "how" questions and depends on the experience of people. Hence, one of the study's aims was to explore how SMT members respond to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual identities. Furthermore, Ahmad et al. (2019) posit that a qualitative research approach is a method of observation that is used to collect non-numerical data. Henceforth, data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

3.5 TARGET POPULATION

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2019), all members of the target group are included in the study target population. The units of interest in the study, which could be individuals, families, or corporations, make up the target population (Etikan & Bala, 2017). This inquiry focused on the SMT members of two

South African schools. The principals and other school officials who oversee the safeguarding of every learner, as well as putting educational standards and principles into practice and upholding them, are part of the SMT's responsibilities. Therefore, the primary target demographic for the study was SMT members.

3.5.1 Sampling

The process by which a researcher chooses participants and chooses the data collection techniques required to achieve the study's goals is known as sampling (Flynn & McDermott, 2016). According to Patton (2014), sampling entails selecting people who are typical of the broader group they are chosen. Sampling can be categorised into probability and non-probability sampling. In probability sampling, every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Methods such as simple, defined, and cluster sampling are used in probability sampling, where samples are randomly chosen (Flynn & McDermott, 2016). In contrast, non-probability sampling limits selection to participants who meet specific criteria, without randomization. Non-probability sampling techniques include purposive, judgmental, quota, snowball, and convenience sampling (Patton, 2014). For this study, I employed purposive sampling, a non-probability technique which is in line with this study which is qualitative in nature. Flynn and McDermott (2016), concurs that sampling is a feature of a qualitative research approach. Purposive sampling according to Christiansen et al. (2010) is when a researcher makes specific choices about the inclusion of people to the sample. It involves the targeting of a particular group, which represents itself. Purposive sampling was employed to collect "rich information," especially from school SMT members, to identify the key elements that went into solving the research problem (Patton, 2014, p. 264). By using this method, the researcher can choose experts in the thematic area under study. The participants in this study were specifically selected because they were SMT members who had served as school leaders for at least five years.

3.5.2 Sample Size

Bertram and Christiansen (2023) assert that sample size is a crucial factor in the

data collection process while conducting research or looking into an issue related to education. The sample size is the number of elements required in a statistical sample taken from the target population (Etikan et al., 2016). For example, only participants from two of Orange Farm's thirteen secondary schools were sampled. The following is the distribution of the six SMT members who were selected from the schools:

Table 2: Identifying participants in schools.

Name of School	Number of Participants
School A	3
School B	3

The SMT members were engaged based on their experience over five years of leading their school. Race, gender, or demographic location was not given any special attention. The SMT members' availability and willingness were the sole requirements.

3.6 DATA COLLECTION

To obtain study data, researchers use data collection methods, which include tools and technologies (Creswell, 2012). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data collection is the act of obtaining and assessing information on variables of interest in a methodical, planned manner that makes it possible to respond to research questions. One of the most important stages of the study process is data collecting and maintaining research integrity requires correct data gathering (Clark & Vealé, 2018). In this research study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Maree (2020) defines an interview as a conversation in which the interviewer gathers information by posing questions to participants that allow the researcher to learn about

their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences related to the phenomenon under study. For this study, my main technique for gathering data was semi-structured interviews. According to Maree (2020), semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to get detailed, first-hand information from the participants. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), an interview is a shared conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer learns about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions, and behaviours of the interviewee through a set of questions to collect data. Through qualitative interviews, the researcher would obtain in-depth knowledge and social reality (Döringer, 2021). Furthermore, qualitative interview's main goal is to understand the world from the participant's point of view and if they are used correctly, they can provide valuable information. Conducting face-to-face interviews is advantageous in this study because it gives the researcher a good chance to gain a profound understanding as well as build up a faster, yet efficient and smooth assessment process while enabling a thorough data collection process (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

The goal of semi-structured interviews in this study is to try and understand the perspective and perceptions of SMT members when it comes to gender diverse issues within the schools. Furthermore, the researcher aims to find out more about the knowledge that the SMT members have about inclusivity and queerness. The researcher conducted face to face interviews with six participants from two different schools. The interviews lasted 20-25 minutes, and permission to record them was asked and granted. During the interviews, the researcher realised that the participants did not know the terminology for sexual orientation and gender identity, hence probing was utilised to guide their responses. Smith (2015) asserts that semi-structured interviews enable respondents to bring up topics the researcher may not have thought of, allowing for flexibility in coverage and the creation of richer data; hence, this method of data collecting was appropriate.

3.6.2 Policy Documentation analysis

Document Analysis is a systematic process for reviewing and evaluating documents for both printed and electronic materials (Morgan, 2022). The process of analysing data requires the researcher to examine the data and elicit meaning, understanding and develop knowledge (Armstrong, 2020). The researcher used this type of technique to find, select, make sense of and synthesise data contained in the documents being

analysed. In this study school documents and school code of conduct were requested from the management of the school as a means of analysing their inclusive policies. Furthermore, access to the following documents was further requested during the interview: dress code policy, admissions policy, inclusiveness policy, and discipline policy.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Bernard (2017), the process of data analysis finds concepts that provide insight into the data's existence and searches for patterns in the data. The systematic process of examining, categorizing, and analysing data to derive meaningful conclusions is known as data analysis in research. Giving the data context and some kind of structure is the aim of data analysis in a qualitative study (Archer, 2018). Data analysis in this study involved processing qualitative data to identify themes, patterns, and underlying meanings related to the SMT's responses to inclusion. In this study, participant interview transcriptions were examined using thematic analysis.

3.7.1 Thematic Analysis

One qualitative research technique for finding, examining, and interpreting patterns (themes) in a dataset is thematic analysis. By classifying recurrent themes, concepts, and narratives that surface from participant responses, it offers a methodical way to arrange and interpret qualitative data. One of the most popular methods in qualitative research, this methodology is quite adaptable and may be used for a wide range of research questions and epistemological stances (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers can find, analyse, and extrapolate meaning from emerging themes in their data by using thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). SMT members' opinions and experiences with the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners were investigated in this study using theme analysis. The primary purpose was to identify and extract recurrent themes from the interview transcripts to ensure that the analysis directly addressed the study objectives. A theme, according to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), is a significant pattern in the data that is relevant to the

objectives of the study. To ensure a systematic approach, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for theme analysis:

Phase 1: Becoming acquainted with the data: To have a comprehensive comprehension, read and reread transcripts.

Phase 2: Creating first codes: This involves methodically coding significant data aspects.

Phase 3: Looking for themes: Finding recurring themes in various answers.

Phase 4: Examining topics: To guarantee coherence, themes should be refined and consolidated.

Phase 5: Identifying and defining themes: Clearly stating the main points of each theme. **Phase 6:** Writing the report: Presenting significant insights requires arranging facts in an organised way.

Through the above stages, the researcher was able to code and classify the data in a way that produced deep, perceptive insights that were in line with the study questions by using this methodical technique.

3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

To ensure the reliability and rigour of qualitative research, credibility and trustworthiness are essential. This study's credibility was established by its open and systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting. According to Lochmiller and Lester (2015), trustworthiness ensures that study findings accurately reflect participants' lives and experiences. It is crucial for persuading readers and stakeholders that the findings are reliable and important. Prior to conducting interviews, I interacted with participants to build trust and rapport. They could express any concerns they had about the study. According to Stahl and King (2020), in qualitative research, validity and reliability are both elements of credibility and dependability. The study employed four primary strategies to ensure its dependability: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Dudovskiy, 2018a).

3.8.1 Credibility

Honesty and the internal validity of research are key components of credibility (Stahl & King, 2020). To increase the study's credibility, the following strategies were used: member verification, precise recording, consistent observation, targeted questioning, interview engagement, and triangulation. As part of the data verification process, participants also had the chance to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses. Confirming initial interpretations was also aided by informal discussions.

3.8.2 Dependability

Creswell et al. (2016) define dependability as the consistency and stability of research findings over time. It ensures that the same population and the same research instruments can produce similar results. I made careful to maintain reliability by taking into consideration changes in the study context because qualitative research is dynamic. Extensive documentation of the research procedure was kept up to date to increase transparency and allow future researchers to replicate the work.

3.8.3 Transferability

Transferability is the capacity of outcomes to be used in many contexts. To aid in transferability, I provided readers with a "thick description" of the study's methodology and participants, allowing them to assess if the findings are applicable in their settings.

3.8.4 Confirmability

According to Stahl and King (2020), confirmability guarantees that results are based on participant replies rather than researcher bias. Through member-checking, in which participants checked the final reports for accuracy, confirmability was strengthened in this study (Dudovskiy, 2018a). To guarantee objectivity and rigour, my supervisor also conducted a critical analysis of the data and conclusions.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are fundamental to protecting research participants. According to Makhubele (2016), ethical research prioritises the confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent of participants over scientific or societal interests. Ethics in research are closely tied to moral principles and the responsibility to respect human dignity (Gregory, as cited in Ramrathran, Grange & Shawa, 2017). To uphold ethical standards, the researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines and was approved by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand. The following ethical measures were implemented:

3.9.1 Ethical Clearance

The researcher received ethical approval from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Committee before starting the project. The researcher further asked school principals directly for permission to conduct interviews during this period and received formal consent from the department of education consenting to the collection of data.

3.9.2 Privacy, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used for both individuals and schools (Creswell, 2020). Confidentiality was further maintained by ensuring that participants' responses were not shared outside the study. During transcription, identifying descriptors such as school names were omitted to safeguard anonymity. As Kumar (2019) emphasizes, researchers must ensure that participants cannot be identified through their responses.

3.10 SUMMARY

The qualitative research strategy, interpretative paradigm, sample strategies, data collection processes, and ethical considerations were all covered in this chapter's overview of the research methodology. Credibility, reliability,

transferability, and confirmability measures used to guarantee trustworthiness were also discussed. The study's results are presented in the next chapter, with an emphasis on how SMTs view and feel about the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners in South African classrooms.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter described the research design and methodology used to collect data for this research. This chapter presents and discusses the data collected from semi-structured interviews and data analysis. Six teachers participated in the data collection process. The teachers were exposed to the same interview questions but in different settings. The data was collected and analysed to answer the following research questions:

Main research question

- How do School management team respond to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in Schools?

Secondary research questions

- What is the perception or views of SMT members when it comes to queer inclusivity in schools?
- What challenges do SMT members experience when dealing with gender and sexual orientation issues in the school?
- How well does SMT members understand policies that promote inclusivity?

The chapter begins by unpacking the demographic data of the investigated schools and further providing demographic details of the participants. The findings are structured according to key themes that emerged from data collected through semi-structured interviews and policy analysis. The discussion highlights both positive outcome and challenges SMTs experience in creating inclusive school environments. Participants' responses are cited in verbatim from semi- structured interviews. All the data are presented in

themes and subthemes.

4.1. SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

It is crucial to comprehend South Africa's school demographics, especially considering the socioeconomic quintile system to ensure high-quality education and accessibility for learners from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the National Norms and Standards for School budget (2004) budget allocation is based on levels or quintile of the school (Singh, 2021). Quintile 1 (Q1) schools, which serve the poorest 20% of learners, receive the most financial support under this post-apartheid funding paradigm, while Quintile 5 (Q5) schools, which serve the wealthiest 20% of learners, receive the least (Singh, 2021). The ability of South African schools to handle gender and sexual diversity is still significantly impacted by the quintile allocation. **Table 1** below shows critical demographic information about the schools which are investigated.

Table 3: School Demographics

NAME OF SCHOOL	TYPE OF SCHOOL	NUMBER OF LEARNERS	NUMBER OF YEARS IN EXISTENCE	PROVINCE
School A	Public	2502	34	Gauteng
School B	Private	890	17	Gauteng

4.1.1. School A

School A is a public secondary school located in the township of Orange Farm, Johannesburg, Gauteng. It offers education from Grade 8 to 12 and follows the structured admission process outlined by the SASA of 1996, which mandates school attendance for children aged 7 to 15. Additionally, given that the school is governed by SASA (1996), it is obligated to maintain equality and inclusivity. The school offers instruction in four home languages, and most learners come from relatively advantaged backgrounds, with parents employed

as teachers, police officers, and nurses. The presence of numerous private transport services fetching learners from school indicates a degree of economic stability among the learner body. School A is considered one of the best-performing schools in Orange Farm.

The school has a strict dress code policy, female learners are not expected to wear trousers. If a learner is found wearing a trouser, they face suspension. When the researcher asked about the aspects that led to that kind of decision being made, no clear answer was given. From their dress code policy one can detect that the school only considers two genders, male and female. The school has a total of 22 toilets, 11 for boys and 11 for girls, their code of conduct or school plan does not show interest of building more toilets that are gender central. As the researcher was conducting the research, she saw a lot of queer learners. The above showed that the school is diverse, but it does not cater for diversity.

4.1.2. School B

School B is a private high-performing institution in Orange Farm, operating under the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA). English is the medium of instruction, and the school follows an Anglican belief system. The school offers instruction in two languages as home languages, Sesotho, and isiZulu. Although this school is managed privately, it is still mandated to follow the SASA of 1996. Furthermore, private schools such as school B are obligated to maintain equality and inclusivity, therefore they are required to implement the principles embedded in White Paper 6 (White paper 6, 2001). The school is a combined college that starts admission from Grade R to 12; however, the study only focused on the high school segment. The learners of the school belong to middle-class and wealthy households, and they are vested with knowledge of human rights and their rights. The school is considered one of the best-performing schools among other private schools in Orange Farm. The school falls under the Anglican church, which means they follow a lot of Christian values.

The dress code of the school is very strictly, and it is followed by every learner. School girls are not allowed to wear trousers; however, the parents have fought that policy and the school amended that all girls will wear trousers only in winter. The consideration of moving from no trousers to only in winter shows that the school is not reluctant to change. The school currently has girls' and boys' toilets only, however within their future school plan they have developments of neutral facilities that will be in place. The issue around toilets is debatable in the school as other SMT members feel that there is an active toilet that can be transformed while others do not see a need for neutral toilets. School B does not have a lot of learners who resembles being queer or it is most likely that they are in the closet.

4.2. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The section below describes the participants' information and provides an overview of the chosen participants. Three participants from each school participated in this study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each participant. Among the participants, two revealed that they identified as queer.

Table 4: Participants' Profiles

SCHOOL	PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION	NUMBER OF YEARS AS SMT	SMT POSITION
School A	Blue	Female	29	B.Ed. Hons	5	DH
	Red	Female	56	Diploma	20	Dep.P
	Yellow	Male	44	PGCE	16	DH

School B	Green	Male	45	Masters in ELPS	10	Principal
	Purple	Male	35	Hons. in science	7	Dep.P
	Pink	Female	46	Degree	17	DH

For this study, from School A, three participants volunteered to participate. Two females and one male consented to participate and share their experiences of the phenomena. However, in School B, two males and one female participated in the study. All participants had an average of 5 years of teaching experience and their average age is 29-56. Only one participant had a master's degree while the others have a teaching qualification.

4.3. THEMATIC PRESENTATION

Through the interview responses, observations and document analysis, the researcher was able to generate codes which were potentially relevant to the research questions. Secondly, from the coded data the researcher searched for the themes by studying coded data to classify the resemblance and extend over the codes. Thirdly, the researcher grouped the codes that appeared to share some common features to reflect and define a clear and meaningful pattern of data. Through this process, the researcher created themes and sub-themes from the dataset. Fourthly, the researcher selected extracts from the dataset and analysed them to set out the story of each theme. Lastly, the researcher wrote a report to give a persuasive story about the data built on the researcher's analysis. Table 3 below shows the themes and Sub-themes used in this study.

Table 5: Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1. SMTs perception and responses about diverse gender identities and sexual orientation.	1.1 Lack of knowledge
	1.2 Factors that contribute to the SMTs response.

2. Challenges experienced by SMT members in addressing gender and sexual identities.	2.1 The role of SMT in building inclusive community.
3. Creating an LGBTQI+ inclusive school environment.	3.1 A need for protective school policies

The results from the semi-structured interviews and document analysis of the six SMT members namely, Pink, Purple, Green, Red, Yellow, and Blue (Pseudonyms) who participated in the study are presented below answering the themes that emerged. The results show the SMT's perceptions and knowledge of queer inclusivity and policy implementation within the schools. The results further show the challenges that the SMT members encounter when trying to adopt and implement school policies that are in line with the White paper 6 of education inclusivity. The results of the study are presented in themes in the following sub-sections with all the participant responses.

4.3.1. Theme 1: SMTs' Perception and response about diverse gender identities and sexual orientation in South African Schools.

In recent years, discussions on diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in South African schools have gained attention. SMTs play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive educational environments. However, findings indicate that many SMT members hold varying perceptions on gender diversity, often influenced by cultural norms, religious beliefs, or a lack of training. The different perceptions come from the idea that the participants come from diverse societies and ethnic backgrounds. When participants were asked when they become aware of the existence of individuals who identify as queer, most of their responses lead to their late 30s, only Pink knew about the LGBTQI+ in her adolescences she also identifies as queer. This study supports Smith and Nkosi (2020), as it has shown that while some SMTs embrace policies promoting inclusivity and diversity, others struggle due to personal beliefs, cultural norms, or inadequate training on gender and sexual diversity. The

different perceptions that the participants have raised throughout the interview have led to the development of this theme, which initially led to two sub-themes. Understanding different perceptions from the participants is very important for this study as it provides a light to different backgrounds that affect learners in the school environment. The acceptance and acknowledgement of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in South African schools is significantly determined by the interpretations and reactions of SMTs. As figures of authority in schools, SMTs are vital in creating an ethos of respect and inclusion where diversity is welcomed. But their perceptions can vary dramatically, and often mirror collective attitudes in society toward gender and sexuality (Reygan, 2023). It is often the case that SMTs are committed to inclusivity and promptly advocate for policy measures to protect LGBTQI+ learners' rights, however, the above literature has shown that not all leaders are conservative and afraid to change how their schools operate. They frequently work to provide safe academic environments where every learner can enable their identities for themselves without being vulnerable to bullying or discrimination. The establishment of support systems such as counselling services and safe spaces that specifically cater to the needs of learners from various backgrounds is one way in which education systems across the world are dialling into this commitment.

According to Thani (2011), there is much confusion when it comes to understanding gender and sexuality as they are often viewed as interchangeable constructs. It is of importance that these distinctions be clarified, especially when relating to the responses of the participants. The findings in this study revealed that, most participants have shown to not understand the distinction between the two, thus making it difficult to understand how to be more inclusive of issues about LGBTQI+. In the literature review, a full description of the concepts is provided; however, looking into the interview transcripts of the participants, it is very important to step back and provide a brief understanding of the concepts. The interview has proven Thani's (2011) judgment of confusion and lack of knowledge around different genders and sexuality. The interviewed participants seemed to have

different ideologies around the concept of gender and identity. Therefore, the researcher believes that it is important to understand gender and sexuality before trying to understand LGBTQI+ individuals. Without a clear understanding of what is gender and sexuality the participants have showed negative resentment towards queer learners. However, they explained that if they could be educated about different genders and sexualities, it would be easy to understand individuals who identify as LGBTQI+.

a) *Lack of Knowledge*

This study revealed that many SMT members have limited understanding of gender diversity and sexual orientation. Their descriptions of LGBTQI+ learners frequently included derogatory terms such as *Ditabane* or *ditwatwa*, highlighting a lack of awareness and potential homophobia. Such language can contribute to discrimination and absenteeism among LGBTQI+ learners. According to Francis (2017), language plays a crucial role in self-esteem development. Msibi (2018) further argues that sexuality and language are interrelated. The findings highlighted that that SMT members' lack of understanding was partly due to their age and belief systems, with older participants showing more resistance to gender and sexual diversity discussions. The absence of Department of Education training on these issues further exacerbates the problem. This study has also shown that many SMT members have not received adequate training or exposure to LGBTQI+ issues, leading to misconceptions, biases, and resistance toward inclusive practices. The findings revealed that only two SMT members knew what LGBTQI+ stands for; one knew because she identified as “lesbian,” and the other knew because he appeared to be very knowledgeable and eager to learn about the LGBTQI+ community. The other participants inferred that their understanding of LGBTQI+ was accurate, but when asked what they understood about the term, Red responded as follows: “*Hai! Those things what can I say? I believe they are demons and are confused and go around promoting nonsense.*”

The response reflected a broader gap in knowledge among SMT members. The use of the terms "those things" and "demons" when referring to LGBTQI+

learners reveal that SMT members hold microaggressions about queer learners. Not only does it show microaggressions, but it also shows a lack of understanding from SMTs regarding diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Calvard et al., 2020). Such language dehumanises LGBTQI+ individuals, reinforcing marginalisation and creating a non-inclusive classroom environment. In school settings, queer microaggressions, subtle, indirect, or inadvertent discriminatory remarks or actions directed against LGBTQI+ people are highly damaging, especially when they originate from members of the SMT. SMT members influence attitudes, policies, and the general inclusive culture in their capacity as school leaders (Msibi, 2018).

The detrimental impacts are exacerbated when they participate in or put up with microaggressions, which furthers the hostile learning environment for queer learners. The “us vs. them” mentality only hinders the creation of a supportive, inclusive atmosphere. If people can understand that identifying as LGBTQI+ does not make someone different from others but is simply about how one identifies and finds comfort, we can break down harmful stereotypes (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). Addressing such misconceptions is essential, especially when some believe that identifying as LGBTQI+ is demonic or a result of confusion. As Francis (2017) argues, it is crucial to dismantle the binary of “us vs. them” to foster inclusivity. Providing education about gender diversity and sexual orientation is vital in combating homophobic behaviour. One of the participants had considerable knowledge and could tell the difference between gender and sex identities. Purple gave a sensible response when asked what he knows about diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. *“In my opinion, sexual orientation is all about who one is romantically attracted to, whereas gender is about one's internal sense of being a man, woman, or neither.”*

Although the statement demonstrates that Purple is knowledgeable about gender and sexuality, the primary problem is that, in his capacity as a leader, he fails to recognise learners who identify as queer in his school. While some participants, like Red, displayed animosity and ignorance regarding LGBTQI+

concerns, Purple and Pink have been completely open to learning about such issues and helping learners, despite their ignorance. Most participants of the study expressed a lack of knowledge when it comes to gender identities and sexual orientations. Although some participants were a bit knowledgeable, such as purple but their understanding was not strong enough to be passed on to others. What was surprising was that even the participant who identified as queer was very clueless about a lot of things, she explained that she had recently come out, so she is now starting to freely learn about queer community. Pink expressed an attraction towards other women for a long time, but she explained that she did not necessarily understand her sexuality at the time. She further explained that she feared that it was a strange phenomenon and chose to suppress and ignore her feelings, considering the environment she grew up in. Pink's parents were very religious and held higher positions in the church. This shows that one of the biggest obstacles to coming out for many learners is a lack of knowledge. If the participants had enough knowledge, it would have been easy to come out, and she would have brought change in the school by promoting inclusivity.

Taking into consideration the gender of some of the participants and the fact that most of them are a bit old, I had to be sensitive in my way of asking questions and explaining. As explained above one of the participants, pink identified as queer however it was very surprising to learn that she is not well knowledgeable about issues of gender and identity. I did not expect her to know everything or to act in a certain way; I just wanted her to be free and express herself. In our interaction I learnt that the society that Pink comes from is against queer people. This points out the idea that society plays a role in the upbringing of an individual. This idea supports Msibi's (2018)'s claim that change in most schools is derailed as the attempts of SMT members to encourage tolerance may be made more difficult by opposition from parents and community members who have cultural or religious convictions. These difficulties underscore the need for thorough professional development and community involvement tactics to give SMTs the know-how and abilities they need to properly support each learner. The norms and values that are imposed

by societies have an impact on how one expresses their perceptions about something. Pink highlighted that she was afraid of coming out early, as her parents were very strict and rooted in culture. *“I knew from early age that am different but had to hide it”*. As Pink indicated that it was very difficult for her to come out, she pointed out that she had an interest in learning more about her feelings towards the same sex, however, her parents always oppressed her and forced her to love boys. When she was asked if the parents were aware, she responded:

“I used to enjoy playing football; however, I was barred, and I believe my mother knew since she always made me wear dresses. My father would always ask me about boys when I got to the adolescent stage, advising me which ones would be best for me. I lost interest in myself at one point, therefore as a teacher and a department head, I always make sure queer learners feel comfortable talking to me because I understand their suffering.”

The participant's response was saddening it is hard to see learners being scared to come out because their parents and teachers do not support them. Most learners ultimately give in to the temptation to conceal their genuine identities, which occurs at most schools. Many SMT members neglect to collaborate with Life Orientation teachers and ensure inclusivity in the schools, which demoralises and harms learners (Govender, 2017). As such, many participants in this study demonstrated resentment toward LGBTQI+ learners. Their responses reflected negative views and a clear disdain for queer-identifying learners. Some SMT members rely on damaging preconceptions because they do not have a thorough awareness of sexual orientation and gender diversity. For instance, they most likely view diverse gender identities as a fad, a product of Western culture, or something that defies religious and cultural expectations. This ignorance leads to discriminatory or contemptuous attitudes, which hinder the successful application of inclusive policies and LGBTQI+ acceptance in schools. Red, for example, shared that her nephew is part of the queer community. When asked how she treats him, she

responded with hate and discrimination.

“I knew from the start that this thing was good for nothing, the way he walked and dressed as a young boy worried me. I told my sister we should take him to initiation school to become a man, but she refused. From that day, I no longer want to see that good-for-nothing son of hers in my house. I heard he is married to a man now, what a disgrace.”

This narrative not only marginalises LGBTQI+ individuals but also shows homophobic behaviour towards same-sex identities. As Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2017) notes, stigma involves strong societal disapproval, especially toward those who are non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming. In this case, Red’s rejection of her nephew stems from a lack of understanding, forcing him to conform to societal expectations of masculinity. The statement further shows that Red believes that culture is everything, and it can cure her nephew. The idea of going to initiation just to demonstrate how manly or female one is it’s not ideal and shows how individuals could use culture to fight the rights of another. This mirrors harmful beliefs, such as the misguided notion that HIV can be cured by having sex with young virgin girls, showing how such harmful ideologies perpetuate discrimination. Red’s statement further proves that a lot of SMT members hold microaggressions about queer learners, they tend to take their values and what they believe into their workplace affecting those close to them. On the other hand, not all SMTs resent learners because they are more culturally and religious, but it is because they are insufficiently prepared to deal with issues about sexual orientation and gender diversity. The participants of the study have proven that they struggle because they lack knowledge or training, which can result in ineffective reactions to bullying or discriminatory occurrences.

While not everyone exhibits resentment toward LGBTQI+ individuals, Francis, and Reygan (2016) state that some school leaders and teachers understand the importance of equality and the need to protect the rights of all learners. Purple proved that the way that SMTs view and react to different

gender identities and sexual orientations in South African schools has a significant impact on the general atmosphere of the school. The researcher opines that SMTs can have a big impact on learning achievement and well-being by encouraging inclusivity and understanding, making sure that each learner feels appreciated and supported throughout their academic path. Grape stated that although she has strong cultural and religious beliefs, she believes everyone deserves equal respect, and as an SMT member, she must fulfil that. She indicated:

“I don’t have any problem with them. I believe that everyone has the right to live their life the way they want. Who am I to infringe on the rights of others? I have a colleague who is lesbian; I learned to respect her. Being around her has showed me that queer people are normal just like us, I just hate that she’s always hitting on school learners.”

This reflects research showing that being around LGBTQI+ individuals can foster positive attitudes toward non-normative sexualities. According to Hall and Rodgers (2019), there are numerous important ways in which the presence of LGBTQI+ learners in schools can improve the attitudes of members of the SMT. Engaging with LGBTQI+ learners enable SMT members to have a more profound comprehension of the difficulties that these learners encounter. SMT members can develop empathy and sensitivity by hearing about individual experiences, which can result in more thoughtful and caring decisions. According to research, teachers are more likely to confront their prejudices and actively advance inclusivity when they are directly exposed to a range of identities and life experiences (Meyer, 2017). SMT members are better able to appreciate diversity as a strength in their educational environments because of this direct involvement (Moradi, 2017). Therefore, this means that positive interactions and learning about diverse sexualities can change attitudes, as demonstrated by other responses in the study. In his statement, Yellow as a participant of the study had stated that having LGBTQI+ learners attending schools helps SMT members to grow professionally as they familiarise themselves with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. When he was

asked how he views queer learners and treat them in the school premises, he responded:

“I am a very fair person. I do not judge based on how you look or where you come from. I believe only God has the power to judge. I treat everyone the same, even though I am against Izitabane. My opposition may stem from the fact that I wasn’t exposed to such things growing up.”

While Yellow expresses a fair attitude toward all learners, he also admits a lack of knowledge regarding LGBTQI+ issues. This is a common thread in the responses, as many participants are open to becoming more inclusive but need education on how to approach diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Francis & Kuhl, 2022). Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2020) emphasise that lack of knowledge about gender and sexual diversity should not be overlooked, as school leaders and teachers must be equipped to address homophobia in schools. Without this knowledge, teachers cannot promote inclusivity or equality. The above response from Yellow does not only show lack of knowledge but it is somehow homophobic. The use of “God has the power to judge”, it simply provides a narrative that being queer is wrong and God will deal with LGBTQI+ decisively. As much as Yellow does not judge but his response show that he has drawn a conclusion that being queer is against God’s will, he uses religion or belief system to justify his discriminatory actions. Msibi (2019) states that school leaders such as Yellow are very dangerous, they tend to make people believe that they support them but fully knowing that they are against certain things. However, as much as Yellow’s response is biased, the idea of introducing trainings and awareness campaigns for SMTs and teachers is significant. Few of the participants of the study raised the issue. Orange was very much congruent with the idea and supported Yellow in the idea that the department of education should start raising awareness and introduce teacher training pertaining gender identities and sexual orientations in school. He indicated:

“I think the government is not doing justice to us. They must be cognizant of

the fact that some of us are old and have no idea about the new changes happening. We should be provided with workshops to educate us about these new genders we encounter in classrooms. I don't know how to address them. Should I call them by their birth gender or adopted gender? I just avoid contact because I feel like I might offend them.”

Orange's response highlights the need for proper training for SMTs and teachers to address difficult school cultures. As Francis and Msibi (2011) suggest, providing pedagogical knowledge on LGBTQI+ issues are essential for challenging heteronormative biases in the classroom. Inadequate knowledge can result in a lack of support for LGBTQI+ learners and perpetuate discriminatory practices. According to Msibi (2018), understanding gender identities and sexual orientations is no longer optional in today's environment of growing diversity and inclusivity, but rather it is imperative. The responses of the participants have shown that in most South African township schools, there is a pressing need to start comprehensive training for teachers. If awareness about diverse gender identities and sexual orientations is not addressed in schools, many schools are at risk of promoting prejudice and injustice. It is very difficult to overestimate the importance of providing SMT with adequate training on gender identities and sexual orientations. SMT members must possess the skills, resources, and compassion necessary to lead well to establish inclusive, secure, and encouraging learning environments for every learner.

b) Factors that contribute to the SMTs' responses to LGBTQI+ inclusivity.

The researcher shows that SMTs' perceptions of gender diversity and sexual orientation are shaped by various factors, including cultural, religious, and societal norms. According to Netshitangani (2017), these perceptions influence their approach to gender diversity in schools. Despite the legal framework in South Africa supporting LGBTQI+ inclusion, many school leaders remain resistant to fully integrating such inclusivity due to cultural or religious views that see non-heteronormative identities as immoral or unnatural (Francis

&Kuhl, 2022). Religious factors play a significant role in shaping these views. Conservative religious groups, as noted by the Guardian (2024), often regard gender diversity as demonic or sinful, influencing attitudes toward LGBTQI+ learners. According to the researcher such beliefs can hinder efforts to foster an inclusive school culture. Singh (2021) believes that personal values and beliefs are among the most direct influences influencing SMTs' responses to LGBTQI+ cases. LGBTQI+ inclusive policies are more likely to be supported and implemented by leaders who prioritise diversity and equity. These ideals are frequently the result of personal experiences, education, or exposure to various viewpoints (Singh, 2021).

On the other hand, SMT members may oppose or minimise the significance of LGBTQI+ inclusivity if they have traditional or exclusionary beliefs. For instance, some of the interviewed participants hold a strong religious belief, which affects their way of communicating and addressing LGBTQI+ issues in the school. The participants' belief system was evident in their responses, as they were even reluctant to answer some of the questions. However, Red proved that she is totally against queer learners as she was very participative, and her response were vague and diminishing. She responded:

“I have hope that one day God will intervene and remove all the disorders and demonic behaviour in his children. That day, we will all rejoice and say the nation has come back to what we know.”

Red's statement reflects an ongoing belief in the need to "correct" LGBTQI+ individuals, reinforcing harmful religious narratives. Research has debunked the myth that homosexuality is a disorder, yet many religious groups continue to perpetuate these views, leading to discrimination and marginalisation of LGBTQI+ individuals (Msibi, 2018). These harmful ideologies impact queer learners by fostering fear of rejection and stigma. When asked about her role in supporting LGBTQI+ learners, Red responded dismissively, suggesting she cannot engage with LGBTQI+ issues due to her

religious beliefs. This reflects a tendency to prioritize religious beliefs over the professional duty to ensure the safety and dignity of all learners, as Swanepoel and Beyers (2015) argue. The mandate and role of SMT is to ensure that all learners are catered for on the school premises; they have the power to manage inclusivity for all. “However, SMT members, such as Red they fail to uphold that mandate as they put forward their beliefs and forget about their duties”. The researcher deeply understand that everyone has a full right to believe in whatever they want and act accordingly. However, it does not mean they need to infringe on the rights of others.

Red in her responses, she has shown that she does not care about anyone but herself and what she believes in. Such leaders are not fit for the development of the school; they make it difficult to adopt inclusive measures for learners. As much as some participants are not very supportive, participants such as Orange have accepted that being in a space such as the school will expose you to different characters, and it is very important to respect everyone. Orange understands that everyone has a right to express themselves and feel free in their bodies. He responded: *“I do not think it would be fair to impose my belief system on anyone. I have a right to believe what I want, if it does not infringe on the rights of others.”* Despite some negative responses, Orange’s view offers hope, showing that not all participants are narrow-minded. His statement underlines the importance of education and awareness to bridge the knowledge gap about LGBTQI+ issues. Without clear training and awareness of LGBTQI+ issues most SMT members will fail to accept and guide queer learners when they experience difficult issues. Blue’s response further illustrates the need for SMT members to uphold the constitutional protections for all learners, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. Blue stated in her response:

“As much as I identify as a lesbian, I do not discriminate against straight learners in my classroom. I have learners who are queer, and I do not give them preferential treatment because we resonate the same. I must teach each learner equally.”

Blue's response highlights the importance of treating all learners equally, regardless of their sexual orientation. SMT members must adopt a non-normative stance that respects the rights and dignity of every learner, as required by the South African education system. The findings of this study show that many SMT members lack the necessary knowledge to create inclusive environments for LGBTQI+ learners. While some are open to learning, the absence of comprehensive training on LGBTQI+ issues in schools hinders the ability of SMTs to fulfil their responsibilities. As highlighted by Blue, SMT members must adhere to their professional duties to ensure equality and dignity for all. The findings of the research have shown that SMT behavior is greatly influenced by the existence of formal diversity and written inclusion policies. The researcher believes that an atmosphere where LGBTQI+ inclusiveness is accepted is more likely to be fostered by organizations with explicit anti-discrimination rules and inclusive benefits whereby all learners are catered for. In this situation, SMT members are directed by educational frameworks that either demand or promote proactive behaviour. Additionally, members of the SMTs frequently feel encouraged to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights if the school culture and climate values transparency and equity for all learners.

4.3.2. Theme 2: Challenges experienced by SMT members in addressing gender and sexual identities.

The findings of this study reveal that SMTs experience significant challenges in implementing policies that support LGBTQI+ learners. While many South African principals and SMTs have a vision for fostering inclusivity in their schools, they often lack the necessary support from the SGB and the Department of Education. One participant noted that inclusivity requires strategic planning rather than ad hoc measures, emphasising the need for clear, actionable strategies. SMTs play a crucial role in shaping the school culture and fostering inclusivity through leadership, policy development, and daily management decisions. However, while some school leaders are open to inclusivity efforts, they often encounter resistance, whereas others remain rigid

in their approach. When asked about training and professional development opportunities related to LGBTQI+ inclusivity, participants expressed surprise. Yellow mentioned that initiatives had been proposed but lacked institutional support. Yellow stated that principals and School based support team have always been preaching about introducing trainings that will equip them with knowledge that will assist in dealing with queer issues, however none of that has happened. Yellow stated: *“Our government expects us to handle everything on our own; they provide no support. As a school, we do not see what more we can do.”*

Yellow’s response indicates a lack of awareness regarding his responsibility as an SMT member. By placing sole blame on the government and the principal, he overlooks the role of school leadership in ensuring the safety and well-being of both staff and learners. SMTs are integral to school decision-making and must actively introduce initiatives that educate staff on LGBTQI+ issues and inclusivity. Not only is the principal responsible for bringing about initiatives that are educational to the school, but SMT members also need to take part in ensuring inclusivity (Msibi, 2018). As the researcher was conducting interviews, she noticed that most participants are not aware of their responsibilities and duties in the school. They all have a mentality that the principal should be responsible for raising awareness and encouraging inclusivity. This kind of mindset is the one that sets a lot of SMT members backward and make them to be clueless about initiatives they need to introduce to support queer learners and staff in the school premises. Nichols and Brown (2021) have previously shown that schools that have developed awareness campaigns and staff training have fully adopted the inclusive policies as they understand the repercussions of not complying with others’ rights and responsibilities. The above can be attested through Pink’s response:

“The principal attempted to host an ‘It’s My Body, It’s My Life’ campaign for both teachers and learners. However, the program only took place twice and was never fully implemented. Despite this, it was informative and helped us understand different sexual identities, though it remains a new and

challenging topic for some.”

Unlike Yellow, Pink’s response reflects a proactive but constrained approach to inclusivity. Their school has taken initial steps, but resistance from conservative SMT members and school stakeholders has hindered full implementation. This demonstrates that while policies may be introduced, success depends on broader stakeholder support. If the whole team is not up for change and inclusivity, it makes it difficult for other members of the team to maintain the high standard of inclusivity. It is very important to understand that the availability of campaigns brings a lot of unknown awareness to people; it bridges a broader gap that most schools and the system fail to close. It is well known that South Africa holds a very strong legal framework of equality; however, there is little or no practice of what has been said. Schools should be forced to follow the constitution and the SASA by basing their school policies and code of conduct aligning with the above.

a) *Challenges of LGBTQI+ policy implementation in schools.*

The adoption of LGBTQI+ policies in schools represents a significant step toward promoting equality and inclusivity. However, despite legislative and institutional efforts, many schools struggle with implementation. Study participants confirmed that they are far from achieving successful policy enforcement. They reported efforts to combat bullying and discrimination against LGBTQI+ learners but highlighted that resistance from parents and staff remains a major obstacle. Kosciw et al. (2020) state that opposition from various stakeholders, including parents, religious organisations, and teachers, often impedes the establishment of LGBTQI+ policies. Such resistance typically stems from claims that LGBTQI+ policies contradict cultural, religious, or personal beliefs. For instance, Principal Green attempted to revise the school’s dress code policy but encountered resistance due to the school’s Anglican affiliation. He stated: *“I tried to refine our dress code policy, but as an Anglican school, it remains an ongoing challenge. The lack of support from some SMT members further complicates the process.”*

This response highlights how school leaders striving for inclusivity often experience pushback from stakeholders, including governing bodies and staff members with conservative views. Moreover, resource constraints hinder many schools from implementing LGBTQI+ policies. This further shows that not all principals or SMT members are against refining their code of conduct to ensure that they are inclusive. However, they encounter a lot of setbacks. It is very important to understand that a school is an organisation that is not merely controlled by one individual but rather there are different stakeholders that a part and parcel of the decision-making in the school. The lack of a common ground between different school stakeholders is the one that suppresses good initiatives for bringing about school development.

Moreover, schools in underprivileged areas struggle to allocate funds for initiatives such as gender-neutral restrooms, inclusive curricula, and staff training, therefore, it makes it difficult to even allocate funds to train leaders in effective policy development (GLSEN, 2019). If only SMT members could be given enough and necessary training, it could make things easy and policies could be implemented and upheld in schools, however, due to a lack of resources, such issues are deemed unnecessary. Yellow, as a participant from a public school, shares the same sentiments as the one above, she expressed scepticism about prioritising such initiatives: *“We barely have enough bathrooms for all learners. With over 2,500 learners and only six restrooms, I don’t see the urgency for neutral facilities.”* Conversely, Orange offered a more supportive perspective: *“If neutral facilities will help LGBTQI+ learners feel included, then the Department of Education should provide funding for it.”*

These contrasting viewpoints demonstrate inconsistencies in how inclusive policies are perceived and implemented. Meyer (2016) highlights that without clear policy guidelines, school leaders may enforce regulations selectively, further marginalizing LGBTQI+ learners. Therefore, schools must develop written inclusive policies that will encourage and cater for all learners. The researcher believes that school policies need to be integrated along with the

constitution, and they should be checked to ensure that they are effective in promoting inclusivity.

b) *Creating an LGBTQI+ inclusive school environment.*

A key theme emerging from the study is the need to establish an inclusive school environment. While some participants held strong personal beliefs against LGBTQI+ inclusivity, they acknowledged that clear policies would help guide their approach. Creating a safe and supportive learning space for all learners requires comprehensive policies, staff training, and a curriculum that promotes inclusivity (Kosciw et al., 2020). Many participants admitted that their schools are not safe spaces for LGBTQI+ learners. Blue recounted a recent case where a lesbian learner was ridiculed for wearing a skirt:

“It was heart-breaking to see a parent leave with her child because the principal failed to assist. As an SMT member, I understand the school’s code of conduct, but was inclusivity considered when it was drafted? I don’t think so. Many learners are marginalised due to dress code regulations, and this issue needs to be discussed.”

This statement underscores the urgent need for protective school policies. South Africa’s constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination (Clause 9), yet many school leaders fail to uphold these protections. The lack of support from SGBS further complicates efforts to address LGBTQI+ issues. Green emphasised the need for professional development: *“There’s nothing wrong with changing outdated policies, but my staff needs proper training on addressing LGBTQI+ issues. The government focuses on learners but forgets that teachers also need guidance.”*

Green’s response proves that he does not have an issue with changing the school culture just to accommodate LGBTQI+, he believes that the South African government should be of assistance in addressing the issue by simply providing help to the teachers. Green’s response reminds us that even teachers

and SMT members are their own people before they become leaders of the school; therefore, they uphold their narratives about life, which must be respected. Hence it is mandatory to ensure that for a full inclusive school they are provided with guidelines on how to deal with queer issues. All schools must have protective policies that protect all their learners and stakeholders.

c) *A need for school protective policies.*

Fostering an inclusive school climate requires clear and enforceable policies. Schools must ensure their policies explicitly protect LGBTQI+ learners from discrimination and harassment (Russell & Fish, 2016). According to Snapp et al., (2015), schools that have thorough anti-bullying policies are better at reducing victimisation based on gender identity and sexual orientation. It became clear from the interviews that neither of the two institutions had any policies that would protect LGBT+ learners. The importance of putting such policies into place astounded the participants. In response to a question concerning current policies, participant Green said: *“We are working on introducing gender-neutral bathrooms. We also attempted to revise our dress code last year, but as an Anglican school, sponsorship constraints complicate the process.”* The response speaks of something that is yet to be done.

According to Msibi (2018), a first step to inclusivity is a good starting point, however, the researcher was not satisfied, especially having to learn that from a school principal. It shows that the school does not care about the learners, but rather it cares about the money they receive and the school's image. While Green highlighted that they are in a process of making changes to the school policies, Yellow stated that they do not even have a single policy that speaks to inclusivity, *“We have no policies in place and haven't even discussed developing them. We don't know where to start.”* The fact that they do not know where to start in implementing the policy proves that there are bigger issues that the Department of Basic Education need to address by sourcing out funding and support to these schools. The department needs to ensure that it provides proper funding for schools to fully implement inclusive policies. Francis and Kuhl (2022) agree that a successful implementation of

the policies requires a good awareness of what inclusivity entails, and that will require funding for campaigns and trainings to be held, thus, it is necessary for DoE to assist. With the assistance and guidance of the SMT, it will be easy for a school to adapt, as Pink has stated: *“With proper guidance, we could implement LGBTQI+ policies effectively.”* Conversely, while some participants demonstrated openness to policy development, others, like Red, resisted: *“Queer learners don’t need special attention, so there’s no need to refine policies.”* This response reflects a lack of understanding of the purpose of school policies. As Bhana (2014) explains, inclusive policies do not grant preferential treatment but rather ensure equal protection for all learners. De Wet and Van Wyk (2022) emphasise that equality entails equal opportunities regardless of individual characteristics.

All the participants were very eager for a policy development. Through their interviews, it was evident that they believed that a key step in creating an inclusive school environment is the development and enforcement of non-discriminatory policies in the school. Participants further stated that the first step of inclusive schooling should start with the code of conduct. Schools should make sure that discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is expressly forbidden in their codes of conduct. Guidelines on inclusive education are provided by the Department of Basic Education (2018), which highlights the necessity of explicit anti-bullying policies and safeguards for LGBTQI+ learners. To guarantee a shared commitment to inclusion, these rules must be successfully conveyed to parents, teachers, and children (Pillay & Roberts, 2021). Most of the participants shared a common goal of ensuring that protective school policies need to be written to be taken serious by most offenders. This shows that a lot of schools have accepted LGBTQI+, however, they do not have any legally written policies, making it difficult for others to follow. When it comes to establishing policies that address gender inclusivity and sexual orientation concerns, principals and SMT members believe that there is a dearth of guidance (Smith, 2018). It is crucial to remember that principals play a critical role in implementing gender transformation for marginalised groups, which has an impact on learners,

gender inclusion, and inclusion. According to the participants, another contentious area where heteronormative binaries were prevalent in the school was clothing codes and uniforms. Clothing subjectively communicates a person's identity and serves as an example of proper behaviour (Brown & Diale, 2017).

SGBs must confer with school principals when making decisions regarding uniforms following the South African National Guidelines on School (Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, uniforms must not in any way impede or endanger learners, especially regarding bullying and harassment. Despite being straightforward and listing both mandatory and optional items for both boys and girls, the School Uniform Act does not include a clothing code to accommodate gender diversity. Effective school rules that uphold the equality and rights of all learners are necessary for a thriving LGBTQI+ inclusive learning environment. Creating policies allows all learners a voice to speak up and express themselves fearlessly, in addition to protecting LGBTQI+ learners.

4.4. DISCUSSION

The study explored SMTs responses regarding learners who identify as queer within the school premises. To explore the main goal, the study used Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to investigate the aim of the study. The study included a sample of six participants who were part of school management within their schools. The study explored the participants' belief system, religious background, values and their understanding of gender and sexual orientation. Most importantly, the study focused on the decision-making of SMT members when it comes to dealing with issues of LGBTQI+ learners within the school. This chapter further presents the findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory, allowing for a layered understanding of the SMT's responses to sexual and gender diversity in schools. Each level of the model was used to organise and interpret the emergent themes from the data. It is against this backdrop that the study explored attitudes and responses of the six participants selected for this study by

using the socio-ecological theory. Using the socio-ecological model as a lens, this section examined these perceptions and responses at five interconnected levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy.

4.4.1. Individual level

The study's conclusions demonstrated that a variety of personal characteristics, such as religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, subjective experiences, and degree of understanding regarding LGBTQI+ identities, influenced SMT members' perspectives on an individual basis. Most research participants lacked a thorough understanding of the diverse identities learner's exhibit. When it comes to issues that contradict their beliefs, school leaders are extremely narrow-minded and Afrocentric, which makes it difficult for them to accept change and new ideas (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Most study participants have publicly expressed uneasiness or moral quandaries about gender and sexual diversity issues. One SMT member said, for instance: *I try to treat all learners the same, but as a Christian, it is difficult to support something that goes against my beliefs.*” Such responses lead to the conclusion of the study's findings that most SMT members are scared to challenge their belief system, even if it means it will bring change and inclusivity.

The researcher has also concluded that there was a general lack of understanding among the SMT members of the two schools based on the participants' responses. The results demonstrate that most members lack adequate training and understanding because LGBTQI+ inclusion was not covered in the previous training they attended. One of the most significant issues at the individual level is seen to be a lack of training and expertise. Since sexual and gender diversity had never been included in their official schooling or continuing professional development, many SMT members experienced a sense of uncertainty (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). Multiple, interacting levels of impact shape SMT attitudes and responses to LGBTQ+ learners, according to the findings derived from the individual level. Peer pressure, institutional inertia, community, and personal discomfort. Diverse and frequently cautious reactions are a result of policy ambiguity and opposition.

Applying a socio-ecological lens to these dynamics identifies both obstacles and possible avenues for implementing policies and developing more inclusive leaders.

4.4.2. Interpersonal level (Micro-system)

The results have demonstrated that the SMT members' contacts with their colleagues further influenced their responses. While some participants were quite conservative, others were open to new developments and were prepared to adapt to the school. Members who disagreed with the admission of LGBTQI+ learners had an impact on others around them. The interpretation and application of inclusive policies were greatly impacted by the interpersonal interactions within SMTs. Teachers were more likely to implement progressive practices in schools where senior leaders set an example of inclusivity and fostered an accepting environment (Calvard, O'Toole & Hardwick, 2020). The study's conclusions indicate that inclusive teaching in schools is more noticeable when leaders at schools encourage their employees to participate in learning about the many genders and sexual orientations present in the school. For instance, if an SMT creates gender-neutral toilets or allows learners to wear uniforms aligned with their identity, it reflects positive inclusion.

4.4.3. Institutional level (Meso-system)

At this level of the paradigm, the significance of school culture and the school-based support system cannot be overstated. According to research, schools that implement an active, inclusive curriculum or approach see an increase in learners' attention spans and enjoyment of their learning environment. The participants stated that most learners leave school because they are not present. It is challenging for learners to express themselves in the two schools under investigation because there are no active committees dealing with issues of diverse genders and sexual orientations. Most research participants were reluctant to learn more about diversity because schools do not have school committees, while those who were willing to learn said they depend more on Life Orientation teachers to teach them the fundamentals of gender diversity.

The interviewees stated that they frequently felt unsure about how to react when specific resources were unavailable, particularly when it came to situations concerning transgender learners' usage of restrooms or uniforms.

4.4.4. Community level (Exosystem)

The study's conclusions showed that when the SMT members attempted to include gender diversity in the school, they experienced many obstacles from the larger community since parents wanted the natural standards to be upheld. Participants said that because certain school stakeholders opposed the idea of varied gender and sexual orientations, it proved extremely difficult for them to develop an inclusive school atmosphere. The study's conclusions indicate that it is challenging to implement change in an organisation that is inclusive of all stakeholders due to divergent opinions regarding diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. One participant noted: *The parents here are very conservative. They would not support us if we allowed a boy to wear a skirt, even if that is how he identifies.*” The response proves that resistance does not only come from the inside, but also that stakeholders from outside resist the change and adaptation of recent changes. This finding reflects broader tensions in South African society between constitutional values and prevailing social norms (Judge, 2018).

4.4.5. Policy level (Macro-system)

The replies from the participants indicate that school leaders' noncompliance with the SASA's requirements results in a notable gap between policy and practice. Disparities in knowledge, interpretation, and implementation of the DBE's policies which are intended to protect all learners from discrimination were discovered by SMTs. The present protective policies were only vaguely grasped by many responders. Due to a lack of professional development and policy dissemination, local school practices and national intents differed. In schools where SMTs had read the DBE standards or attended pertinent training, the road to inclusive practices was clearer. But policy awareness was often only at surface level. An inclusive school environment depends on clear dissemination, ability building, and accountability mechanisms, according to

the study's findings. Policies remain symbolic rather than transformative without them, and the gaps between theory and practice are left unattended.

a) Diverse gender identities

During the data collection process, it became noticeably clear that most SMT members are not well informed about diverse gender identities and sexual orientation. The definitions and understanding that they gave when interviewed it was too narrow as it failed to explicitly unpack the definition of gender and sexuality to its level that matches the study. Out of all the participants, only two participants proved to be knowledgeable about diverse gender and sexual orientations while others seemed to not care about the existence of queer learners. The data analysis further proved that sexuality and gender has appeared as complex and difficult to be understood mostly by individuals who have reached their old age. This is evident in the perpetuated dominant constructions expressing that homosexuality was a Western concept and that it is un-African.

The term “diverse gender identities” in this context hold different meaning for individuals. The participants of the study shared different understanding of gender and how they viewed diverse genders. In this everyday life recognising and embracing a range of gender identities in schools has become crucial to setting up safe and fair learning however it seems like most SMT members are not well informed with knowledge. To most people gender is a simple binary construct of male and female as it is most likely perceived, however with the knowledge provided in this everyday life gender goes beyond a construct of male and female. Gender is a range that includes those who identify as transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gay and lesbian, among others. Due to assigned sex at birth, these identities might not conform to social norms. The social norms would be to react and act according to your assigned sex. Relating this to the participants responses they also hold the same mindset about gender; they believe that gender is formed of male and female. Such thinking makes it hard for schools to be accommodative to queer learners. Throughout the data collection it was clear that most secondary schools fail to

cater for LGBTQ+ learners due to lack of information.

The findings reveal that SMT responses to diverse gender inclusion in South African schools are shaped by a complex interplay of personal beliefs, professional roles, peer influence, institutional culture, community norms, and policy frameworks. The socio-ecological approach demonstrates that inclusive change cannot rest solely on individual will; rather, it requires systemic support, community dialogue, and clearer policy implementation.

4.5. SUMMARY

The research questions of this study have been addressed by the qualitative research findings reported in this chapter. Participants' opinions and reactions on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners through school safety regulations were the main topic. Three themes and their sub- themes were constructed in this chapter to help address the research questions. The SMTs' perceptions and reactions about a range of gender identities and sexual orientations were identified by the first theme. It was evident that SMT members' answers were influenced by their ignorance and that their beliefs influenced how they perceived the situation, with some appearing to support inclusion while others did not.

The second theme focused on the difficulties SMT members have while tackling issues pertaining to sexual orientation and gender diversity. Issues pertaining to the successful execution of policies were brought up, and solutions were explored. Finally, the third theme was to create the protective policies that would be required to create an inclusive educational atmosphere. The summary, findings, and suggestions for additional research are presented in the following chapter, which wraps up the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. INTRODUCTION

An outline of the earlier chapters, a discussion of the research results and answers to the research questions, practical and policy consequences, and

recommendations for additional research will all be covered in this chapter. The purpose of the study was to investigate SMTs' perceptions regarding the inclusion of learners with different sexual orientations and gender identities in South African classrooms. The chapter goes on to list the study's advantages and disadvantages, particularly with the applicability of the methodology and the socio-ecological theory paradigm. Suggestions for further research are given.

5.1. OVERVIEW OF THEMES

The study was guided by three critical themes:

- How do SMTs understand and interpret policies on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ learners?
- What challenges do SMTs experience when implementing these policies?
- How do implemented school policies impact LGBTQI+ learners?

It was very important to think about whether the study's overall findings could sufficiently address and answer the above significant issues or concerns to form an appropriately and satisfactorily drawn conclusion. As a result, it became essential to revisit the results. The following summary discusses the key findings.

5.1.1. How do SMTs understand and interpret policies on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ learners?

This response highlights a basic misinterpretation of the goal of school policy. According to Rothmann and Simmonds (2015), inclusive policies guarantee equal protection and chances for every learner rather than giving them special treatment. Participants in the interviews showed a strong commitment to policy development, recognising that the establishment and implementation of non-discriminatory rules is a crucial first step in creating an inclusive school climate. Numerous participants underlined that the school's code of conduct must serve as the foundation for inclusive education. In these codes, schools

should expressly forbid discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

Guidelines on inclusive education are provided by the Department of Basic Education (2018), emphasising the need for thorough anti-bullying procedures and protections for LGBTQI+ learners. However, to promote a shared commitment to inclusivity, these rules must be effectively conveyed to parents, teachers, and children (Pillay & Roberts, 2021). Most participants underlined the necessity of explicit, written regulations to safeguard LGBTQI+ learners and hold discriminatory behaviour accountable. Although many schools have accepted LGBTQI+ inclusion in theory, enforcement is difficult due to the absence of legally binding regulations. Concerns regarding the lack of explicit policy mandates to steer their choices regarding gender inclusivity and sexual orientation were voiced by principals and SMT members (Smith, 2018). Additionally, principals are essential in promoting gender transition in schools, especially for queer learners. Participants of the study noted that dress regulations and school uniforms are especially divisive topics because they frequently perpetuate heteronormative dichotomies.

According to Brown and Diale (2017), clothing is a representation of identity and self-expression that shapes ideas of acceptable behaviour and societal norms. SGBs are required to work with school principals to create uniform rules by the South African National Guidelines on School Uniforms (School Uniform Act) (Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, learners shall not be harmed, subjected to prejudice, or made more susceptible to bullying and harassment because of their school uniforms. However, because it upholds a binary distinction between uniforms for boys and girls, the School Uniform Act does not specifically address gender diversity. Gender-nonconforming learners experience obstacles and have less freedom to be who they are because of this divide, which perpetuates strict gender norms. The findings also showed that one of the study's participating schools had no inclusive rules in its code of conduct. Cultural and religious beliefs were identified by the

SMTs as major obstacles to establishing a secure and encouraging learning environment for LGBTQI+ learners. SMT members showed a lack of understanding of their responsibility in promoting equality and protection for all learners when asked about inclusive policies, expressing doubt about their usefulness.

These results demonstrate that resolving homophobia and discrimination against LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse learners remains a structural concern in many schools, especially in township regions. School leaders' prejudices and misunderstandings make it even harder to advance gender inclusivity and shield LGBTQI+ learners from prejudice. Most participants in the interviews acknowledged the significance of putting policies in place that guarantee the safety and inclusion of all learners, despite these obstacles. According to one of the participants who identified as a school principal, their institution is making efforts to create an inclusive learning environment, which includes plans to install gender-neutral restrooms. This shows that although some schools have difficulty being inclusive, others are making significant efforts to provide more welcoming and affirming learning environments for all learners.

5.1.2. What challenges do SMTs experience when implementing these policies?

There is frequently strong opposition to implementing rules in schools that help LGBTQI+ learners. The results of the study show that although some members of the SMT are dedicated to promoting inclusivity, they usually encounter resistance from other school stakeholders, such as parents, community members, and SGBs. The obstacles that prevent protective school policies from being implemented effectively are caused by institutional, individual, and societal issues. One of the study's main conclusions is that many township schools are in areas where LGBTQI+ inclusion is not supported by traditional, religious, or cultural values. It is challenging for schools to enact and implement rules that safeguard LGBTQI+ learners because of these ingrained cultural norms. Cultural norms are a major obstacle, especially at schools located in hetero-cisnormativity neighbourhoods where

LGBTQI+ rights initiatives frequently encounter opposition. Both overt opposition and covert exclusionary behaviours that support an atmosphere that is not inclusive might be examples of this resistance. Furthermore, a lack of accountability mechanisms usually compromises the effectiveness of protective policy enforcement. Because of this, there are frequently no repercussions for teachers or administrators who break these rules, which encourages a culture of impunity and deters reporting.

Furthermore, SMT members frequently incorporate their personal views into their leadership positions, perhaps ignoring the LGBTQI+ learners' constitutional rights in the process. The survey also found that inclusive policies are either non-existent, ambiguous, or applied inconsistently in many schools. Participants voiced concerns about the Department of Education's lack of direction and assistance in putting into practice successful inclusion policies. It was challenging for many SMT members to interact meaningfully with LGBTQI+ learners and successfully resolve their difficulties because they had never been trained on how to handle LGBTQI+ issues in their schools. Notwithstanding these challenges, participants agreed that inclusive policies are essential for promoting diversity and opposing heteronormative dominance in schools (Govender, 2018). They acknowledged, meanwhile, that they lacked the resources and expertise required to carry out such measures successfully. According to the study's conclusions, conquering these obstacles calls for: Clear policy guidelines from the Department of Education, professional growth and training for educators and school administrators; community involvement to dispel prejudice and advance inclusivity; and strong leadership to guarantee the effective execution of inclusive policies and the safety of all learners (Butler, 2019).

5.1.3. The Impact of School Policies on LGBTQI+ Learners

The well-being, academic achievement, and general school experience of LGBTQI+ learners are significantly impacted by the adoption of school policies, whether they are inclusive or supportive. Their safety, mental health, and sense of belonging in the school setting are all impacted by these policies.

The results show that inclusive policies have largely beneficial effects on schools. Supportive policies lessen bullying and prejudice by fostering a more equal and affirming learning environment. Participants saw that LGBTQI+ learners are better able to concentrate on their academics and achieve better academic results when they feel protected and accepted. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that inclusive school settings reduce LGBTQI+ youths' risk of suicide and self-harm. In addition to helping learners, inclusive policies also improve the whole school climate. Learners are more likely to be motivated, involved, and successful academically when they feel accepted and safe. Schools that promote diversity also improve their standing as forward-thinking establishments that put social justice and the welfare of learners first.

5.2. SUMMARY OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

The first chapter discussed the study's subject: "Queering South Africa's Protective School Policy: Exploring School Management Team (SMT) Responses to the Inclusion of Learners with Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities in South African Schools." It gave a summary of the problem description, goals, research questions, background, and justification for the investigation. The study's methodology, research design, and theoretical framework were also briefly covered.

A review of the literature that matched the goals of the study was reported in Chapter 2. The socio-ecological theory was examined, providing an analytical framework for comprehending how SMT members reacted to LGBTQI+ inclusion. According to the reviewed literature, many SMT members have unfavourable opinions towards LGBTQI+ learners and frequently use their cultural and religious convictions as an excuse. The chapter also demonstrated how heteronormativity is pervasive in South African schools, fostering unfriendly learning environments for LGBTQI+ learners who frequently experience victimisation, bullying, and harassment (Bhana, 2014).

The research technique was described in Chapter 3, with a focus on the study's

qualitative approach. This method was chosen to document the individual viewpoints and experiences of SMT members. An interpretive paradigm, which gives participants' interpretations, perceptions, and lived experiences priority, was used in this study. The chapter also included study constraints, ethical issues, thematic analysis, data collection methods, and sample methodologies. Purposively chosen participants participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis.

The study's results, arranged into major themes and sub-themes, were presented, and analysed in Chapter 4. The attitudes of SMT members towards LGBTQI+ learners, their experiences with inclusive policies, and implementation challenges were all examined in this chapter. Three important research questions served as the framework for the conversation, which finally produced suggestions for developing socially just and inclusive schools.

A summary of the study's major conclusions in answer to the primary research questions is given in Chapter 5. Additionally, it provides suggestions for creating inclusive learning environments in schools and guaranteeing that LGBTQI+ protective measures are successfully implemented.

5.3. EVALUATION

The purpose of this study was to explore how SMT members addressed LGBTQI+ inclusion concerns in schools. The study's objectives regarding inclusivity in South Africa. Secondary schools have mostly been met in this study's investigation; therefore, I will now assess whether the study was carried out in compliance with the stability (reliability) and credibility (validity) principles discussed in Chapter 3.

5.3.1. Credibility: Authenticity

The hermeneutic spiral was used in this investigation. It was a useful instrument in guaranteeing the validity of the research investigation, even though it did not fit the parameters of eco-logical theory. Aronson, as cited in Thani (2014), advises interpreting the information in its most unadulterated

form while preserving its integrity, rather than altering its meaning. In keeping with the study's goal of examining the participants' experiences, I always tried to make sure that each participant's unique story was told using the technique. Otherwise, changing the information gathered from the interviews would not benefit the current investigation.

5.3.2. Stability: Consistency

Since the study noted that SMT responses formed by participants may vary based on their belief system, weaknesses and strengths at a given time, the consistency or authenticity of the results is limited to the current study and cannot be guaranteed over time to similar findings in other studies. Therefore, no consistency can ensure that a different sample will yield findings that are comparable to the varied findings in the current sample. I therefore acknowledge that the dynamics of SMT roles and the results may evolve.

Due to its flexibility as a data collection method, the semi-structured interview used in this study can produce a wide range of results. Future research would be further impacted by this since various analysis techniques could produce wildly disparate outcomes. The results of this investigation are therefore not generalisable due to most of SMT members being bias and the sample size was small.

In addition to the credibility and stability of the study, I identified two major strengths in the current research:

- Firstly, the transcribing and analysing of the data provided as much of the participants' account of events as possible. The transcription provided verbatim accounts of the participants' responses to questions, projecting their thoughts and words clearly. Allowing for a complete analysis of data.
- Secondly, I was always aware of my feelings towards the research process, allowing myself to have insight into the impact I had on the research process.

5.4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

South Africa is unique in the world because of its constitutional guarantees of rights related to gender identity and sexual orientation. These safeguards are intended to apply to schools as well, laying the groundwork for inclusive school regulations. These rights are expressly protected by the nation's constitution, and numerous non-governmental organisations have urged schools to modify their LGBTQI+ policies to reflect this. South Africa boasts a robust legal framework aimed at protecting LGBTQI+ learners. Key policies include:

- South African Schools Act (1996). Prohibits discrimination on any grounds and mandates equal access to education.
- White Paper 6 (2001). Promotes inclusive education by adapting curricula, teaching methods, and school environments to meet diverse needs.
- Western Cape Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Guidelines (2020). The first provincial-level guidelines explicitly addressing LGBTQI+ inclusivity in schools.

5.4.1. Policy Implications

Notwithstanding South Africa's progressive legal system, LGBTQI+ learners' real-world experiences show a concerning discrepancy between policy and reality. According to research, schools mainly fall short in teaching teachers and learners to respect different genders and sexual orientations. Instead, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia are still encouraged in South African textbooks and schools. The SMTs' perceptions of sexual orientation and gender diversity were influenced by medical models, religious convictions, and cultural norms. These perceptions, in turn, influenced how they navigated "safe" learning settings for individuals with different gender identities.

The study's conclusions demonstrate that the South African constitution contains inclusive policies. Although the constitution (section 9) guarantees

everyone's rights, research has revealed that South African schools lack inclusive practices. Since most school leaders have not embraced equality and implemented inclusive policies in their institutions, the Ministry of Education and Training must immediately begin the process of adopting and implementing school policies that incorporate school ethos and forbid discrimination based on gender and sexual diversity. Any learner will feel more comfortable if the school has anti-discrimination policies. The adoption of school protective measures ensures the safety and wellbeing of all school stakeholders on school property, in addition to safeguarding learners who are LGBTQI+.

5.4.2. Practical Implications

The results showed that SMT members knew little to nothing about gender and sexual diversity, as seen by their poor comprehension of frequently used sexuality terminology. To give them the confidence to carry out educational programs that encourage learners to be accepting of gender and sexual diversity, it is advised that all teachers and school leaders complete pre-service and in-service training. Topics like gender and sexual diversity, a policy protecting LGBTQI+ learners and how to put such a policy into practice to stop unjust discrimination. These programs ought to incorporate programming based on sexual orientation or gender. Additionally, these programs need to consider the different social traits of school-age children and how these traits affect how they perceive and comprehend their sexualities (Francis, 2022). If the Department of Basic Education provides teachers with the resources and support, they require to establish inclusive policies in their schools, the results also demonstrate that teachers are open to learning.

5.5. IMPLEMENTATION GAP

For LGBTQI+ learners, the effects of this implementation gap are profound and far-reaching. On paper, schools have protective policies, but in practice, they are often unsafe places where these children are victimised, harassed, and bullied. Research evidence by Qaqamba (2017) suggests that LGBTQI+ learners have high dropout rates, as well as alarming rates of substance abuse

and homelessness. When regulations fail to safeguard vulnerable learners, the tragic story of Nare Mphale serves as a vivid example of the potential for severe harm. One of the first transgender teenagers to be compensated by local education authorities for gender identity discrimination was Mphale, a transgender youth who experienced severe transphobic harassment at school. Among the startling infractions in her case was the principal of the school telling her classmates to "feel her crotch to 'find out what is there'". These cases demonstrate how serious human rights breaches in schools can result from the improper application of protective regulations and practices. Such cases have forced the South African education sector to investigate the implementation of policy versus practice.

5.5.1. Policy vs Practice

South Africa's progressive constitution guarantees protection based on sexual orientation and gender identity, yet a significant implementation gap exists in schools. Initiatives from the provinces have been developed to address these gaps. Most notably, the Western Cape Department of Education created what it says are the first complete standards on sexual orientation and gender identity in South Africa. With a special focus on transgender learners who encounter major obstacles in conventionally binary schools, these principles seek to establish more welcoming and encouraging learning environments. The project is a significant step in closing the gap between the reality on the ground and the protections provided by the constitution. The Western Cape Education Department's guidelines serve as a model for inclusive practices, advocating for teacher training, LGBTQI+ friendly curricula, and accommodations like choosing uniforms aligned with gender identity. These guidelines demonstrate how provincial initiatives can bridge gaps left by national policies. Inconsistencies in practice persist despite these frameworks. For instance, many schools enforce cisnormativity clothing codes, lack gender-neutral restrooms, and neglect to include LGBTQI+ themes in their curricula. Teacher training programs rarely handle gender and sexual diversity comprehensively. The persistence of heterosexist norms in school environments is made possible by these discrepancies.

5.6. CRITIQUE OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Although there were advantages to the study but there was also one disadvantage to the current study:

- The methodology, namely qualitative research, was time-consuming. The steps involved required intense involvement from the sample, the data collection, transcription, data analysis and the writing-up. The proper execution of these steps was necessary to ensure that the findings were representative of the research process.

5.7. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study produced several theoretical suggestions, legislative recommendations for creating gender inclusive schools, and recommendations that could help SMT members lead gender change initiatives more effectively:

- Future studies should incorporate perspectives not only from SMT members but also from teachers, LGBTQI+ learners, parents, and community stakeholders. This broader approach can provide a more holistic understanding of how SMT actions impact the school ecosystem.
- Consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine how SMT attitudes and practices evolve, particularly after policy interventions or training. This can reveal patterns of change, resistance, or reinforcement of existing norms.
- Further research is needed to assess the extent and quality of LGBTQI+-related training provided to SMTs. Identifying professional development needs can guide more targeted capacity-building initiatives.
- Future research should examine the alignment (or lack thereof) between national/provincial education policies and school-level practices. This analysis can highlight gaps in implementation and offer insights into systemic barriers.
- Research is needed in the field of fluidity of sexual identity in South Africa, stemming from the observation made in the current study, that sexual identity is strongly perceived as a permanent identity, but as we have

identified in the findings of the current study, this may not necessarily be so.

- Finally, research should be conducted to educate black communities about the rights of homosexuals in South Africa.

5.8. CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined a variety of interrelated factors from across the socio-ecological spectrum influence SMT responses to the inclusion of queer learners. Although South African policy frameworks are inclusive, their efficacy is compromised when cultural and personal barriers are not addressed. It is necessary to take a multifaceted, systemic approach that changes not only the policy environment but also community involvement, school culture, and leadership. The study's conclusion, an analysis of its shortcomings, and recommendations were further discussed in the last chapter.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A



**Zertifikat
Certificat**

**Certificado
Certificate**

Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale
Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants

Certificat de formation - Training Certificate

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NTSOAKI Mokoena

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[REV: 20220217]



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER:

PROJECT TITLE

Queering South Africa's protective school policy: Exploring School Management Team (SMT) responses to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in South African schools.

INVESTIGATOR

Roseline Ntsoaki Mokoena.

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

WSoE

DATE CONSIDERED

09 September 2024

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL

Low Risk

EXPIRY DATE

Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

25 September 2024

CHAIRPERSON


Dr. Lawan Abdulhamid

cc: Dr Glodean Thani.

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.


Signature

Date

26 / 09 / 2024



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	25 July 2024
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2024– 30 September 2024 2024/217
Name of Researcher:	Mokoena RT
Address of Researcher:	5042 Four seasons Drieziek 3/ Orange Farm
Telephone Number:	078 498 4048
Email address:	2144745@students.wits.ac.za
Research Topic:	Exploring School Management Team(SMT) Responses to the inclusion of Learners with diverse sexual Orientations and gender identities in South African Schools
Name of University:	Wits
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	2 secondary schools
District/s/HO	Johannesburg South

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za



ANNEXURE D: CONSENT FORM

Title of project: Queering South Africa's protective school policy: Exploring School Management Team (SMT) responses to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in South African schools.

Name of researcher: Roseline Ntsoaki Mokoena

Name of Supervisor: Dr Glodean Thani

I _____,
 ___, agree to participate in this research project. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I *YES* *NO*
 understand what this study is about.

I understand that I can volunteer to take part in *YES* *NO*
 the study

I agree that the interview activity may be *YES* *NO*
 audio recorded

I agree that my participation will remain
 anonymous (my name will not be used by the
 researcher in their research report and future
 publications

I agree that direct quotations from my
 interview may be used by the researcher in
 their research report

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

.....(signature)

..... (name of researcher/person seeking
consent)

..... (date)

APPENDIX F



ANNEXURE D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This is the semi-structured interview schedule. It contains questions that will be posed to participants as well as probing cues in parentheses that will ensure that participants understand and respond posed by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative research method widely used in various academic and professional fields. They offer a balance between the rigidity of structured interviews and the flexibility of unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by the use of a predetermined set of open-ended questions, which guide the conversation but allow for additional questions to emerge based on the respondent's answers. This approach provides a framework for the interview while leaving room for exploration of new topics that arise during the discussion. Encourage participants to respond honestly and appropriately and remind them of their confidentiality, anonymity and explain how you will protect their data through password-safe software. The interview will take approximately 30- 45 minutes.

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

This section contains information that provides background information about the participant. The name of the participant will be concealed in the report to protect the participant's identity.

1. Race:
2. Gender identity:
3. Highest level of qualification:
4. Subject taught:
5. Can you briefly describe your role in the School Management Team (SMT) and how long you have been in this position?
6. How would you describe the current policies and practices in your school regarding diversity and inclusion?

SECTION B: BELIEF SYSTEM

In this section, beliefs relate to the participants' religious/traditional/cultural beliefs.q111

1. How would you describe your belief system?
2. How long have you ascribed to this belief system?
3. What does your belief system say about gender diversity (if anything)?
4. How does your role as a believer differ from your role expectation at work relating to gender diversity (if at all)?

SECTION C: Understanding of School Policy on LGBTQIA+

In this section, the questions aim to interrogate whether the educator is aware of the impact of their beliefs on their practice (if at all).

1. What is your understanding of the national and school policies related to the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities?
2. Can you describe how these policies are communicated to staff, learners, and parents in your school?
3. In your opinion, how well does your school's policy protect and support LGBTQIA+ learners?
4. Which South African legislation advocates for gender diversity?
5. Have you encountered situations where the school had to address issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity among learners? If yes, could you describe one or two instances?
6. How have you, as a member of the SMT, responded to such situations?

SECTION D: POLICY AWARENESS AND SCHOOL INITIATIVE PROGRAMS

In this section, the questions aim to explore whether the educator is aware of the Legislation that promotes gender diversity and their school policies.

1. How do you think the broader school community (teachers, parents, learners) views the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ learners?
2. How comfortable do you feel discussing issues of sexual orientation and gender identity with staff or learners? What factors influence this comfort level?
3. In your opinion, what are the key factors that enable or hinder the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ learners in your school?

SECTION E: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND TRAINING

In this section, the questions aim to explore whether the educator is aware of the school environment when it comes to dealing with LGBTQ and the training they need.

1. What type of training or professional development opportunities are provided to staff regarding LGBTQ inclusivity?
2. How often are these training sessions conducted, and who is responsible for organizing them?
3. Do you feel that the school has adequate resources (e.g., policies, training, support systems) to address the needs of LGBTQIA+ learners? Why or why not?
4. What steps has the management team taken to foster a more inclusive and supportive culture for queer students?
5. Can you provide examples of how inclusivity is promoted in everyday school activities and interactions?

SECTION F: Evaluation and Improvement

This sections explore possible solutions that can make the school more inclusive

1. What are your recommendations for improving the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in your school?
2. What role do you think the SMT plays in shaping an inclusive school culture, and what more can be done at the leadership level?
3. How do you envision the future of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in South African schools, and what steps can be taken to ensure all learners feel safe and accepted?

APPENDIX H: TURN IT IN REPORT

Ntsoaki_Final copy corrections.docx

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APPENDIX I: EDITOR'S LETTER

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10 March 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I certify that I have edited the Master's dissertation:

**Queering South Africa's protective school policy: Exploring School
Management Team (SMT) responses to the inclusion of learners with diverse
sexual orientations and gender identities in South African schools**

by

Roseline Ntsoaki Mokoena

However, the correction of all errors/missing information remains the responsibility of
the author.



G. C. HANNANT (BA HED)