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Toward promoting resilience of gender and sexually diverse youth in South African rural school ecologies

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Introduction: Gender and sexually diverse youth in schools experience exclusion, which detrimentally affects their ability to cope with the consequences of minority stress and may lead to absenteeism or dropout. The purpose of the study is to highlight a pressing need for inclusive policies and practices to aid in enabling LGBTQ+ learners in schools.

Methods: This paper explores how multiple systems intersect to promote a sense of inclusion and engagement within the school environment and impact the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in a rural school setting. This paper presents findings from a qualitative interpretive phenomenological study with twelve purposively selected self-identifying LGBTQ+ youth residing in a rural South African community. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Results: This study shows the significance of teacher emotional support, addressing homophobic bullying, moving away from gender-based uniform prescriptions and designating some school bathrooms as gender-neutral to LGBTQ+ learners' resilience.

Conclusion: The findings of this study demonstrate how certain schools in rural settings employ innovative methods to support LGBTQ+ learners despite limited resources and the absence of comprehensive, inclusive policies on gender and sexually diverse learners. The findings have implications for LGBTQ+ learners in rural community schools worldwide. Future longitudinal studies could focus on how school ecologies inclusive of teachers, parents and the wider community can foster the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners, particularly in rural community contexts.

KEYWORDS

gender and sexual diversity, hetero-and cisnormativity, LGBTQ+ youth, multisystemic resilience, rural school settings

1 Introduction

The South African Human Rights Commission brought a case to court on 14 November 2016 involving Nare Mphela, a transgender woman from Ga-Matlala village in Limpopo Province in South Africa. Nare's case involves the harassment suffered by Nare from the school principal, Kgabo Francis Manamela. Manamela instructed other students to cease referring to Nare as "sister" and to subject her to harassment in the school restrooms. Additionally, she encouraged them to touch her genital area and investigate its contents. The principal also forbade her from singing hymns during the school assembly and would utilize physical punishment. After winning the court case, the Limpopo Department of Education in South Africa was instructed to compensate Mphela with

R60,000. This fee includes R20,000 for her psychological costs and an additional R20,000 to support her education completion (Botha, 2017). The Nare case and others exemplify the South African broader education system's lack of readiness and reluctance to implement inclusive education policies in rural schools effectively.

The draft guidelines on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in Public Schools, provided by the Western Cape Department, faced criticism from multiple institutions (Western Cape Government, 2020). The Equal Education Law Centre (2020, p. 3) states that the guidelines provided by the Western Cape Department of Education employ language such as “may,” “it is recommended,” or “it is encouraged,” which diminishes the potential obligations and responsibilities of governing bodies and principals. This language reduces their role to mere recommendations and suggestions rather than directives. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the South African National Education Department to develop and enforce proactive policies that will support the resilience of LGBTQ+ students, particularly in high-risk environments like rural communities.

Presently, the South African Constitution, the South African Schools Act, and the inclusive education White Paper 6 are legal frameworks that safeguard the human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. According to the Bill of Rights (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6), in Chapter 2, section 9(3) of the Republic of South Africa's constitution, it is prohibited from engaging in discriminatory practices based on gender, sex, or sexual orientation (Department of Justice, 1996). The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) attempted to produce the draft guidelines regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) to address issues surrounding bullying, uniforms and gender-neutral bathrooms (DBE, 2022). However, the DBE's attempts were opposed by several African Christian Rights organizations citing that they are godless and violate conservative Christian values (Francis and McEwen, 2023).

Furthermore, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 explicitly forbids discriminatory practices within educational institutions. White Paper 6 of 2001 defines inclusive education as a dynamic process that entails modifying attitudes, behavior, teaching methods, curricula, and environment to cater to all learners' requirements (Department of Education, 2001, p. 7). Ubisi (2021) expresses concerns about the lack of coherent inclusive school policies, which leads to uncertainties, omissions, and inconsistencies. These concerns allow school governing bodies, including single-sex, faith-based, or religiously conservative schools, to determine what they consider appropriate and whether to promote specific gender expressions and sexual orientations. Moreover, researchers, including Bhana (2014), Bhana and Mayeza (2016), and Francis and Kuhl (2020), have observed how the broader education macro system contributes to the continuation of compulsory hetero-cisnormativity by influencing school culture and policy. This means that policy reform to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ learners is an urgent need. Hetero cisnormativity is a worldwide phenomenon which is prevalent in rural communities. Discriminatory practices against LGBTQ+ youth including school going learners have been a global concern (Wike et al., 2022). There has been a shift in the international community toward policy reform and protection of the human rights of LGBTQ+ students to support resilience constructions.

Resilience encompasses a range of protective mechanisms that are culturally and contextually bound (Ungar, 2015). For example, adaptation and growth mechanisms in resilience protect against maladjustment in the face of severe risks to life and function (Wright and Masten, 2010). Furthermore, internal and external adaptability, as well as the ability to manage and harmonize multiple domains of functioning, are critical to resilience (Masten, 2014). Ecologically, resilience includes interconnected protective characteristics at individual and contextual levels (Ungar, 2015). The ecological study of resilience stresses the capability of a specific ecology to provide resources that are relevant and dependable to optimize wellbeing in adversity (Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021). In addition, the multisystemic perspective examines interactions between multiple systems in an ecological context (Ungar, 2021). The multisystemic resilience approach foregrounds situational and cultural factors that shape protective factors and processes. In this sense, a network of protective and promotive factors and processes across biological, psychological, social, structural, institutional, and environmental systems fosters the resilience process (Theron et al., 2022). Also, direct systems (parent, teacher, peer relational supports, antibullying school policies, uniform policies, and gender non-binary bathrooms) or indirect systems (national Department of Education inclusive policies) support LGBTQ+ youth resilience trajectory in school settings (Francis and McEwen, 2023; Theron et al., 2023).

To this end, research (i.e., Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a) from the international community strongly suggests a more holistic approach in intervention to LGBTQ+ student issues involving multiple systems such as whole stakeholder involvement including parents and the wider community, such is consistent with multisystemic resilience approaches. In a multi-country study conducted by Ioverno (2023) involving 66,851 LGBTI youth aged 15–24 from 30 European countries investigating whether national inclusive policies represent protective factors for LGBTI youth in Europe. This study shows that youth who have multiple protective policies in their countries have fewer experiences of minority stress and have a higher degree of life satisfaction. This study has also observed the protective role of inclusive school curricula and supportive teacher relationships. Similarly, in the United States studies such as Day et al. (2019) and McDermott et al. (2023a,b) show that policies such as antibullying at the school level and national policies are associated with a positive school climate for LGBTQ+ learners. Hence, there is a global need to move toward inclusion and promotion of the resilience of LGBTQ+ school-going youth. There is a paucity in the resilience literature particularly in South Africa on the positive impact of affirmation in schools particularly on how schools can enable LGBTQ+ learners resilience. This research revealed the positive impact of affirmative practices in rural school ecologies.

2 Theoretical framework

The current study draws on the Multisystemic Resilience Framework (Ungar, 2021). The multisystemic resilience framework was used as a lens to explore and understand social and environmental supersystems within a school environment co-facilitate LGBTQ+ youth resilience processes. The paper

conceptualizes resilience-enabling ecological resources as reliable, dependable and contextually meaningful resources that promote normative functioning within the delimited study context (Ungar, 2011). Within the school context such could be the presence of social, structural, institutional and cultural resources that foster inclusion of sexual and gender diversity.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Research paradigm

Socio-constructivist and critical theory served as paradigmatic lenses that guided this research perspective (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Socio-constructivist epistemology explores the participants' views rather than relying on objective knowledge (Becvar and Becvar, 2014). Furthermore, critical theory, in its endeavors to look at history, societal position, and prominent culture, influences the understanding of reality by looking at how individuals are positioned in the community (Sankofa, 2021). The critical theory advocates for the inclusion and social justice of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ youth (Jackson et al., 2018). From a critical theory perspective access to resilience-enabling resources by LGBTQ+ youth that foster school engagement is necessary to promote their human rights. School ecologies should foster inclusion by creating an affirming environment and providing resources that would promote school engagement of gender and sexual minorities.

3.2 Research design

This study followed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological research design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Interpretive phenomenological research design refers to a study of personal or lived experiences by the researcher. Using this design, the researchers were able to delve deeper and elicit a rich and in-depth understanding and interpretations of a phenomenon experienced by research participants (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The phenomenological research approach emphasizes the validity of the way things appear to the consciousness of the participants, as well as the validity of an individual's perceptions and subjective meanings of the experiences of the research participants (Engward and Goldspink, 2020; Miller et al., 2018).

3.3 Sampling procedure

Twelve participants aged 16–30 years, residing or having grown up in Free State province of South Africa in a rural area, and who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other identities indicated by a plus sign (LGBTQ+) were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling procedures (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method selective or subjective sampling that the researcher uses to decide on the population members suitable for a study. In this snowball sampling procedure, initially, participants (using purposive sampling) recruited other participants who met the

inclusion criteria (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Free State Rainbow Seeds recruited participants; a non-profit organization working with LGBTQ+ people in the Free State province in South Africa. They recruited eight participants altogether, then the remaining four participants were recruited by participants after doing their interviews.

3.4 Data generation

3.4.1 Interviews

The first author and researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants. Two participants were interviewed in their homes, while seven were interviewed at local parks; one participant was interviewed at a local library and two participants at their workspace. The researcher had to be cautious in conducting the interviews where participants felt safe and secure given the prevailing risk factors faced by LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities (Daniels et al., 2019; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021; Wike et al., 2022). Participants were asked to tell a story: "Take me on your journey toward discovering, working through, or accepting your gender and sexual identity." then the researcher asked them semi-structured interview questions as they related their stories. Participants during interviews related experiences they had in their respective school environments, and the data derived was used in the writing of this paper.

3.5 Data analysis

The research data was analyzed with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with Atlas Ti serving as a tool in the data analysis process (Engward and Goldspink, 2020). After data analysis, to ensure the credibility of research findings participants were requested to evaluate the study findings; thereafter, they were asked to provide their overall impressions, assess the correctness of the findings, and suggest any elements that should be excluded from the data analysis.

4 Literature review

4.1 South African rural communities and schools

In South Africa, the Apartheid regime's legacy resulted in various societal imbalances, such as creating traditional rural homesteads, townships, and urban areas (Ratele, 2017; Shefer et al., 2015). Rural communities are characterized by a culture of communalism (Theron et al., 2013). Theron (2016) highlights the significant emphasis this culture places on the collective norms and values shared within the community. Rural communities often exhibit collectivist cultural values, which can present difficulties in implementing LGBTQ+ inclusion policies in educational institutions and society as a whole. The challenges primarily arise from the impact of conservative religious perspectives, communal norms, and collective principles, as emphasized by Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2019). Rural areas are often associated

with poverty, limited resources, dysfunction, and inadequate health and education systems (Balfour, 2016). In the post-colonial culture of post-apartheid South Africa, there are significant structural limitations that often impede the successful implementation of policies and the promotion of inclusivity in rural communities, particularly in rural schools. These constraints are primarily based on heterosexual and cisnormativity norms. These constraints are primarily based on hetero and cisnormative norms (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020; Gyamerah et al., 2019). Rural communities in various international contexts also maintain conservative religious perspectives on sexuality, akin to the African context (Rand and Pacey, 2022). The prevalence of conservative attitudes toward sexuality in rural communities worldwide is a significant factor contributing to the marginalization and mistreatment of LGBTQ+ young individuals in society (Wike et al., 2022).

4.2 Compulsory hetero-cisnormativity in the education sector

South African schools at large exhibit heterosexist tendencies by promoting compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity (Francis, 2017). Exclusionary tendencies may be observed in the formalized curriculum and pedagogy as well as in informal structures such as the school culture. In addition, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ encounter discrimination and bias from their peers, educators, and school administrators (Francis and Kuhl, 2020), indicating that resilience within a school setting is a complex and interconnected process involving active engagement at behavioral, emotional, and cognitive levels (Theron et al., 2022). School engagement is influenced by various protective factors and processes within and outside the school environment. However, most LGBTQ+ adolescents encounter difficulties in actively participating in emotional interactions within a school setting due to a range of discriminatory experiences. Discrimination frequently leads to atypical behaviors, such as low attendance and dropping out of school (Daniels et al., 2019; Wike et al., 2022). Unlike Ghana and Kenya, South Africa has laws and policies in place that safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ students in schools (Moreno et al., 2020).

Many South African schools experience a shortage of gender non-binary bathrooms, while their school uniform policies promote cis-normativity. Additionally, the school curriculum fails to address LGBTQ+-related subjects (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020). Teacher training programs lack comprehensive instruction on gender and sexual diversity (Francis, 2017). In addition, the training of school therapists, such as educational psychologists, does not prioritize interventions that support the mental wellbeing of individuals who identify as gender or sexual minorities (Brown and Njoko, 2019). The culture of exclusion is prevalent in primary and secondary schools and is evident in higher learning institutions, as indicated by the literature (e.g., Munyuki and Vincent, 2017).

Furthermore, discriminatory practices have been documented in these educational settings. A qualitative study conducted by Brown and Njoko (2019) examined 11 students pursuing a professional master's degree in educational psychology. The

study revealed that these students lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to support LGBTQ+ learners in affirming ways. An educational psychologist in training held religious and cultural beliefs that were not supportive of LGBTQ+ youth. One participant explicitly stated that they did not associate with LGBTQ+ individuals because they believed demons possessed them. This viewpoint could threaten their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities once they become qualified.

As an example, dual-method research was carried out in two provinces of South Africa, namely KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Gauteng Province (GP), involving a total of 22 participants who held positions as secondary school principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments (Bhana, 2014). This study investigated the prevalence of homosexuality and homophobia in secondary schools in South Africa. The study uncovered a prevailing atmosphere of sexual silence and denial within schools. Religious and cultural beliefs led to internal conflict among school administrators regarding their position on homosexuality. Queer sexuality was perceived as a challenge to conventional cultural norms. The study proposed that South African constitutional law and legislative policies can be utilized to challenge and undermine heterosexual power and privilege to combat homophobia.

Francis and Reygan (2016) conducted a study in which they interviewed 25 life orientation teachers in South Africa. The in-depth interviews included teachers from both rural and urban schools in the Free State (FS). This study uncovered instances of micro-aggressions perpetrated by teachers toward LGBTQ+ students. These microaggressions entailed making statements that demonstrated a lack of respect, unease, and disapproval toward LGBTQ+ individuals and the act of categorizing homosexuality as a deviance. Studies such as Bhana (2014), Francis and Reygan (2016), and Francis (2021) show that teachers often hold non-affirmative views, biases and prejudices which may be hindering policy implementation and resulting in experiences of exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth in schools.

4.3 Experiences of exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth in South African schools

LGBTQ+ learners in schools often experience discrimination and prejudice from both school staff and fellow students due to the prevailing heterosexist culture (Bhana and Mayeza, 2016; Daniels et al., 2019; Francis and Kuhl, 2020). The South African education system, curriculum, and school policies promote a mandatory culture that favors heterosexuality and assumes cisgender as the norm (Francis and Kuhl, 2020). The failure to acknowledge and accept the sexual orientation of non-heterosexual students often undermines the validity of their orientation, making them vulnerable to microaggressions from both teachers and peers (Francis and Reygan, 2016).

Bhana and Mayeza (2016) conducted a study on male individuals between the ages of 10 and 13 who were enrolled in a primary school in South Africa. The school was predominantly attended by students from a working-class background and of Black ethnicity. This study investigated the concept of hegemonic masculinity to gain insight into the role of power in instances of

violence among African boys in primary school. The study suggests that due to the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, boys created a sense of separation from girls, femininity, and boys who did not conform to traditional gender norms. Participants in this study indicated that their carers at home instructed them that being gay was morally incorrect and that cultural norms did not permit it. This study examines the intersection of gender and sexual diversity with societal values that prioritize heterosexuality and cisgender expression. Widespread societal belief systems frequently hinder the recognition and support of gender and sexual minorities.

Similarly, a study conducted by Francis (2021) found that students of the black race belonging to the Basotho ethnic group encountered a higher frequency of microaggressions from teachers compared to their white peers. Furthermore, it has been observed that educators tend to perceive LGBTQ+ students as being excessively sexually active and in need of disciplinary measures (Francis, 2017). Francis (2021) demonstrate that LGBTQ+ identity is influenced by cultural factors, such as belonging to the black race, as well as the myths and stereotypes that individuals associate with LGBTQ+ youth.

Affirmation can be particularly difficult in rural community schools. Research conducted by Haffejee and Wiebesiek (2021), Johns et al. (2019a), and Daniels et al. (2019) demonstrate that experiences of exclusion frequently lead to atypical behaviors, such as low school attendance and dropping out, as well as internalizing mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

4.4 Toward understanding rural ecologies from strengths and resilience perspective

School attendance and educational achievement are highly regarded in rural communities in South Africa and are closely associated with resilience. Acquiring a good education provides a promising opportunity for young people and older community members to eliminate poverty and enhance their quality of life (Daniels et al., 2019; Ebersöhn, 2017; Theron et al., 2022). Multiple studies, including Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019b), McDermott et al. (2023a), and McDermott et al. (2023b), highlight the importance of school ecologies in actively addressing LGBTQ+ issues. Strategies listed for addressing LGBTQ+ issues include developing inclusive policies and promoting inclusive practices. Although affirmation is crucial for promoting resilience, South African schools, particularly those in rural communities, are filled with risks and have a negative impact on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth (Francis, 2017; Francis and Kuhl, 2020; Gyamerah et al., 2019).

School ecology includes a learner, teachers, school managers, and the community. At a community level in rural communities, the exclusion of LGBTQ+ youth is reported as a global phenomenon (Daniels et al., 2019; Francis, 2021; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021). Exclusion in rural areas is often typified by many risk factors and few relational supports (i.e., parent, community, teacher and peer support) (Wike et al., 2022). Rural communities in South Africa are generally typified by a collectivist culture entailing shared norms and values that mostly adhere to Christianity and the African religion (Theron et al., 2013). The prevalent

compulsory values that are pro-heterosexual are often reflected in the school culture and practices. Furthermore, the notion of rurality is frequently associated with conditions of poverty, geographic isolation, low household income, material deprivation, inadequate funding, dysfunctionality, substandard education, and membership in the Black community (Mbabazi, 2015). However, Rand and Pacey (2022) suggest that resilience in rural ecologies should not be seen as insufficient but taking a different path than in metro and urban towns. South African studies such as Daniels et al. (2019) and Haffejee and Wiebesiek (2021) indicate how LGBTQ+ youth navigate the rural environment despite the risk factors found, including in schools.

4.5 The resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in a school context

Multiple studies have been conducted in Western nations, including the United States of America and Canada, focusing on the school resilience of LGBTQ+ students. Research conducted by Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019a), McDermott et al. (2023a,b), and Marraccini et al. (2022) has extensively documented affirmative practices within the school setting that have been shown to enhance the resilience of LGBTQ+ students. Furthermore, the scholarly works of Bhana and Mayeza (2016) and Francis (2017) highlight the urgent need to implement affirmative measures in schools, particularly in rural communities, as indicated by the literature on South African studies. Research indicates that affirmation can be attained by fostering a cooperative endeavor among education stakeholders within communities and the broader education macro systems.

According to McDermott et al. (2023a), school-based interventions for LGBTQ+ learners are successful when they involve all education stakeholders, such as senior executives, educators, school personnel, parents, guardians, and the wider community. In addition, McDermott et al. (2023b) conducted a literature review that examined 17 studies focusing on affirmative interventions implemented in schools. This review determined that the implementation of affirmative policies, the provision of teacher training, the establishment of school-based support groups, and other measures to address structural hetero-cisnormativity are associated with improving the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners. In addition, a study conducted by Marraccini et al. (2022) examined interventions specifically targeting the prevention of suicide among LGBTQ+ students within educational institutions. The review has identified factors such as a positive school climate characterized by various forms of intervention, highlighting that no single intervention is sufficient. Therefore, it can be inferred that a comprehensive, multisystemic intervention is required to combat bullying. From this perspective, a range of protective resources that include extracurricular activities, inclusive school policies, family support, school support, community support, and the promotion of school connectedness may be employed (Fernandes et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Daniels et al. (2019) in South Africa found that transgender youth living in rural townships experience a decrease in resilience due to their educational aspirations and the opportunities for self-expression they gain by participating

in netball alongside cisgender females. Although micro and macroaggressions are common in South African rural schools, Daniels et al. (2019) are one of the few studies that focus on the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners in these settings.

5 Results of study

The participants in this study reported risk factors and experiences of affirmation from teachers, school managers, and peers. Some of the narratives also touched on how parental support traded resilience for schools in cases of non-affirmation. The data used in this paper analyzed and reported thematically. Also, participant's direct quotations are provided to support the discussion.

5.1 Risk factors in the school environment

Participants reported various risk factors ranging from macroaggressions, such as being sexually molested by an educator, to microaggressions, such as discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes from their teachers.

One participant, who identifies as lesbian, related their painful experience after "suffering in silence" from the traumatic experience she had when she was around the age of 14 when her teacher sexually molested her:

Ahhm. You are not introduced to sex, but you are not ready, so this thing of being in something you never thought you'd be in—you have to be ready for sex. Even the sex was rough, and she (referring to her teacher) wanted me to be like a man. I was slow and fragile like that; she would say, "You did it wrong; let's start again. It is done like this (P10-Lesbian).

Compulsory hetero-cisnormativity in school is reflected through the uniform policy, which strictly stipulates the type of uniforms that boys and girls should wear to school. Participants who identify as lesbian and transgender in the study felt uncomfortable regarding being forced to wear a uniform that matches the gender assigned to them at birth. The following exceptions indicate various experiences of participants navigating non-affirmative uniform policies at school.

"He [referring to the school principal] just shouted out of 1000+ children, "(calling participant's name), you know that you are a boy; take that hat off" (P2-Gay man).

Trans females and feminine presenting gay males also experience discomfort owing to cisnormative uniform prescriptions in schools as evidenced in the following:

"There is a gay man at Thabanchu who left school. He is a friend; I asked why he left school, and he said no, they were forcing me to wear trousers (P5-Trans woman).

One of the barriers to including LGBTQ+ youth could be a lack of understanding of non-normative gender and sexual orientation.

Cultural and religious prescriptions also seem to be playing a role in terms of gendered expectations from schoolboys and girls which is reflected in school uniform policies.

Oh, things I came across. In my school, a boy wore trousers, and a girl wore a skirt. They did not understand that even if you are a girl, some girls don't feel comfortable wearing a skirt, so they were not understanding (P11-Lesbian).

School uniform policies in South Africa are drafted by school governing bodies in collaboration with parents. Existing South African school policies power to governing bodies to decide on matters regarding uniforms which may continue to exclude gender and sexual minorities.

The absence of gender non-binary toilets in schools is one aspect that represents the exclusion of non-normative sexualities and gender expression.

"Yes, Girl's toilets, and they questioned that, and I couldn't answer that because I did not know whether am I am gay or transgender or what is going on" (P3-Trans woman).

Also, the other participant reported:

"They never allowed me. I remember a teacher found me in girls' toilets, and she said my birth certificate does not say I'm a girl. It says you are a male and said, I'm comfortable using girls' bathrooms" (P2 Gay man).

P3 felt very embarrassed by the experience she had because of the lack of proper infrastructure in her school to cater for the needs of transgender learners. P2 opted to use female toilets, resulting from the awkward experiences of being bullied in male toilets. After being questioned by his teacher about their biological gender makeup, adding to his previous painful experience of being bullied, was an embarrassment which came with the confrontation.

5.2 Experiences of LGBTQ+ youth of systemic resilience within the school environment

The experiences participants had were related to resilience, including participation in life orientation lessons on LGBTQ+ issues. Furthermore, some teachers, including principals, actively addressed homophobic bullying and offered emotional support to LGBTQ+ learners. Also, there were instances where schools encouraged transgender participants to take an active role in sporting and recreational activities that match their gender identity. In other instances, owing to a lack of resources, certain bathrooms were assigned to be used by learners who were not comfortable using gender-binary bathrooms owing to bullying.

Relating experiences of having to present to the entire class, which offered a sense of affirmation and validation of sexuality and boosted confidence, this participant reported that:

I would say my LO teacher is a darling. I feel very comfortable around her; I could do anything around her. Sometimes, she would just say, “Teroh, today’s topic is about LGBTQ; just come in the front and do your thing,” I would take my classmates through LGBTQ life (P2-Gay man).

She related her experiences with a teacher who encouraged her to express herself by changing her hairstyle and wearing a uniform that matched her gender identity. This participant also received support from the educational circuit manager, who encouraged the principal to let her wear what she wanted as long as she produced good results.

So we had a school circuit manager who told the principal that no, as long as he produces good results, forget who he is, pass your judgment on the paperwork, and if he passes, don’t have stress (P3-Trans woman).

Although the circuit manager seems to have tolerated this participant doing a female hairstyle and wearing a female uniform, accepting her gender expression was conditional, which raises concerns. Thus, it indicates that the education macrosystems are still heterosexist despite some themes of inclusion from some school personnel at the school level.

Another participant received affirmation from the whole school; they allowed him to wear a school uniform that matched his gender identity; this participant commented that:

At school, those were the only incidents. Oh, I remember in [the] high school I went to. At first, there were days they would check if a girl wore a skirt and a boy wore trousers. It is like it was in their knowledge, or someone just looked at me to say, okay, this one is wearing trousers, and we will not ask him too many questions (P8-Trans man).

Despite unclear policy guidelines on uniforms, some schools actively take measures to protect LGBTQ+ learners from discrimination and promote human rights and inclusivity. However, given there are no clear education policy guidelines on uniforms schools are left to decide on measures they need to take on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ learners.

A participant who related experiences of bullying narrated how the teachers, including the school principal, assigned the toilets as gender-neutral and also addressed bullying by suspending the boys who continuously bullied him.

So if ever boys are going to discriminate against you when you go to their toilets as much as girls are going to discriminate against you when you go to their toilets, I, as the principal, am going to give you toilets specifically for gays (P4-Gay man).

Although the principal provided a toilet, one might raise concerns that the participants’ actual challenge was bullying, which was not addressed. However, the participant felt recognized and protected as a gay person in their school through the principal’s act of affirmation.

I remember the day I wanted to go to the boys’ toilet, then there was this gang; I don’t remember what they were smoking, then they tried to insult me and asked me, What do you want here, you gay? Then I ran to Mr. Buffel and told him the whole story (P4-Gay man).

A participant who was allowed to self-express and teach girls to dance at her school reported that:

Teachers were not judgmental. They supported me this way: I am a dance choreographer and a dancer, so I used to teach children to dance at school. After school, I taught them Setswana dance, sepotjwa dance, and all that, so we went to shows. They gave me a room at school. I was dealing with girls, saying they said you would work with girls (P5-Trans woman).

Participants reported instances of affirmation from school personnel including school managers. The reports by participants were resilience-enabling in that the social support system facilitated emotional comfort, a sense of belonging, and confidence. Despite affirmation, there is a need to challenge structural hetero and cisnormativity in schools as well as more psychoeducation to education stakeholders about gender and sexual diversity.

6 Discussion

According to the account of a participant in this research who identifies as a lesbian, they experienced sexual assault by their female teacher. The omission of discussions surrounding nonconforming gender expression and sexuality in educational institutions is a dangerous practice that can result in students being subjected to sexual abuse by teachers and others, with the victims often choosing to remain silent about their experiences. An ongoing issue is the absence of gender and sexual diversity representation in the curriculum, as well as the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality in schools (Francis and Kuhl, 2020). Although South Africa has implemented progressive laws to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, the lack of affirmation at the school level can be attributed to deeply ingrained heterosexist education systems (Bhana, 2014). Training for educational psychologists and teachers does not prioritize offering therapeutic and professional support to gender and sexually diverse learners (Brown and Njoko, 2019).

Toward inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in school is an active reform of the system starting with the wider education macro system (Francis, 2017). Inclusion involves the entire ecosystem and stakeholders including parents and the community need to be involved to mitigate barriers (Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a; McDermott et al., 2023a). Being more inclusive of gender and sexual minorities in schools’ buffers negative effects that come with exclusion and promotes the emotional engagement of LGBTQ+ learners.

The present study shows that the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners is informed by intersecting multiple systems such as relational support from teachers, peers and parents. Also,

school structural systems such as affirmative culture and policies significantly contribute to the resilience process. Daniels et al. (2019) show that transgender female school learners felt affirmed by playing a competitive netball game with cisgender females. Similarly, this study showed how participants valued opportunities created by schools to participate in sports and recreational activities. Despite this, as noted in this research like studies such as Francis (2017) and Francis and McEwen (2023) some schools seem to be promoting the culture of hetero normativity which marginalizes LGBTQ+ learners in schools.

The emotional engagement of LGBTQ+ learners at school is negatively impacted by the experiences of microaggressions from teachers, as well as the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality through uniform policies and the absence of gender non-binary bathrooms. The internalization of structural and relational risks within schools leads to the internalization of homonegativity, which frequently manifests in atypical behaviors like dropping out of school. Lack of affirmation in schools is frequently a result of overlapping identifiers, such as being part of a rural community and adhering to conservative cultural and Christian values, as indicated in this study. Nevertheless, rural communities also possess collectivist cultural norms and certain conflicting doctrinal Christian principles that either exhibit tolerance or even acceptance toward LGBTQ+ individuals (Gyamerah et al., 2019; Haffejee and Wiebesiek, 2021; Theron et al., 2013). Parental involvement, as a crucial education stakeholder, plays a significant role in interventions aimed at promoting the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth; however, due to a combination of factors, including their conservative religious beliefs that prioritize heterosexuality and the prevailing heteronormative values into the broader community. In addition, Nichols (2021) demonstrates in this study that some parents continue to support their LGBTQ+ children, but they frequently face discouragement from prevailing heterosexist and cisgender structures.

7 Limitations of the study

The present study was only conducted with twelve youths who identify as LGBTQ+ in a rural South African context. Previous research has indicated the collaborative role of different practitioners in tailoring affirmative policies and developing inclusive practices. Teachers and School-Based Support Teams (SBST) still need to be engaged. Also, parents as important stakeholders were not interviewed in this research. However, as a point of departure the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ on how different systems inclusive of teachers, school managers, parents and communities were reported in this study. Nevertheless, it's still important to explore both challenges encountered and strategies that education stakeholders in enabling the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners. Engaging other stakeholders will aid in effective policy implementation in rural schools.

8 Implications and future studies

However, the findings of this study indicate that rural schools in Free State province are not only characterized by a high level of risk

and a lack of safety for LGBTQ+ youth. Some teachers, including school administrators, actively play a role in providing affirmation to LGBTQ+ students. Nevertheless, their endeavors are frequently thwarted by heterosexist educational macrosystems. Regardless, Francis and McEwen (2023) emphasized the need for South African research pointing to the positive impact of inclusive practices and creating inclusive school ecologies. This paper addresses the research gap identified by Francis and McEwen (2023). It also highlights that more emphasis on inclusivity, human rights and social justice in schools is needed.

The present study suggests that in promoting the resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in rural ecologies there is a need for the active involvement of all education stakeholders, at the micro level including parents and the wider community. Schools can champion LGBTQ+ youth resilience by providing or designating some bathrooms in the school as gender-neutral and tackling homophobic bullying by strengthening anti-bullying policies to include explicit statements that condemn bullying on grounds of gender and sexual diversity and the implications thereof. Also, the culture of inclusion needs to be reflected in school uniform policies by moving away from gender-based prescriptions on uniforms. The South African National Department of Basic Education (DBE) must promptly develop a policy addressing affirmation practices for LGBTQ+ learners. This policy should specifically cover admission policies, uniforms, gender non-binary bathrooms, measures against bullying, and inclusion in school sports activities. Additionally, the DBE must conduct teacher workshops on gender and sexual diversity to ensure they carry out their professional duties with sensitivity and inclusivity.

Research from South Africa and the wider international community (i.e., Daniels et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2019a; McDermott et al., 2023a) shows that the environmental and relational processes that promote inclusivity can enhance the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners in their psychological subsystem, thereby boosting their confidence and sense of belonging in school. Research by Fernandes et al. (2023), Johns et al. (2019a), McDermott et al. (2023a,b), and Marraccini et al. (2022) has established a connection between the mental health of LGBTQ+ adolescents and their behavioral and cognitive functions, including consistent school attendance, active participation in school activities, and good academic performance. However, more research is needed on how school ecologies inclusive of teachers, parents and the wider community can foster the resilience of LGBTQ+ learners, particularly in rural community contexts.

9 Conclusion

The need to move toward policy reform and implementation of inclusive practices is global (Day et al., 2019; Francis, 2017; Ioverno, 2023). This study suggests that inclusivity in school should not only be reflected in school curricula and culture such as tackling homophobic bullying and uniform policies. Also, aspects of the environment in schools need to be altered (i.e., the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms) to create a welcoming environment for gender non-binary students. This study revealed that a culture of inclusion was evident in some schools despite the absence of

affirmative policies in the South African education system. This study shows that affirmative processes significantly contributed to resilience and a sense of school connectedness in LGBTQ+ learners. However, rural schools across the globe are still threatened by a lack of resources despite other threats such as non-affirmative cultural and Christian practices. Opposition toward affirmation of LGBTQ+ people in including learners in schools by Christian Pro-family organizations is also evident in African countries, in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Eastern and Western Europe (Francis and McEwen, 2023). There is, therefore, a global need to uphold human rights and social justice when addressing issues surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ learners. Also, work collaboratively with organizations that promote inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, when a system, such as a school or social system, demonstrates resilience, it can transfer that resilience to other systems co-occurring, such as the parental and individual systems of an LGBTQ+ child (Ungar, 2021). This means that schools should act as agents of change by fostering inclusivity by creating dialogues and educating parents about gender and sexual diversity.

Particularly in South Africa, the National Department of Basic Education (DBE) must promptly develop a policy addressing affirmation practices for LGBTQ+ learners. The case of Nare and others highlights the need for a comprehensive overhaul of South African education systems.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of South Africa (UNISA) College of Education Research Ethics

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Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

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