

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SCHOOL BASED SUPPORT TEAM TO EMPOWER EDUCATORS IN ADDRESSING NON-HETERONORMATIVITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The Bill of Rights as enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Southern Africa Act 108 of 1996, advocates protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) learners, and in terms of the School Based Support Team (SBTS) policy, all learners should benefit from education irrespective of their sexual orientation. However, research indicates that such a minority group continues to experience victimization, social aggression, bullying and harassment as compared to their heterosexual counterparts because educators lack skills to address non-heteronormativity that prevails at schools. As a result, due to fragmented SBST policies, majority of LGBTI learners leave schools not equipped in the areas of sexual health and human rights. This paper will collect data from both primary and secondary sources such as theses, journal articles and government gazette to enhance the effectiveness of the (SBST), which, in turn, will empower educators to suggest strategies for inclusive education (IE) and embrace diversity in the classroom. This paper will be grounded in critical theory, ecological system approach and relational social justice. As it is the goal of the gay liberation movements to organize workshops for multicultural education and sexual orientation for school governing bodies (SGBs), educators, policy makers and administrators, findings show that the reinforcement of the SBST improves teaching and learning, and increases educators' participation in addressing non-heteronormativity in SA schools. In recommendation, the Department of Education should ensure that it is critical that IE is continuously implemented so that the educators provide support towards LGBTI learners.

Keywords: diversity, educators, heteronormativity, human rights, policies

INTRODUCTION

School Based Support Teams (SBSTs) in South Africa, are not the only one experiencing lack of support from the Department of Education to equip educators to effectively address heteronormativity. In Canada, Perkins (2012) found that the districts whose policies are Christian value-driven like Catholics as well as supporting learners, refused to implement the policies around the sexual relations amongst lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersex (LGBTI). In Australia, gay and lesbian learners do not get support from their educators and they live in fear for violation of their rights (Ward, 2017). It is not surprising that various studies across South Africa documented that from an early age, boys are socialized both at school and home to view homosexuality as deviant (Langa, 2015; Mostert, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2012; Nichols, 2016). Due to socialization of boys as mentioned in the preceding sentence, there is a need for the support structures at school level to support educators to promote sexual orientation and gender orientation

at schools and to protect LGBTI learners from ridicules. This is because LGBTI learners will be called derogatory names such as “*moffie*” or “*istabane*” to discriminate against them (Kheswa, 2016; Matebeni & Msibi, 2015). For fear of being perceived as gay, most boys hide their identity in competitive sports such as soccer and rugby while their passion might be in ballet (MacGillivray, 2000) or join gangs to feel wanted and accepted (Ruiz & Stohr, 2018). Given that in African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, there is high degree of intolerance towards homosexuality (Pew Research Centre, 2014), once learners have been suspected to have same-sex relationships, not only do they face criminalization (UNESCO, 2016) but face expulsion from school and/or inhumane treatment (Mucherah, Owino, & McCoy, 2016). Even in South Africa, there have been reports of bullying from the LGBTI learners whose educators would fuel ostracism towards them when not complying with masculinity and femininity constructions (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015; Morojele, 2011; Swanson & Anton-Erxleben, 2016).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) distributed 60 000 copies of *Safe Schools for All: Challenging Homophobic Bullying*” to schools after consultation with LGBTI organization (DBE, 2014). However, the School Based Support Teams (SBST) seemed not to have won in preparing their educators to master inclusivity because discrimination and brutal attacks towards LGBTI learners, continue to reach unprecedented levels. In South Africa, research on homosexuals has been on how they are being discriminated against in their communities and churches (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Siwela, Sikhwari & Mutshaeni, 2018), health care centres (Müller, 2016) and schools (Bhana, 2012) and it is very limited on investigation of the effectiveness of the SBST to empower educators in addressing non-heteronormativity schools. The main question raised in this paper is to determine the extent to which the SBST members ensure that the school policies promote educators’ intervention for the well-being of the LGBTI learners. Against this background, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: (i) What are the challenges faced by SBST to effectively equip educators in addressing issues on LGBTI in South African schools? (ii) Which strategies to be considered for educators to ensure inclusion of LGBTI curriculum?

To ensure that there is effectiveness from the SBST in ensuring that the educators address non-heteronormativity, the following objectives were formulated;

- i. To identify the challenges faced by SBST to effectively equip educators in addressing issues on LGBTI in South African schools.
- ii. To determine strategies to be considered for educators to ensure inclusion of LGBTI curriculum.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LGBTI LEARNERS

The literature review represents an attempt to produce and provide an overview of developments and challenges experienced by SBSTs to empower educators in addressing non-heteronormativity in South African schools. Few studies have been conducted on the SBSTs to empower educators in addressing non-heteronormativity. The systematic review method was used in this study. Systematic reviews involve a search strategy and detailed plan, aimed at reducing bias by identifying, evaluating and synthesizing all relevant studies on a specific topic (Uman, 2011). In this regard, the researcher read both international and local articles, newspapers, government

gazettes and doctoral theses on LGBTI and policies and practices by SBST in destabilizing heteronormativity for data collection.

Before focusing on the effective ways that the SBST may employ to ensure that the educators are equipped for addressing the challenges faced by LGBTI learners, it is important to address those challenges and their effects, first.

Physical attacks to LGBTI learners

Literature related to homophobic attacks found both the SBST and educators fail to normalize bullying and discipline the perpetrators (Conoley, 2008). Research points out that an underlying reason for the educators not to report homophobic bullying could be that the SGB controls sexuality and affirms heterosexuality as compared to homosexuality, by referring to the school policies (Bhana, 2014; UNESCO, 2016). Homophobic bullying is a type of bullying characterized by prejudice against individuals who are suspected to be LGBTI (Department of Basic Education, 2015). In the United States of America, Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer and Boesen (2014), reported that 55.5% of LGBTI learners felt unsafe when at school because of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) (2012) study, *Growing up LGBT in America*, found that a large proportion of LGBTI learners were victims of verbal harassment and physical attacks (Kosciw, Palmer, Kulli & Greytak, 2012). Instead of acting accountably, in Taiwan, some of the SBST members would put minimal effort in addressing physical attacks and conceal incidents where LGBTI learners were being ridiculed (Chang & Wu, 2012). This type of marginalization and ostracism are even encountered at the tertiary institutions by LGBTI students (Kheswa, 2016). For example, in Pretoria, Gauteng Province, a nurse, ridiculed an effeminate black male student from University of Pretoria student that he got what he deserves after being brutally attacked by homophobic students (Müller, 2016). Victimization of LGBTI learners could be attributable to the utterances once made in September 2006 during the celebration of Heritage Day by Mr. Jacob Zuma while he was the Deputy President. In his speech, he emphasized that while growing up he would beat "*ongqingili*" homosexuals (Ismail, 2006). As a result, educators have been reported not to create a safe environment for LGBTI learners when beaten and raped because of prejudice and the belief that they pollute African culture (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Ganga-Limando, 2014; Meyer, 2010).

In the United Kingdom (UK) and Croatian schools, a higher prevalence of homophobic bullying experienced by gay learners resulted in many demonstrating impaired psychological well-being (Jugović & Bezinović, 2019, Nixon, 2010). As a result, their school performance deteriorated due to school absenteeism, and felt disempowered. According to the report released by GLSEN in a journal article by Kosowic et al., (2014), 57 % of the LGBTI learners indicated that they would not inform the school staff about their ordeal because their educators would not provide social support. If social support was provided at schools for LGBTI learners by SBST, Swanson and Gettinger (2016) are of the opinion that the negative sequelae of stressful experience would be minimized. For this reason, rates of low self-esteem, posttraumatic stress disorders, aggression and suicidal ideation are likely to increase among LGBTI learners (Rosario, Everett, Reisner, Austin, Buchting & Birkett, 2014; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz & Sanchez, 2011)

Influence of religious and cultural beliefs

Viewing of homosexuality as a “sin” or “unnatural” in many communities is based on cultural and/or religious backgrounds and it has largely contributed towards prejudice and condemnation of LGBTI individuals (Newman, Fantus, Woodford & Rwigema, 2017). Culturally, Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014) published that very often LGBTI learners are judged as being cursed or bewitched when their sexual expression deviates from the broader societal expectations. Schools, in turn, based on being the dominant climates to permeate social norms, Newman and Fantus (2015) found them to be religious social ecology transmitters of homophobic attitudes. In a study conducted in two South African provinces, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, principals who indicated to be religious, reported restriction of sexual rights of LGBTI learners and felt that by teaching homosexuality it would be viewed as promoting it (Bhana, 2014). Similarly, in Canada, three educators lost their jobs for opposing Catholic doctrines while demonstrating tolerance for homosexuality during their teaching (Callaghan, 2015). DePalma and Francis (2014) found that at schools where the leadership style of the principals is authoritarian, educators would stop teaching about homosexuality when the principals have entered their classes. For cultural and religious reasons, the SBST may find it hard to empower educators to teach about sex-education because there are parents who are not supportive of inclusion of diversified sexualities (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017).

Discrimination

In Jamaica, Smith found that discrimination is linked to violence when a group of secondary school learners beat learners who identified themselves as gays. In a collaborative report by the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy, the National Education Policy Center, and the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, states that over 85 % of LGBTI learners in the United States reported being discriminated against based on their sexuality (Biegel & Kuehl, 2011). South Africa is not exceptional as for many years, LGBTI learners have been suffering emotional trauma in the hands of their educators (Nichols, 2016; Smith, 2018). Discrimination could go as far as being teased by other learners when a learner is reared in a same-sex parents’ household. However, in Martino and Cumming-Potvin’s (2011) research, an educator managed to provide emotional support and discouraged victimization of learners whose same-sex parents have been experiencing a break-up. From this literature finding, it could be deduced that when the educators demonstrate empathy and prosocial behavior towards LGBTI learners, they may, in turn, feel less anxious relative to being fearful. Therefore, in South Africa, the SBST may rely on putting emphasis on the Constitution of the country, Section 108 of 1996 (RSA, 1996) that no learner should be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation, culture and religion, amongst others.

In the next sections, the theories and literature supporting the need for supporting educators to effect a positive change in the lives of LGBTI learners, are discussed.

GROUNDING FRAMEWORKS

To achieve the research objectives of this paper, critical theory was adopted because it inspires social change and it is tied to movements of social justice (Vaccaro & Koob, 2018). Critical theory is based on the notion that there should not be some oppression on sexual minority groups and their rights should be respected (Harris, Battle, Pastrana, & Daniels, 2015; Kohli, Picower, Martinez & Ortiz, 2015). It explicates how power is embedded in everyday life. For example, LGBTI learners can struggle to optimize their optimal functioning because of the top-down approach bureaucratic policies (Sue, 2010; Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011). On the other hand, Fraser's (1997) social justice is conceptualized as respect and recognition for individuals' rights and privileges. Young's (1990:09) argues that the five faces of oppression, namely; violence, cultural imperialism, exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness, should therefore be avoided in pursuit of social justice. As proposed by Lynch (1995), there should be equalization of power and education system, which, promote egalitarian society and restructure family for enriching personal lives of individuals without prejudice based on sexual orientation.

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM THE SBST TO DESTABILIZE HETERONORMATIVITY?

Globally, various scholars such as Francis (2017), Loutzenhelter (2015), emphasize destabilization of non-heteronormativity as largely dependent on the transformation in education, safe schools, LGBTI curriculum, implementation of school policies and conflict management.

Transformation in education

Transformation in education refers to reconstruction of discourse in which new syllabi or curriculum should redress the inequalities of the past including respect for one's rights to sexual orientation (Bawa, 2013). One of the cornerstones of transformation of democracy and promotion of sexual rights for all learners is South African National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996. However, the Department of Basic Education (2014) found that cultural and religious ideologies and negative attitudes towards sexual diversity by educators block transformation. Perception of homosexuality as immoral and fear among educators that they may be attacked by teaching about sexual diversity, are some of the obstacles presumed to be hindrances of transformation (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Msibi, 2012). To transform education especially in a South African context, Horn and Sullivan's (2012) study in Illinois in the United States amongst middle and high school educators and SBST proved that professional training could be of benefit as their positive attitudes towards LGBTI learners and engagement in anti-LGBTI violence and discrimination.

Safe environment

Realistically, this disenfranchises learners of their rights to holistic approach to education as much as Bhana (2012) found that not all learners are homophobic. In this instance, Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma and Klepp (2009) argue that educators should create a safer environment that protects the LGBTI learners from ostracism. By safe school, National School Climate Council

(2007), GLSEN (2010) and Wright (2010) refers to a learning institution in which positive relationships should be fostered to promote education and ensure that every learner is safe from exploitation and harm. The School Based Support Team (SBST) should therefore adopt a public framework that focuses on all levels of prevention and intervention for LGBTI learners. Herrick, Stall, Goldhammer, Egan and Mayer (2014) suggest that the SBST should ensure reinforcement of optimism and resilience among all school learners to buffer the negative emotional effects resulting from syndemic school experiences for LGBTI learners. It is surprising that the Department of Basic Education implemented school professional programme about LGBTI in 2014 (DBE, 2014) but there is an ongoing evidence of dropouts and poor academic performance experienced by LGBTI due to harsh treatment received from the educators and schoolmates. Furthermore, previous studies highlighted that when LGBTI learners lack resilience and optimism as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Francis & Reygan, 2016; Rothmann, 2018), they are most likely to resort to risky sexual behaviour (that is, substance abuse, unsafe sex with multiple partners) and eventually contract HIV/AIDS (Abaver & Cishe, 2018; Kheswa, 2016; Mbatha, 2013).

LGBTI curriculum

Life-Orientation is the only South African school subject which opportune secondary school learners to be equipped in terms of being agentic in their sexualities. However, it has shortcomings because it does not address issues on LGBTI and the only time the educators talk about gays, it is only when they are associated with HIV/AIDS (Kheswa, 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer, 2018; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). In terms of accessing right to health care, there is no curriculum accommodating LGBTI learners as compared to their heteronormative peers, who, when, they have challenges with menstruation, sexually transmitted infections and/or guidance on using contraceptives, they get information (Macintyre, Vega & Sagbakken, 2015; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). In Australia, educators expressed lack of empowerment and support from the SBST, thus, they would not promote equality regardless of sexual orientation (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). The present author argues that the SBST should be effective in empowering educators about diversified sexualities because there are/were certain television programmes such as *The New Normal*, *Marry Me* (the comedy shows on NBC Channel), *uZalo* and *Generations* (SABC 1 or Channel 194) which educate the society about same-sex parenting and same-sex feelings. Agreeing more with this assertion is Van Leent (2017) whose published article "*Supporting school teachers: primary teachers' conceptions of their responses to diverse sexualities*" advocates that not all parents discuss about nor engage in sex-education with their children. Empowering educators in sexuality and sexual orientation could enhance their self-efficacy in respond to learners should they ask them about LGBTI issues. Finally, the present study is in agreement with the suggestions by Clark (2010) and Francis and Msibi (2011) that the LGBTI issues be incorporated in the curricula during educator training.

Policies

To destabilize heteronormativity, it is imperative that the Department of Education becomes knowledgeable about the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act 49 of 2003 and

Promotion of Equality Act since they allow transgender and intersex people to alter their gender status once they have undergone gender re-assignment surgery (South African Litigation Centre, 2017). Furthermore, the SBST should orientate and familiarize educators with the *Safe Schools for All: Challenging Homophobic Bullying*” booklet, because it has relevant terminology relating to LGBTI and practical steps to be followed to effectively engage educators in developing more inclusive school environments (Reygan, 2016). However, there are schools whose policies do not specifically address how educators could intervene decisively in instances of LGBTI victimization (Hall, 2017). To date, at the universities there are preparations of pre-service educators to work on social changes and redesigning of curricula and policies suitable to accommodate LGBTI learners (Clark, 2010; Nzimande, 2015).

Conflict management

Conflicts are inevitable in social realm and to solve them, there should be effective communication among individuals in a particular organization to enhance morale and promote harmony (Safeena & Valnampy, 2017). School principals are therefore obliged to protect learners from anti-LGBTI violence and associated harassment (Cordeiro &, Cunningham, 2013) since their functions entail leadership, conflict management and promotion of conducive climate for teaching and learning. Because of the authority and power vested in them, they are entitled to make decisions with respect to educator-training on LGBTI topics for the curriculum and/or participate in advocacy for gender non-conforming learners (Smith & Payne, 2016). At schools characterized by diversified sexualities, it is clear that the school principals could assign the SBST to ensure conflicts are solved and prevented from occurring. For instances, in dealing with cases of discrimination such as the report released in 2011 by the National School Climate Survey where 56.9% of LGBTI learners experienced homophobic attacks from the school –staff members (Kosciw et al, 2014), the SBST may equip educators with skills appropriate to address LGBTI learners, respectfully, provided they received effective training.

In wrapping up this paper, a way-forward is presented below.

WAY- FORWARD

To ensure safety of the LGBTI and progress for South African education system, the following recommendations may serve as a guide;

- The SBST should consciously acknowledge the existence of LGBTI learners and ensure their safety.
- The SBST should ensure that the schools have symbols, stickers, flags and posters depicting acceptance and respect for LGBTI.
- Mentorship from organizations such as GALA, is imperative for SBST and educators to be familiar with correct terminology concerning LGBTI. Such mentorship would be key in reducing myths such as perceiving gay learners as having genitals of both genders.
- The admission forms should have an information of one’s sexual orientation. For example, lesbian (L) or gay (G) or bisexuals (B) or transgender (T) or Intersex (I). Such information should be treated with confidentiality.

- The SBST should adhere to ethical principles when referring LGBTI learners to the psychologists for counselling.
- Educators who are socially bold and not afraid of being labelled as belonging to LGBTI community, may raise awareness of the existence of the sexual minorities through dialogues. In so doing, the self-esteem of LGBTI learners can be enhanced.
- Most importantly, LGBTI learners should be equipped in terms of leading a positive sexual health free from STIs.
- Finally, there should justice taking place for the perpetrators of homophobia to ensure that heteronormativity is stabilized.

CONCLUSION

As much as the research objectives of this paper have been met, however, there are shortcomings encountered during compilation. Firstly, there are few researchers addressing non-heteronormativity at school levels in South Africa. In addition, there is no evidence of actions taken against the schools whose SBST and educators victimize learners based on their nonconformist sexuality. Secondly, this study was a desktop review and there was no direct interaction with the participants, who, could have provided the suggestions to destabilize heteronormativity.

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