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TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH LGBTQI LEARNERS AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE NONGOMA CIRCUIT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined secondary school teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners within the Nongoma Circuit, focusing on the interactions between teachers and LGBTQI students and identifying effective engagement strategies. Adopting a phenomenological philosophy, the research aimed to understand the lived experiences and meanings of teachers' perspectives. A qualitative approach was employed to provide flexibility in exploring these experiences. The study utilised a phenomenological design to uncover nuanced insights into teachers' attitudes. The sample comprised five Life Orientation educators from secondary schools in the Nongoma Circuit, selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant data. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Social constructionism served as the theoretical framework, offering a sociological perspective on human behaviour and interactions. Findings indicated a range of attitudes towards LGBTQI learners, from positive acceptance to negative biases. The study highlighted the need for enhanced training and support for educators to create inclusive and secure educational environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Thematic analysis revealed diverse viewpoints, underscoring the importance of targeted teacher training and policy reviews to foster empathetic and inclusive learning spaces. The results suggest crucial steps towards improving secondary school environments by addressing LGBTQI issues comprehensively within teacher training programs and school policies.

Introduction

The global attention on LGBTQI individuals has intensified due to rising incidents of discrimination and bullying faced by this community. Secondary school environments often exhibit a disproportionately high incidence of such discrimination, adversely affecting LGBTQI students' engagement and mental well-being (Edwards & Watson, 2020). For example, Berg and Kokkonen (2021) have highlighted how gender norms in physical education classes are predominantly heteronormative, which further marginalises LGBTQI students. As discussions around education increasingly include the rights of LGBTQI individuals, it becomes evident that bullying can significantly impact their self-esteem and academic success (Msibi, 2012). However, addressing non-traditional sexual and gender norms within educational settings can provoke moral concerns and challenge existing power dynamics (Piper & Sikes, 2010; Gray, 2010; Rudoe, 2010).

In South Africa, this study focuses on understanding secondary school teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners within the Nongoma Circuit. This exploration is particularly important given the national push for strategies and interventions that address such issues (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2011). Teachers must navigate between their personal beliefs and the need to foster a school ethos that supports all students' well-being (Department for Education, 2013). Nonetheless, schools often reinforce entrenched gender norms and power imbalances (Gray, 2010). Furthermore, Msibi (2012) notes a prevailing misconception among teachers that homosexuality is 'contagious', leading to the erroneous belief that heterosexual students are at risk from LGBTQI peers.

To address these challenges, it is essential for teachers to create an inclusive and equitable school environment. Steck and Perry (2017) emphasise that strong student-teacher relationships are crucial for the academic success of LGBTQI students. Research has shown that supportive adults in schools significantly influence LGBTQI students' success (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Teachers are pivotal change agents in combating LGBTQI stigmatization and ensuring equal educational opportunities (Scandurra et al., 2017; Payne & Smith, 2011). Collaboration with school social workers and youth workers can help develop effective interventions to combat bias and bullying (Dessel et al., 2017).

Despite these needs, there is limited research on how teachers understand and address homophobia, particularly in rural settings such as the Nongoma circuit. Teachers' roles extend beyond delivering quality education; they involve managing school dynamics and continually improving through effective role management and training (Berger, 2015; Scandurra et al., 2017). Effective teaching encompasses more than subject expertise; it involves fostering positive student interactions and shaping perspectives. Successful teachers share characteristics like preparedness, clear expectations, a positive attitude, patience, and regular evaluation of their methods (Hopkins, 2020). These traits are vital for creating enriching educational experiences for all students.

This study aims to uncover teachers' perspectives on LGBTQI learners within the Nongoma circuit. It seeks to explore teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards LGBTQI students and examine the dynamics of their relationships with this demographic. By focusing on these aspects, the research aims to provide insights that can help improve the educational environment for LGBTQI students in the region.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in social constructionist theory, which provides a sociological lens for analysing and understanding human behaviour and perceptions (Kivunja, 2018). This theory, extensively articulated by scholars such as Berger and Luckmann (1966), Burr (1995), Butler (1993), and Jagose (1996), investigates how realities are constructed through social interactions and cultural practices. Social constructionism offers a robust framework for examining how societal norms and collective beliefs shape individual experiences and attitudes, making it particularly relevant for this study's focus on teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social constructionism posits that reality is not a fixed entity but is constructed through human interactions and social processes. This perspective argues that our understanding of the world is shaped by the social contexts in which we live, including the cultural and historical factors influencing our perceptions (Friedman, 2016). In the context of education, this theory suggests that teachers' views on LGBTQI learners are influenced by broader societal norms and beliefs about gender and sexuality. These views are not inherent truths but are socially constructed through ongoing socialisation processes.

Friedman (2016) further emphasises that social constructionism highlights the role of upbringing, culture, and shared assumptions in shaping individual perceptions. This framework is particularly useful for

understanding how teachers' attitudes towards LGBTQI learners are influenced by prevailing cultural norms and societal expectations. It underscores that these attitudes are not static but are subject to change as societal norms and values evolve. By applying social constructionism, this study aims to uncover how teachers' beliefs about LGBTQI learners are constructed and negotiated within their educational and cultural contexts.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) outline three key principles of social constructionism that are pertinent to this study: the nature of knowledge, the dual nature of society as both objective and subjective, and the critical role of language in socialisation. The first principle asserts that knowledge is not merely a reflection of reality but is actively constructed through social interactions. The second principle highlights that society comprises both objective structures and subjective experiences, which shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours. The third principle focuses on how language and communication play a crucial role in the process of socialisation, influencing how individuals understand and interpret their social world.

This theoretical framework aligns with the study's aim of exploring teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners by providing a lens through which to analyse how these perceptions are shaped by social and cultural constructs. Social constructionism allows for an examination of how societal attitudes towards LGBTQI individuals are reflected in teachers' attitudes and behaviours. It also facilitates an understanding of how educational environments can either reinforce or challenge these socially constructed norms.

By examining teachers' perceptions through the lens of social constructionism, this study seeks to uncover the underlying social processes that influence their views on LGBTQI learners. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how cultural and societal factors contribute to the formation of these perceptions and highlights the need for targeted interventions to address and challenge discriminatory attitudes within educational settings.

Moreover, social constructionism provides insights into the ways in which educational practices and policies can either support or hinder the inclusion of LGBTQI learners. It offers a framework for analysing how educational institutions can foster more inclusive environments by challenging existing norms and promoting more equitable understandings of gender and sexuality. This perspective underscores the importance of creating educational spaces that acknowledge and respect diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

In summary, social constructionism offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners. By focusing on the socially constructed nature of these perceptions, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural and societal factors shape attitudes towards LGBTQI individuals in educational settings. This theoretical approach not only informs the study's objectives but also provides a basis for developing strategies to promote inclusivity and address biases within schools.

The insights gained from applying social constructionism will be instrumental in formulating recommendations for improving the educational experiences of LGBTQI learners. By addressing the underlying social constructs that influence teachers' attitudes, the study aims to support the development of more inclusive educational practices and policies. Ultimately, the application of social constructionism will help in advancing efforts to create supportive and equitable learning environments for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Literature Review

The National Department of Basic Education Safety Framework (2015) defines homophobia as an irrational fear or aversion towards homosexuality or individuals perceived as homosexual. This form of prejudice is not only a manifestation of sexual and gender-based violence but, when it escalates to physical harm, it constitutes a hate crime. Homophobia, therefore, represents a significant barrier to creating inclusive educational environments and highlights the need for effective interventions. Nell and Shapiro (2011) conducted a study with Life Orientation teachers in secondary schools, which uncovered a concerning lack of awareness regarding the impact of homosexuality in the classroom. Their research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policies that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity, with a particular focus on sexual orientation. They advocate for the implementation of anti-bullying measures and codes of conduct that align with constitutional principles to safeguard students' rights.

Kolbert et al. (2015) conducted an empirical study examining educators' perspectives on the bullying of LGBTQI youth. Their findings revealed a strong link between the perceived support of school staff for LGBTQI students and a reduction in bullying incidents. This study highlighted the significant role of supportive educators in mitigating the frequency of bullying experienced by LGBTQI students. Notably, Kolbert et al. found that educators who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual had different perceptions of

LGBTQI issues compared to their heterosexual colleagues, indicating that personal experiences and identities influence educators' views on LGBTQI matters.

In Spain, Aguirre et al. (2020) found that hostility towards LGBTQI learners persisted in high school environments, despite ongoing efforts to address these issues. Their research emphasised the need for integrating queer perspectives into teacher training programmes to foster a more inclusive educational environment. By incorporating LGBTQI issues into pedagogy, educators are better equipped to challenge discriminatory attitudes and create supportive spaces for all students.

Neville et al. (2015) explored attitudes towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals within residential care facilities. Their study revealed a significant lack of preparedness among care providers to offer adequate services to non-heteronormative individuals. Recommendations from this research included the development of guideline-based strategies, ongoing education, and collaboration with LGBTQI community organisations to ensure culturally sensitive care. Although this study focused on residential care staff rather than educators, it underscores the broader implications of attitudes towards LGBTQI individuals and the necessity for targeted training and awareness.

The existing literature highlights the pervasive issue of homophobia within educational settings and the importance of supportive teacher attitudes in reducing bullying and discrimination. Nell and Shapiro (2011), Kolbert et al. (2015), and Aguirre et al. (2020) all point to the critical role of educators in fostering inclusive environments for LGBTQI students. However, the current research has predominantly focused on general attitudes and interventions, with limited emphasis on specific rural settings such as the Nongoma circuit.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners within the Nongoma circuit. The unique context of rural education settings presents distinct challenges and opportunities for addressing LGBTQI issues. Understanding how teachers in this specific setting perceive and respond to LGBTQI learners will provide valuable insights into the broader educational landscape and inform strategies for promoting inclusivity.

Overall, the literature underscores the need for targeted interventions and training to address homophobia and support LGBTQI students. By examining the perceptions of teachers within the Nongoma circuit, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on LGBTQI inclusion in education and provide practical recommendations for improving educational practices and policies.

Research Methodology

The research methodology outlines the structured approach used to tackle a research problem and the scientific process underlying research conduct (Liu, Liping, & Khan, 2018). Carter and Little (2017) argue that a well-defined methodology ensures the validity of methods employed in data generation and analysis. This section details the research methodology, including the research paradigm, approach, design, population, and sampling methods, as well as data collection and analysis techniques. It also addresses trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and discusses the ethical considerations pertinent to educational research.

The study was conducted within an interpretive paradigm, which aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how specific groups perceive and interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2014). This approach was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' interpretations within their natural settings. Interpretive research seeks to uncover how individuals experience and interact with their world, focusing on contextual factors influencing these experiences (Saunders, 2013). This paradigm was chosen to effectively explore and describe teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners in secondary schools in the Nongoma Circuit.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to offer flexibility in both methods and processes. Unlike quantitative research, where designs are pre-determined, qualitative research allows for iterative decision-making regarding data collection and analysis (Saunders, 2013). This approach facilitated an interactive dialogue between the researcher and participants, uncovering the participants' perspectives through a qualitative lens. The qualitative nature of the study enabled an in-depth exploration of attitudes and experiences, emphasising interpretation and understanding.

The study employed a phenomenological design to reveal the underlying meanings of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology focuses on exploring and describing how individuals perceive and experience specific phenomena, providing rich, detailed insights into their experiences (Creswell, 2014). This design was suitable for investigating teachers' perceptions of LGBTQI learners, aiming to uncover the nuanced meanings behind these perceptions.

The study's population comprised teachers from secondary schools within the Nongoma Circuit. The sample was drawn using purposive sampling, selecting five Life Orientation teachers from five secondary schools. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants had specific knowledge relevant to the research questions and could provide detailed, pertinent information (Creswell, 2014). This method allowed for a targeted approach, focusing on educators directly engaged with the study's central issues.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which are defined as a guided conversation between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the five selected teachers, utilising a detailed interview guide developed with supervisory input. The interviews, lasting between 20 minutes and one hour, were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture. This approach allowed for flexibility in questioning and enabled the researcher to seek clarification and elaboration on participants' responses (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Thematic analysis involves identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning within the data. The process included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and producing a report. This systematic approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of common themes and patterns within the participants' responses.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Mills & Gay, 2016). Credibility was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail, including digital recordings and detailed descriptions of the research process. Member checking was used to validate preliminary findings with participants. Dependability was ensured by consistently reporting themes across transcripts and involving another researcher in reviewing the data collection process. Confirmability was upheld through peer briefing and maintaining a reflective journal during interviews, contributing to the objective representation of data.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research, ensuring that participants' rights and confidentiality were upheld throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. The research adhered to ethical guidelines, fostering an environment of trust and respect between the researcher and participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
Findings of the Study

Theme 1: Challenges of LGBTQI in Schools
LGBTQI learners face significant challenges in the school environment, often stemming from both peer and educator attitudes. The interviews revealed a pervasive issue of homophobia among heterosexual learners, particularly male students, who exhibit hostility towards LGBTQI peers. Teacher A highlighted the intensity of this prejudice, noting that "the majority of male heterosexual learners have a strong dislike of the LGBTQI. The learners keep their distance from LGBTQI learners because they discriminate against them and even victimize them by doing what by abusing these learners verbally, emotionally, and physically." This sentiment is echoed by Teacher C, who observed that "they believe that being gay is unholy and if they involve themselves with gay learners they will turn into gay as well." These findings align with Goodhand and Brown's (2016) research, which documents frequent bullying and harassment directed at LGBTQI students, exacerbated by misconceptions about the transmissibility of homosexuality.

The persistence of such negative attitudes contributes to an environment where LGBTQI learners are subjected to verbal and physical abuse. The interviews confirmed that these learners often feel isolated and marginalized within their educational settings. Teacher B reported witnessing frequent discrimination, stating that "female heterosexual learners embrace and are more accommodating to the LGBTQI learners. They even initiate easy friendships with others." However, this acceptance is not universal, as highlighted by the negative experiences of LGBTQI learners with their male peers.

Theme 2: Strategies for Inclusion
To address the issues faced by LGBTQI learners, effective strategies for inclusion need to be implemented. The findings suggest that the Department of Basic Education should prioritise the development of policies and practices that promote inclusivity. Teacher A advocated for inclusive policies, stating, "The Department of Basic Education should encourage schools to include rules and values on attitudes with interaction with LGBTQI learners in their code of conduct." This includes allowing learners to wear uniforms

that align with their gender identity, as well as introducing more inclusive administrative forms that reflect a spectrum of gender identities.

Teacher B also emphasised the importance of educational workshops, noting, "The Department of Basic Education has tried by all means to educate teachers about curriculum inclusion. What is left is to motivate or to tell learners that they are not the same." The need for these workshops extends beyond mere curriculum inclusion to fostering a deeper understanding among learners. Francis (2017) supports this, highlighting the role of both overt and covert curricula in shaping students' values and experiences. Effective workshops can help dismantle misconceptions and promote a more accepting school culture.

Theme 3: Handling of LGBTQI Bullying by Learners

Teachers play a crucial role in managing and mitigating bullying of LGBTQI learners. The study findings revealed various strategies employed by teachers to address and prevent bullying. Teacher C described their approach, stating, "I encourage respect for all students and prohibit bullying and harassment with violence against all students." This includes creating safe spaces within the school environment, such as counselling offices, to support victims of bullying.

Similarly, Teacher B emphasised the importance of immediate intervention, noting, "I use my problem-solving skill that allows me to solve that certain case in that specific time." This proactive approach aims to address bullying as it occurs, ensuring that LGBTQI learners feel protected. Recommendations from the study included reducing gender segregation in classrooms, as Teacher A suggested, "Gender segregation should be minimized in the classroom situation as this segregation puts LGBTQI learners in a difficult position." Engaging in discussions about diversity and inclusivity, as noted by Teacher D, can further promote a supportive environment.

Theme 4: Professional Training for Teachers on LGBTQI

Professional training for teachers regarding LGBTQI learners is crucial for fostering an inclusive educational environment. The study found that teachers had participated in various training workshops designed to equip them with skills to support LGBTQI students. Teacher A shared their experience, stating, "I have been in workshops that trained about this community called LGBTQI and also taught me how to handle learners in the classroom situation." This training helps teachers manage classroom dynamics and address issues related to LGBTQI learners effectively.

Teacher E confirmed the importance of these workshops, explaining, "The government organises workshops since it is new in the curriculum. In the workshops, we talk about the challenges faced by LGBTQI learners in different schools and how we can help them face discrimination." However, a notable concern is the inconsistent attendance at these workshops, which may undermine their effectiveness. Govender et al. (2023) emphasise the need for regular professional development to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to address critical issues in the classroom. Improved participation in these training sessions could enhance teachers' ability to support LGBTQI learners and address challenges they face.

The study highlights the significant challenges faced by LGBTQI learners in schools, including discrimination and bullying from peers. Effective strategies for inclusion, such as policy changes and inclusive uniform options, are essential for creating a supportive environment. Teachers' proactive measures to handle bullying and their participation in professional training play a crucial role in addressing these issues. The findings underscore the need for ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity and support LGBTQI learners in educational settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significant challenges faced by LGBTQI learners in schools, highlighting the need for systemic changes to foster inclusivity and respect. The pervasive issues of homophobia and discrimination within school environments, as reported by participants, reflect broader societal attitudes that align with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of social constructionism. This theory posits that realities, including prejudices and biases, are constructed through social interactions and cultural norms. In this context, the hostile attitudes towards LGBTQI learners can be seen as a manifestation of socially constructed beliefs about sexuality and gender, which are perpetuated through peer interactions and institutional practices.

The findings reveal that heterosexual learners, particularly male students, often exhibit strong negative attitudes towards their LGBTQI peers. This aligns with Goodhand and Brown's (2016) research, which documents

the prevalence of bullying and harassment against LGBTQI students. The belief among some learners that homosexuality is contagious reflects deeply ingrained misconceptions and fear, which contribute to the exclusion and victimisation of LGBTQI individuals. The data collected in this study echo these concerns, highlighting the urgent need for educational interventions that address these harmful beliefs and promote understanding.

In addressing these challenges, the study found that strategies for inclusion are crucial. The participants suggested that the Department of Basic Education implement policies and practices that support LGBTQI learners. Teacher A's recommendation for inclusive dress codes and administrative forms aligns with Francis's (2017) emphasis on both overt and covert curricula in shaping student experiences. By making these adjustments, schools can create a more welcoming environment that respects diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. This approach reflects a commitment to dismantling traditional norms and embracing a more inclusive educational framework.

Teacher B's call for workshops to educate both teachers and learners further supports the need for comprehensive inclusion strategies. Educational workshops can play a pivotal role in challenging existing biases and fostering a more inclusive school culture. This is consistent with the arguments of Saunders (2013), who highlights the importance of educational interventions in shaping individuals' experiences and interactions. The study's findings suggest that while some progress has been made, there is still a need for ongoing training and support to ensure that all members of the school community are equipped to engage with LGBTQI issues constructively.

The handling of LGBTQI bullying by learners is another critical area highlighted by the study. Teachers reported various strategies to create safe spaces and address bullying incidents. Teacher C's approach of encouraging respect and prohibiting harassment is in line with Mostert, Gordon, and Kriegler's (2015) findings, which stress the importance of equitable treatment for non-normative students. Creating safe spaces, such as counselling offices, and encouraging reporting of bullying incidents are proactive measures that can help mitigate the adverse effects of bullying on LGBTQI learners. These strategies are essential for fostering a supportive environment where all students feel safe and valued.

The study's findings also underscore the importance of professional training for teachers. Participants noted that while some training has been provided, there are issues with attendance and engagement. Teacher E's observations about the challenges faced by LGBTQI learners and the need for continuous professional development align with Govender et al.'s (2023) research, which emphasises the role of ongoing training in adapting to evolving educational needs. Effective professional development can enhance teachers' ability to support LGBTQI learners and address discrimination more effectively.

Despite the availability of professional training, the inconsistent attendance at workshops remains a significant challenge. This issue highlights the need for strategies to increase teacher participation and engagement in these training sessions. According to Mills and Gay (2016), establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research involves addressing the consistency and reliability of data collection and analysis. Similarly, in the context of professional development, ensuring that teachers consistently engage with training opportunities is crucial for maintaining an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Overall, the findings reflect a pressing need for systemic changes within educational institutions to support LGBTQI learners effectively. The integration of inclusive policies, professional training, and proactive measures to address bullying aligns with the principles of social constructionism, which emphasises the role of societal norms and interactions in shaping individual experiences. By addressing these issues, schools can work towards creating an environment where all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, feel valued and respected.

The study's findings also suggest that while progress has been made in some areas, there is still much work to be done. The persistence of negative attitudes and discriminatory practices highlights the need for continued efforts to promote inclusivity and challenge harmful stereotypes. This is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) assertion that changing socially constructed realities requires ongoing effort and engagement from all members of the community.

In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by LGBTQI learners and the strategies needed to address these issues. By integrating findings with theoretical perspectives, such as social constructionism, and drawing on existing literature, the discussion underscores the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment. The study highlights the need for continued professional development, policy changes, and educational interventions to ensure that LGBTQI learners are respected and valued within the school setting.

Recommendations

The study highlights a critical need for the Department of Basic Education to enhance its approach towards supporting LGBTQI learners in schools. The findings indicate a significant gap in teacher acceptance and effective handling of LGBTQI issues, which can be attributed to insufficient participation in the Department's workshops. To address this, it is recommended that the Department implement regular, comprehensive training and seminars aimed at equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge. Continuous professional development is essential for teachers to manage LGBTQI learners effectively and to challenge the misconceptions, such as the erroneous belief that homosexuality is contagious, which contribute to bullying and discrimination. Ajani (2023) underscores the importance of ongoing professional development in preparing educators to handle diverse classroom dynamics and promote inclusivity.

In addition, the study suggests that LGBTQI awareness programs should be integrated into school curricula and community outreach efforts. These programs would help to combat homophobia by fostering a culture of understanding and acceptance among both students and staff. It is crucial for school policies to be updated to explicitly support LGBTQI learners, including the removal of gender-conforming uniform requirements, which often alienate non-binary and gender non-conforming students. Educating heterosexual learners about LGBTQI issues is also essential to mitigate prejudice and create a more supportive environment. Implementing these recommendations could significantly improve the school climate and ensure that LGBTQI learners feel respected and included, aligning with the broader objectives of creating a fair and inclusive educational environment.

For future research, the study's findings suggest the need to expand the scope beyond the single district of KwaZulu Natal Province and the five secondary schools involved. Conducting a larger-scale study across various regions and school settings could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and effective strategies for supporting LGBTQI learners. Such research could offer valuable insights into the broader applicability of the recommendations and help to refine policies and practices on a national level, ensuring that all schools are equipped to handle LGBTQI issues effectively and inclusively.

Conclusions

This study offers valuable insights into the perceptions of teachers and students towards LGBTQI learners in secondary schools within the Nongoma Circuit. It highlights that while teachers generally demonstrate acceptance and inclusivity towards LGBTQI students, challenges persist due to misconceptions among heterosexual students, who often view homosexuality as contagious, leading to bullying and discrimination. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive professional development workshops for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills to foster inclusive environments and address bullying effectively. Additionally, the study suggests that allowing non-gender-conforming uniforms could further support LGBTQI students. Overall, the research underscores the importance of targeted interventions and continued education to promote a supportive and equitable school atmosphere for all learners.

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