

**A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social  
Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training  
Institution in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is scant research regarding the experiences of Black lesbian students in relation to their access to tertiary education, their success at higher education institutions and their experiences with their lecturers and co-students, especially within the environment of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The lack of empirical research on the academic and social experiences of Black lesbian students has left a gap in the understanding of how their social identities intersect to influence their post-school education and training experiences. To address this gap in knowledge, I investigated the academic and social experiences of six Black lesbian students at a TVET college in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.

This dissertation adopted an eclectic theoretic approach, using the African decolonial perspective of Oyeronke Oyèwùmí as well as the work of decolonial feminist theorist, Maria Lugones. I also drew on key concepts from Black feminist thinkers Patricia Hill-Collins and bell hooks – in particular, their concept of intersectionality. I used these frameworks to argue against the ongoing influences of past colonialism and apartheid that tend to permeate the institutional culture of TVET colleges in South Africa.

This feminist research study adopted a qualitative methodology and used visual narrative inquiry. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, photo voice, reflective journaling and focus groups. Poetry was used as a data-generating reflective tool. Data analysis combined both visual narrative analysis and analysis of the narratives.

Findings revealed institutional heterosexism and a lack of educational access for black lesbian students at this TVET college which impeded their educational participation and success, resulting in failure, absenteeism and dropout. Educational access is understood in this thesis as a multifaceted phenomenon that includes administrative, financial, physical, social, career guidance and epistemic aspects. Enablers to learning at the college included individual strategies (using their own agency) as well as strategies that the college could initiate. This included stronger support from lecturers to contribute to lesbian students' participation in class and their academic success.

Meeting other lesbians who were open about their sexual identities was also another enabler to learning, as it provided these students with a sense of belonging. Financial enablers to be able to attend a college and study were present in the form of the NSFAS grant, which covered their study costs and also enabled them to provide support to their families.

Whilst there has been significant evolution in the TVET sector in terms of administrative access and funding for students, the provision of psychological support for minority students is still lacking. This study recommends that the Department of Higher Education develop ongoing psychological support interventions to address the negative psychological impacts LGBTQ+ students experience within the tertiary environment, inclusive curriculum and institutional policies. New college buildings should always include 3-5 individual toilets to provide an alternative for individuals who feel uncomfortable entering the main toilet blocks.

## DECLARATION

I, Sanele Siwela declare that:

- This thesis is my original work; sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged fully.
- This study has not been submitted for any degree at any other institution of learning.
- This dissertation does not comprise other researchers' diagrams, data, pictures or graphs without being referenced as being sourced from other persons.
- This thesis does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the references.

Researcher



10 July 2023

Sanele Siwela

Date

### Supervisor's Declaration

As the candidate's supervisor, I agree to the submission of this thesis.



10 July 2023

Dr Saajidha Sader

Date

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to:

the six Black lesbian students who participated in this research:  
this research would not have been possible without your cooperation;  
my daughters, Nokuthaba and Nonhlanhla;  
and my husband, Prof Muthulisi Siwela.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The process of completing this doctorate has been long and slow. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, something would always get in the way: illness, death in the family, strict government lockdown regulations – the list is endless. To add to the challenges, I faced, the newly introduced 2020 UKZN Rig system proved to be unfriendly, as it made it difficult for me to obtain ethical clearance to gather data on time. However, giving up was not an option, and I had to endure this cancer that had already infected me.

I am indebted to the 6 students who took part in this study and 4 students who assisted in the piloting of research instruments. I am grateful for their eagerness and willingness to undertake this research journey with me.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor, Dr Saajidha Sader, for your support and guidance throughout the duration of this thesis. Your critical feedback and encouragement enabled me to refine my ideas and complete this dissertation.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr Melanie Martin's input as a core supervisor during the proposal stage of this research project.

I would like to express my immense love and gratitude to my daughter, Nonhlanhla, for listening to and commenting on various draft forms of my chapters and for constantly encouraging me to keep going.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECD	Early childhood development
GBV	Gender-based violence
GSA	Gay–straight alliances
ICASS	Internal continuous assessment
LGB	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and more
NCV	National Curriculum Vocational
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UTVET	uMgungundlovu Technical Vocational Education and Training (College)

### **Note regarding the use of LGB / LGBT / LGBTQI / LGBTQ+ in this thesis:**

The terms to represent diversity in sexual identity, gender, sexual orientation have expanded over the years, with more identities being represented in the acronym with time. In addition, some research studies have focussed on sexual orientation alone (e.g., LGB), while others have been broader in focus. This has resulted in a wide range of acronyms being used in the literature. In this thesis, the acronym ‘LGBTQ+’ is used to indicate the unlimited range of descriptors which individuals may choose to identify with. However, as some of the studies cited used more restricted acronyms or focus, the thesis tries to preserve this. This results in a variation of acronyms being used in the thesis which is not accidental.



## **Daylight Robbery**

You invaded my space, a gun in the left hand  
and a Bible in the right.

You smeared me with the dung of intellectual and physiological inferiority,  
at a substandard Bantu school.

You robbed me of knowledge  
perceived me as less capable of intellectual pursuit  
and dumped me into unskilled cheap labour in  
my White superior coloniser's household –  
because I am a Black female.

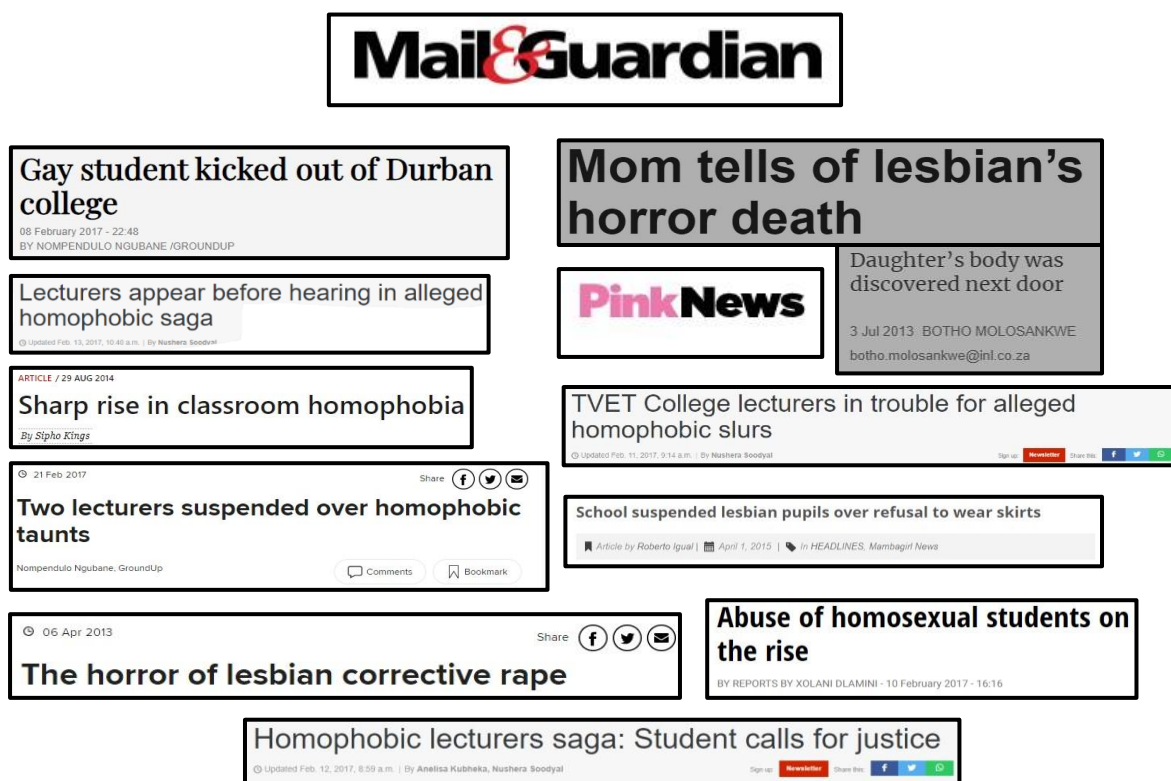
*Sanele Siwela*

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

...and when we speak, we are afraid our words will  
not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent,  
we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak,  
remembering we were never meant to survive.  
*bell hooks (1989, p.17)*

The public is exposed to media headlines and reports on a frequent basis in South Africa. These headlines highlight that the higher education system – and the larger society – are failing to uphold the rights of lesbian women and other groups marginalised for their sexual orientation or identity.



**Figure 1 Snippets of news articles illustrating the prevalence of aggression towards homosexual individuals in South Africa**

Institutional heterosexism and the access of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or other (LGBTQ+) students to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in South Africa is a critical issue which is neglected both in practice and in research. This neglect is not only a matter of educational exclusion but also of social justice. This thesis addresses this

lacuna by investigating the academic and social experiences of six Black lesbian students at a TVET college in Pietermaritzburg in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Unfortunately, the reporting of such tragic events in the South African context reveals just the tip of the iceberg of the persisting and widespread challenges faced by many LGBTQ+ individuals in education settings globally. According to Thoreson (2018), there is still brutal and widespread discrimination against LGBT people worldwide despite laws that protect their rights and freedom of expression. In some patriarchal or strongly religious (Christian or Muslim) countries, the penalty for same-sex relationships is imprisonment or even death (Hutt, 2018). In Africa, Human Rights Watch (2015) has reported public violence and even torture of LGBTQ+ people in countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya and Tunisia. Homosexuality is openly condemned by most senior African politicians and religious leaders, and people with such sexual orientation often suffer violence and aggression.

LGBT movements have used tactics as diverse as public education, lobbying and legislative campaigns, litigation, and direct action to advance LGBT human rights. Gerber et al. (2021) report that, in 2019:

wide media attention was given to decisions allowing same-sex couples to marry in Taiwan and Ecuador, as well as Brunei's implementation of Sharia Law, which provided death by stoning as a punishment for anyone found guilty of engaging in same-sex sexual conduct. While Australian federal, state and territory anti-discrimination laws protect against discrimination on the basis of SOGIE, the majority of these laws contain exemptions for religious organisations, which significantly limits their utility (p.3).

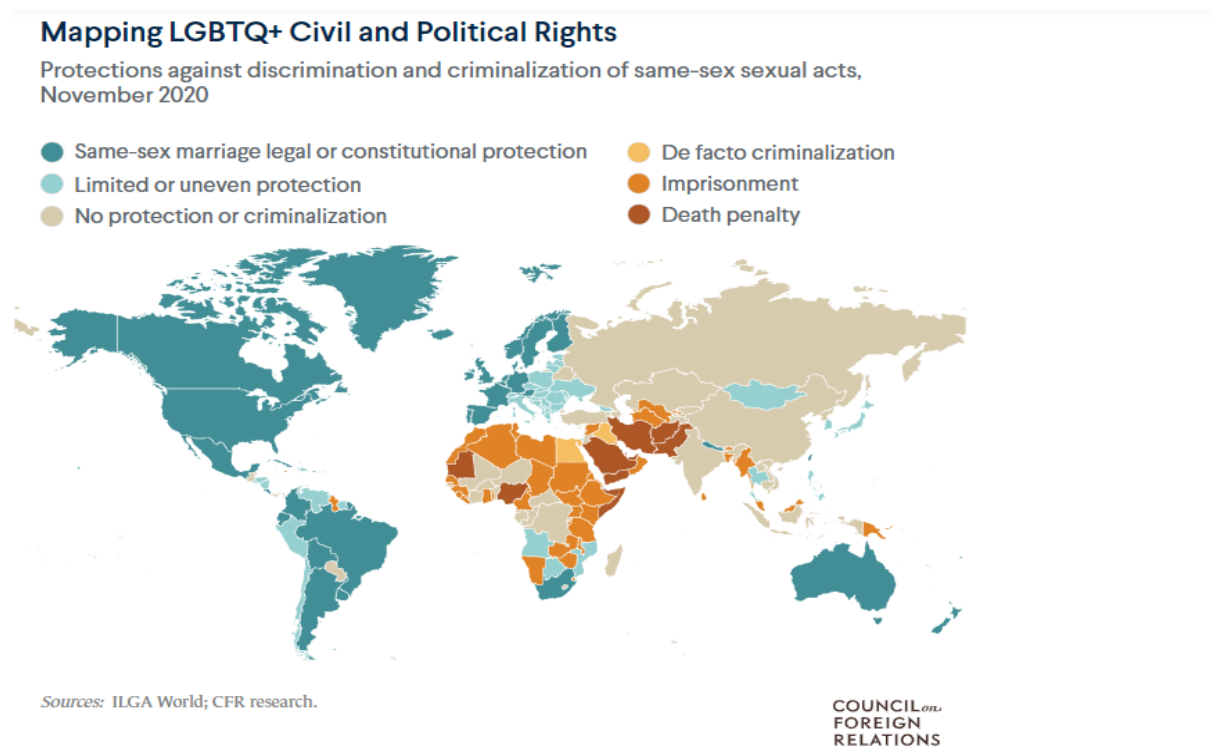
The increase in constitutional protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity does not signal a growing global consensus with regard to the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, however (Kuehl, 2010).

During the early 21st century, the broader landscape of LGBTQ+ civil rights changed rapidly, while some political and social rights still lag behind (Dion, 2020). There has been a gradual shift toward recognizing LGBTQ+ rights globally, with these rights gaining traction in formal law and policy as well as in public opinion and in the agendas of activists working for human rights and social justice (Thoreson, 2020). By way of example, Scotland is set to implement LGBTQI+ inclusive lessons into the school curriculum in 2021, which will see students

learning about same-sex marriage, same-sex parenting, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. (Gomes da Costa Santos & Waites, 2022). Gerber et al. (2021) comment that “[d]espite such efforts, LGBTQ+ people in every region of the world still face marginalization and repression with a few exceptions” (p. 3). Despite continued progress on the legal and public policy fronts, gay and gender-non-conforming students continue to face violence, threatening circumstances and significant impediments to learning, globally (Stuart & James, 2010).

Studies show that LGBTQ+ students are more likely than other students to feel unsafe at college and that the mistreatment they face interferes with their ability to succeed. Students often stop coming to classes regularly; many drop out, run away from home or attempt suicide (Valentine, et al., 2009). Gerber et al. (2021) argue that “a holistic approach is needed to address the myriad human rights violations that stem from entrenched gender binaries, heteronormativity and homophobia/biphobia/transphobia” (p. 9).

The figure below depicts the geographical regions where same-sex sexual acts are protected from discrimination or criminalised.



**Figure 2 Geographical regions where same-sex sexual acts are protected from discrimination or criminalised (Angelo & Bocci, 2021)**

## **1.2 Background and context**

The post-school education and training system in South Africa comprises all forms of education and training provision for adults who have completed their secondary level of schooling. On a separate track, it also includes those who have not completed their primary or secondary schooling and even those who have never attended school. Exclusionary, racist and sexist apartheid legislation kept Black South Africans from participating fully and meaningfully in post-school education and training during the colonial and apartheid eras (Akala & Divala, 2016). However, the South African post-school education and training system has experienced significant and positive change since then, with recent reforms informed by the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (WPoPSET) (South Africa, 2013). The goal of the WPoPSET (South Africa, 2013) is to democratise the post-school education and training system, improve the quality of education, expand access to educational opportunities, and address and eliminate any form of unfair discrimination.

According to the constitution of South Africa, “the consolidation of democracy in our country requires the eradication of social and economic inequalities, especially those that are systemic in nature, which were generated in our history by colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy, and which brought pain and suffering to the great majority of our people” (South Africa, 2002, p.1). Despite the constitutional mandate of having to ensure equality and non-discrimination, as well as legislation such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, also known as the Equality Act, most South Africans still experience systemic social injustices according to their race, gender, class and other social identities. According to Kamsteeg (2016), this includes Black lesbian students who, despite gaining access to post school education and training, experience various forms of exclusion. Oppression regarding race, gender, class and sexuality is still prevalent in post-school education and training institutions. As a result, these post-school education and training institutions are frequently experienced as unsafe for the survivors of such discriminating and abusive actions (Naidu & Mutambara, 2017).

Research suggests that heterosexism may hinder Black lesbians' participation and ultimate success in post-school education and training (see, for example: Gormley, 2017; Breshears & Beer, 2016). A study conducted by Munyuki and Vincent (2017) found that lesbian students in post-school education and training in South Africa encountered incidents of harassment, ranging in severity from verbal abuse to physical violence and rape. Naidu and Mutambara

(2017) also found that Black lesbian students encountered multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, based on their social identities. Negative experiences in post-school education and training may contribute to students' under- and non-performance in their academic careers caused by their continuous exposure to discrimination. These risks include poor test or exam scores, high dropout rates, achievement gaps, low grades, and high suspension rates (Koebler, 2012). This is further supported by Francis (2017), who asserts that negative experiences in educational institutions may cause these students to drop out of college and become involved in self-harming behaviour.

Gender, race, class and sexual orientation have the ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression (hooks, 2000). Black lesbian women being of the 'second sex' and the 'last race' are perceived by some as being at the bottom of the totem pole of society (Collins, 1990). This constrains their agency and the purposeful and unimpeded influence on their education. Becoming conscious of their oppression with a view to emancipation may raise their agency to take action in response to oppression (Rothmann, 2018).

This feminist study on the educational experiences of Black lesbian students at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college is set within this context of persistent social injustices as well as post-school education and training transformation<sup>1</sup>.

### **1.3 Purpose, focus and aims of the study**

The purpose of this research was to explore the academic and social experiences of Black lesbian students at a TVET college in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study focused on how the various social identities of Black lesbian students intersect to influence their post-school education and training experiences. The study also aimed to investigate the factors that influence their participation and success in post-school education and training, and how they negotiated the influences of these factors.

The objectives of this study were to investigate:

- the post-school education and training experiences of Black female lesbian students at a TVET college;

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<sup>1</sup> Transformation can be defined as "radical change that makes for a clean break with the past and energises people towards new configurations, structures and processes" (Maringe & Osman, 2016, p.121).

- the intersection of Black female lesbian students' social identities and how they influence their participation and success in post-school education and training; and
- how Black female lesbian students navigate the contextual dynamics that influence their participation and success at a TVET college.

## 1.4 Rationale

Rolfe and Peters (2014) note that very little has been done in post-school education in South Africa to address continued heterosexist patterns and resulting homophobia. Despite an impressive legislative framework in South Africa, Black lesbian students are subjected to forms of discrimination, including marginalisation and invisibilisation (Nduna & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2015; Akala & Divala, 2016; Matthyse, 2017; Netshandama, Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Matshidza, 2017). Many studies in South Africa report that discrimination still exists, despite the increasing acceptance and participation of these sexual minorities (Msibi, 2013; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017; Nela, Vawdab, Mbokodo & Govender, 2017; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Bhana, 2012). According to Munyuki and Vincent (2018), the focus of the transformative processes in higher education in South Africa has been on addressing historical injustices linked to race and class, with little emphasis on sexuality and heterosexism, which this study seeks to investigate in relation to the academic and social experiences of Black lesbian TVET college students. Most prior studies have focused on universities (Lesch et al., 2017; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017), with only a few studies focusing on TVET colleges (Ngidi & Dlamini, 2017). The limited research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) students' experiences of heterosexism in the TVET college sector (Rolfe & Peters, 2014) was a key motivation for this research. My identity and experiences as a TVET lecturer provided a further motivation for the study.

As a TVET college lecturer for the last 12 years, I have observed the marginalising and exclusionary practices that students experience because of their sexual orientation. Lesbians, gays and bisexual students are among the disadvantaged minority groups at TVET colleges. They are undermined and often shunned by their heterosexual peers. While executing my pastoral duties, I have also observed that most of these students experience emotional and behavioural difficulties, which are triggered by verbal abuse and name-calling by their heterosexual counterparts. They have also indicated that they have lost friends and family after disclosing their sexual orientation, which in a worst-case scenario can sometimes even lead to

them being abandoned or rejected by their families and becoming homeless. At college, they normally form their own friendship circles, because of being belittled and snubbed by some heterosexual peers and even by lecturers. This often leads to absenteeism and a high dropout rate, and even fear of participating in education among this group of students.

Some studies show evidence of poor and harmful practices against LGBTQ+ students by their lecturers who receive insufficient training to prepare them to work with them (Msibi, 2012). Also, various incidents on social media have been observed that demonstrate aggression towards LGBTQ+ students. This prompted me to conduct a study that would detail the experiences of Black lesbian students, with the hope that the data derived from this study would increase awareness and spur transformation of the TVET sector's approach to LGBTQ+ students and other minority groups.

## **1.5 Research questions**

This study was driven by the following critical question:

What are the post-school academic and social experiences  
of Black lesbian students at a TVET college?

The following sub-questions were used to deepen the investigation:

1. What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college?
2. What factors impeded or facilitated their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?
3. How does the intersection of the social identities of Black female lesbian students contribute to their educational success and participation at post-school educational institutions?

## **1.6 Background of the TVET college**

The uMgungundlovu Technical Vocational Education and Training (UTVET) College is a public college for school leavers that offers vocational programmes and qualifications, including both certificate and diploma programmes as well as skills programmes (DHET, 2013). The college is situated in the city of Pietermaritzburg in the province of KwaZulu-Natal,



South Africa. The college serves rural, semi-rural and urban communities. I position the history of Black lesbian students against the backdrop of a racially divided residential area, which is still reflected today. This racialized class difference was created and enabled through the past colonial and apartheid eras. Apartheid classification meant that Black people lived in rural areas, Black townships, and informal settlements, while White people lived in relative comfort in the city centres, suburbs or on farms. Being Black meant that one was worse off than the average White person on practically every index of life. White and Black interactions were governed and enforced by systematic inequality. The apartheid-era race classification system is still in use today, despite equity and redress policies (Strauss, 2019). The mission and vision of the PSET system is to provide integrated, coordinated and articulated education that enables the improved economic participation and social development of youth (DHET, 2013).

### **1.7 Challenges to students' success at TVET colleges**

According to the White Paper on Post-Secondary Education and Training (South Africa, 2013), “the current mix of programmes and qualifications in the TVET colleges is complex to administer, difficult for learners and parents to understand and often poorly quality-assured” (DHET, 2013, p. xii). Based on my observation as a National Curriculum Vocational (NCV) TVET lecturer, students who struggle with academic subjects at school often enrol at a TVET college hoping that the academic content will be easier, only to find that they are still required to pass languages and mathematics. There is thus a misalignment in the system, because of the strong academic expectations of these colleges. Most of the students are school leavers from low socio-economic status homes, with a minimum schooling level of Grade 9, especially in the NCV programmes (DHET, 2013).

TVET colleges are funded and therefore pressured into taking in as many students as possible. From my observation as a TVET lecturer, some students enrol in the programme because a bursary is available or because they consider it to be their only option. Often, these students leave the college as soon as they receive their bursary money. The Department of Higher Education and Training has also acknowledged that the pass rates at the TVET colleges are not satisfactory. Many students struggle to make the transition from school to the TVET colleges (DHET, 2013).

## **1.8 Overview of relevant literature**

Past research has shown that the heterosexist post-school educational system in South Africa is discriminatory in that it infringes on the right to education of those who classify themselves, or are identified by others, as lesbians (Van Vollenhoven, 2013). It constructs Black lesbian students as ‘other’: different from, and outsiders to, the heterosexual norm (Sithole, 2015). Black lesbian students struggle with issues of labelling, sexual abuse, harassment, and having to resort to a total denial of their sexual identity to cope, as well as frequently experiencing fear and isolation (Henderson, 2015; Nzimande, 2017). This often leads to high dropout rates among these students.

Studies conducted in post-school education and training in South Africa have found that LGBTQ+ students experience violations of their human rights (Vollenhoven, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Naidu & Mutambara, 2017), including gender-based violence (Francis, 2017; Nela et al., 2017; Bennet & Reddy, 2015; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). Verbal abuse, stalking, rejection, hate crimes, and instances of ‘corrective rape’ have been reported (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Netshandama et al., 2017; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Francis & Msibi, 2011). Exclusion based on prejudices (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017) and exclusion from social events has been reported by some gender scholars (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Matthyse, 2017). Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) report identity categorisation among some lesbian women in higher education. In response to this reality, Rothmann (2018) advocates for the potential role of a social constructionist approach to resilience in encouraging the creation of a transformative higher education context for sexual minority academics and students. In the same vein, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) used the concept of hegemonic masculinity in education studies to understand the dynamics of classroom life, including patterns of resistance and bullying among LGBTQ+ students. These concepts were also used to explore relations to the curriculum and the difficulties in gender-neutral pedagogy. From these studies emerged themes that are discussed in depth in the literature review in Chapter 2.

## **1.9 Overview of the theoretical framework**

To develop a conceptual understanding of the experiences of Black lesbian students within an educational context, a single theoretical foundation was insufficient. Thus, I brought together several theoretical threads with the goal of creating an integrated conceptual framework that draws from different disciplines.

This study is grounded in the feminist paradigm. According to hooks (2000), feminism is an ideology that aims to end sexism by challenging the domination, exploitation, and oppression of women politically, economically, socially, and culturally. It is a political movement that aims at enforcing equality and fairness through the empowerment and emancipation of women in relation to the effects of colonialism (racism, sexism, patriarchy and capitalism) in postcolonial contexts. I have chosen to undertake a feminist investigation because it privileges women's experiences and subjugated knowledge. Feminists advocate for the inclusion of women in knowledge production and assert that this is best done by grounding research in the daily experiences of women as perceived and interpreted by the women themselves in various spheres of society and paying special attention to differences of power and privilege among diverse women (Hesse-Bieber, 2011).

The study draws on Black feminism, which brings an understanding of the interlocking nature of oppression. Intersectionality was also used, which was introduced by Black feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1991), hooks (2015) and Collins (2000). Black feminist scholars argue that for Black women, race, ethnicity, sex, class and gender are inseparable. These 'matrices of domination' describe this overall social organisation within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained. The 'outsider-within' concept described the position of Black women 'who do not belong to any one group' (Collins, 2000). The Black Feminist Standpoint theory, which emphasises the standpoint of and for Black women – that is, Black women's reality according to those who live it (hooks, 2012; Collins, 2000) – also informed this study. These concepts are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

In addition, I drew on the central arguments of decolonial theory, which critiques Western representation of the 'other' and reveals how knowledge produced in and by the West is layered with colonial power, thereby creating and sustaining a politics of Western knowledge dominance and rendering the 'other' an object of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007). Decolonial thinking is understood as a space for minority groups to redefine their identities and reaffirm their humanness in their social locations. It is based on the intersectional inequalities that form the colonial matrix of power and provides a political tool for resistance (Fanon, 1967; Mignolo, 2003; Lugones, 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2016). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) also views decoloniality as a liberator language of the future for Africa, and a mode of self-actualization and the realisation of epistemic justice for African people.

I also incorporated decolonial feminism, which engages with debates pertaining to coloniality, modernity and indigenous identity (Lugones, 2007). Decolonial Feminist theory values all knowledge and lived experiences as equal, and in so doing provides a new framework within the geopolitics of knowledge production, one that demands respect for the pluralisation of differences (Manning, 2021). Colonialism had a psychological effect on communities as it affected how people perceived themselves. According to decolonial feminists, we need a “decolonial turn” that will free women who have been colonised twice—as Africans and as women. I drew on the work of African anticolonial scholar Oyèwùmí (1997), who argues that gender was non-existent in precolonial Africa and arose in the African context as a colonial imposition.

### **1.10 Overview of research methodology**

This study focused on how the various social identities of Black lesbian students intersect to influence their post-school education and training experiences. A qualitative design was appropriate for this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which focused on how people construct identities. A feminist paradigm was used, as it advocates for women's social, political, and economic rights, especially with regard to the equality of the sexes.

The study aimed to capture the essence of participants’ educational and social experiences by considering the intersection of sex, class, race, and gender relations. I, therefore, opted to use a narrative inquiry methodology. I selected a visual narrative approach, because personal narratives construct people’s identities (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Through narratives, I was able to gather information from the participants’ perspectives and gain a better understanding of their lived experiences.

Participants were six self-identified Black (African) lesbian students between the ages of 18 and 25, registered at the TVET college during the data collection period. The research made use of the purposive sampling technique also called judgment sampling. “It is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (Ilker Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2).

To identify participants, I used the snowball sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability-based sampling technique that can be used to gain access to hard-to-reach and/or hidden populations who are socially marginalised, for example, Black African lesbian students in the present study. It also “acts to exacerbate the problem of the reproduction of similarities and the exclusion of differences” (Appleby, 2006, p.19). In this study, participants were asked to identify other qualifying students who they believed might be interested in taking part in the research.

For this study, I used the following participatory methods of data collection: Narrative interviewing (semi-structured), photo voice, focus group discussions and reflective journaling. Given that this is a narrative study, I utilised semi-structured questionnaires, which facilitated participants developing their own narratives. I used probes to ensure that they fully described their experiences of being Black African, lesbian college students.

### **1.11 Researcher reflexivity (my standpoint)**

This is feminist research. To adhere to the tenets of the feminist research process, I have disclosed my values and attitudes, my history, positionality, and identity by engaging in strong reflexivity. I acknowledge my standpoint as a Black, African, able-bodied, middle-aged, heterosexual feminist academic and researcher living in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and working at a TVET college.

I grew up in a low socio-economic Black township, where women were oppressed due to patriarchy, misogyny, race and class. I am familiar with Black culture and since my youth, I have been very aware of the challenges Black women experience because of their gender, culture, race, class and sexual orientation. I am passionate about creating positive social change—especially for students who do not fall into privileged social identity categories, such as Black African lesbians.

My research is foregrounded by my positionality as a Black African woman who recognises and identifies with power dynamics. I acknowledge that my position as the researcher is that of an outsider, in terms of my heterosexuality. I am also an insider from the perspective of my race, gender, and class. I state my social positionality as a way of acknowledging my target and agent identities, which may influence my position as researcher.

## 1.12 Structure of the thesis

A brief overview of the structure of the thesis and its chapters follows below:

**Chapter 1: Introduction.** This chapter has provided an overview of the study. The research problem was introduced and contextualised and the focus and motivation for the study were also briefly discussed, along with an introduction to the literature and theoretical framework that guided the study and the methodologies used to implement the study.

**Chapter 2: Literature review.** This chapter discusses the legislative and empirical literature on the experiences of Black female lesbian students in connection with factors that facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success in post-school education.

**Chapter 3: Theoretical framework.** This chapter describes the conceptual framework of the study. Decolonial feminism, which encompasses Black feminist thought, decolonial and African feminism, are discussed in detail. The key concepts of coloniality and decolonial theory are explained, as well as the concepts of intersectionality.

**Chapter 4: Research design and methodology.** presents the research design and methodology.

**Chapter 5: Narratives.** This chapter presents personal and visual narratives of the participants.

**Chapter 6: Data analysis.** This chapter describes the analysis of the data that was conducted and the results of the study. The first part of the chapter presents the participants' demographic information. The second section examines the first research question. The third part analyses the findings of the second and third research questions.

**Chapter 7: Expressions of the identity of lesbian students as barriers and enablers to access, participation and success at a tertiary education college**

This chapter focuses on the social identities (biographies of the participants). The discussion focuses on the intersection of social identities and the consequences in relation to racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism.

### **Chapter 8: Heterosexism, participation and success at a TVET college**

This chapter presents the key findings in relation to Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college.

### **Chapter 9: Resistance and resilience: participants' agency in their responses to heterosexism in the context of the college**

The chapter focuses on agency and ways in which participants resisted their oppression and demonstrated their agency and resilience.

### **Chapter 10: Summary, conclusions and recommendations**

This chapter presents the final argument based on the key findings, as well as the limitations, recommendations for future research and conclusion.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the South African legal and policy context relevant to the rights of LGBTQ+ students in higher education and synthesises local and international theoretical and empirical work on the experiences of Black lesbian students in post-school tertiary education relevant to the questions:

- What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college?
- How do the social identities of Black female lesbian students contribute to their educational success and participation at post-school educational institutions?
- What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?

Any exploration of the experiences of Black students in South African higher education may be understood through the lens of how the country's colonial and apartheid history, and the policies that these regimes imposed, have impacted the development of education, the legislative framework and cultural dynamics within South Africa. Colonisation, and the missionary enterprises that accompanied it, ravaged many of the cultural practices of indigenous people (Fanon, 1963). Thiong'o (1986) describes colonialism as an exploitative, racist, decivilising and dehumanising system of political dictatorship, which aimed at destroying and undervaluing indigenous people's social practices in education, religion, and history. Missionaries banned some native practices which they deemed to be immoral, such as homosexuality (Gaitskell, 1982). In contrast, heterosexism was promoted as normal and 'civilised'.

In 1948, the White post-colonial government in South Africa introduced apartheid, a set of laws and policies to enforce segregation that included laws that regulated sexual relationships across the racial categories. Apartheid education emphasised subservience and cultural domination by the ruling White segment of the population, and prepared Black children for a place as subordinate workers for the privileged White leaders (McKeever, 2017).



After the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Constitution of South Africa (1996) was promulgated, granting equal rights and freedoms to all citizens. Unlike the apartheid regime, which limited sexual orientation to private spaces, in the new democracy, sexual preference became a public matter and homosexuality was legalised. This also implied that discrimination against and intolerance towards a person's sexual orientation became a violation of their constitutional rights. Despite this enabling legislative environment, Black lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation openly were often targeted with harassment, victimisation and violence (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane, 2010).

Thirty years after South Africa became a true democracy, the previously disadvantaged groups such as Black women, people with disabilities, and sexual minorities continue to experience a significant gap between the rights and respect afforded them by the Constitution and the reality they face every day. Heleta (2016) comments, "The curriculum remains largely Eurocentric and tends to reinforce Western dominance and privilege. The underlying structures of the previous era's oppression and injustices also remained the same" (p.1). Heterosexuality is still positioned as a given, natural norm. According to Lake (2017), living openly as a Black lesbian woman tends to condemn one to exclusion in most social spaces.

Keeping this context in view, this chapter begins by reviewing relevant legislation and policy for equity and redress in post-school education introduced after the abolition of the apartheid legal framework. This section explores local and international literature on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education institutions, focusing on barriers to their full and unfettered participation and success and the impact of these on their well-being, strategies they use to overcome barriers to participation and success, and institutional strategies to support their participation and success.

## **2.2 South African legislative and policy framework around the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and their inclusion in higher education**

Soon after the demise of apartheid in 1994, several pieces of legislation and policies were introduced to transform the historical inequality of South Africans under the law and the violations of human rights that had been embedded in the apartheid legal framework. The Constitution of South Africa (1996) itself, and numerous Acts, enshrine equal rights for all and prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender or sexual orientation. A number of

legislation and policy documents specifically address equality and discrimination in the contexts of education and higher education institutions.

The purpose of these Acts and policies was to achieve redress and equality, especially for disadvantaged social groups, among whom are people in the LGBTQ+ community (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Van Vollenhoven & Els, 2013). The transformation agenda set out in the legislative framework held the promise of equal rights becoming available for disadvantaged students, including LGBTQ+ students in post-apartheid South Africa (Maringe & Osman, 2016).

## **2.2.1 Laws asserting and protecting the equal rights of all**

### ***2.2.1.1 The Constitution of South Africa 1996***

The Constitution of South Africa (1996) contains a Bill of Rights that enshrines the human rights for all people in South Africa; these include the rights to equality, human dignity, freedom and security, privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of association, a healthy environment and education. Human rights, such as the right to dignity, equality, and non-discrimination, apply equally to all people, irrespective of their sexual identity (De Wet, Rothmann, & Simmonds, 2016). The Constitution is clear that the rights it enshrines apply equally to all citizens. There is no question of any of these rights being based merely on ‘tolerance towards diversity’ or these rights being available to different groups at different levels. Instead, the human rights enshrined in the Constitution place every human being in South Africa on an equal footing as to their rights.

### ***2.2.1.2 The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000***

The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 (PEPUDA) (2000) prohibits discrimination and harassment in any form. This Act refers to incidents of rape and sexual harassment on campuses, which it condemns in the strongest terms. In terms of Section 13 of the PEPUDA (2000), any form of discrimination based on a person’s sex and gender is considered unfair discrimination. In Section 8, The Act condemns gender-based violence (homophobia) and the systemic inequality of participation and lack of access to education or sport by homosexuals as a result of their sexual orientation. The Act further seeks to address

unequal structures, hierarchies and power relationships that continue to exist in South African society – and that are also relevant to this study.

### ***2.2.1.3 Acts Addressing Domestic Violence and Sex Offences***

Two of the most important laws that address violence against women are the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act 32 of 2007. According to these two laws, violence includes physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse; economic abuse; intimidation; harassment; stalking and rape, and all forms of sexual offences.

Despite their good intentions, these laws have been criticised for their failure to adequately address the cultural, social, and economic consequences that result when gender-based violence does occur. Badat and Yusuf (2014) argue that legislators did not consider the wider negative implications of sexual violence or abuse, and that this has led to tertiary education in South Africa also failing to ensure the freedom for all.

## **2.2.2 Legislation and policy addressing equality and discrimination in education**

The National Education Act of 1996, and the subsequent White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) and Policy framework for the realisation of social inclusion in the post-school education and training system (DHET, 2016), mandate equality and inclusion in institutions of higher education in South Africa.

### ***2.2.2.1 The National Education Act of 1996***

The National Education Act of 1996, in Section 3, aims to achieve equitable education opportunities and the redress of past inequality in the provision of education, including the promotion of gender equality and the advancement of the status of all women.

### ***2.2.2.2 The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (WPoPSET)***

The WPoPSET (DHET, 2013) is a vital policy document that spells out the key principles that must be implemented in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector by 2030. The intention is to transform cultures of exclusion in education institutions by addressing inequality and inequity in order to achieve a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist, and

democratic South Africa and expanded access, improved quality, and increased diversity of provision (DHET, 2013, p.4).

In relation to TVET colleges specifically, it identifies the improvement of student support services as an aim, but notes as an impediment to these goals the victimisation of female students through prevalent patriarchal practices and sexual harassment (DHET, 2013).

#### ***2.2.2.3 Policy framework for the realisation of social inclusion in the post-school education and training system***

In 2016, the *Policy framework for the realisation of social inclusion in the post-school education and training system* (DHET, 2016) was introduced by the Department of Higher Education and Training for post-school tertiary education and training institutions. Its main aim is to address the challenges and exclusion experienced by Black women from marginalised backgrounds in terms of access to institutions of higher learning. The policy acknowledges the record of homophobic violence in tertiary educational institutions and advocates for the radical transformation of the cultures of these educational institutions (DHET, 2016). The policy framework (DHET, 2016) mandates that post-school education and training (PSET) institutions ensure that their institutional policies include social inclusion mechanisms and are guided by the principles of substantive equality to remove all barriers that perpetuate and create inequalities in society. The policy framework (DHET, 2016) also mandates that PSET institutions institute policies designed to eliminate sexual harassment and sexual discrimination in any form, including setting standards and guidelines for dealing with offenders. The Ministry of Higher Education and Training accompanied its introduction of the Framework by making funds available to TVET colleges to implement the Framework. TVET colleges were to apply to the National Skills Fund for such funding. However, severe under-resourcing of both human and relevant other resources hindered implementation, hampering the development of effective responses to heterosexism-based discrimination (DHET, 2016).

#### **2.2.3 Realities under the South African legislative and policy framework**

While the Constitution, and the legislation that emanates from it, is binding in every institution and environment in South Africa, including education institutions at every level, studies conducted at higher education institutions in South Africa have found that LGBTQ+ students have experienced human rights violations at these institutions as a result of being targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation (van Vollenhoven & Els, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Naidu & Mutambara, 2017). Numerous qualitative studies have provided empirical evidence that

higher education institutions perpetuate and reinforce social prejudices and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ students (Naidu & Mutambara, 2017; Brits & Naidoo, 2017; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017).

Gross violations of human dignity and safety have been reported in some instances, including women who identify as lesbians being assaulted and stripped naked, stabbed, and raped (Van Vollenhoven, & Els, 2013). Msibi (2012) found that educators were spreading rumours that homosexuality was contagious and therefore heterosexual students were in danger of becoming 'infected' by sexual minority students. Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2017) report the denial of LGBTQ+ students to participate in sports, to apply for financial aid or actively engage in classroom discussions because of their sexuality, resulting in these students deciding to terminate their studies.

Thus, despite the directives provided through legislation and policy for higher education institutions to ensure equality, inclusion and non-discrimination, many educational institutions continue to reproduce the patterns of heterosexism, with the result that minority groups, such as Black lesbian students, continue to experience victimization by members of the dominant heterosexual group at these institutions (Reygan & Francis, 2015; De Wet, 2017).

### **2.3. Barriers to the participation and success of LGBTQ+ Students in higher education**

This section highlights the key findings of previous studies on the barriers experienced by sexual minority groups in institutions of higher learning in South Africa and across the globe.

#### **2.3.1 Cultural beliefs**

Traditional, cultural and religious beliefs that same-sex relationships are unacceptable exist and are held by segments of the population in South Africa and around the world (Lesch, Brits, & Naidoo, 2017; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Studies have shed some light on the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community that are created and sustained by the cultural beliefs held by their respective societies. In many of the traditional African cultures found in South Africa, manhood is culturally defined in terms of dominance, toughness, masculine behaviour and the defence of male honour, which can promote an ideology of male supremacy and superiority (Mkhize et al., 2012). Many scholars have linked violence against Black lesbian students to a motive to uphold the patriarchal gender order (Msibi, 2013; Lake, 2014). Msibi (2013) argues

that homophobia is directly linked to patriarchal systems that believe that women's bodies belong to men. This strongly entrenched cultural and societal norm contributes to higher rates of violence as a tool used by men to exert their authority and power over women (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015).

In South Africa, some view homosexuality as a 'colonially-imported idea' and hold discriminatory beliefs and prejudices towards all homosexuals (Nela et al., 2017). However, the roots of same-sex attraction can be traced back to long before the arrival of Western settlers (Msibi, 2011; Morrissey, 2013). Therefore, homosexuality is not a Western construct, but a way of being that is suppressed by the act of privileging heteronormativity (Msibi, 2011).

Koraan and Geduld (2015) define heteronormativity as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only seem coherent – that is organised as a sexuality – but also privileged" (p.1935).

### **2.3.2 Institutional culture**

Researchers have found that post-school education institutions in South Africa often pose a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students and this directly affects their potential academic achievements, their educational aspirations, and their psychological well-being (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, & Mogotsi, 2017). Bennet and Reddy (2015) identify homophobia especially in and around institutions of higher education as a challenge for LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa. The findings of some studies suggest deep seated institutional cultures of heteronormativity in higher education settings in South Africa, which tend to lead to structural imbalances, inequalities and injustices, despite the political freedom that was achieved in 1994 (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017; Boonzaier & Mkhize, 2018).

According to Bhana (2012), while educational institutions are, by definition, places of learning and teaching, discussions about sexuality are not encouraged, even though such discussions are supported by policy. As a result, there is often silence regarding the presence of homophobia in South African higher education institutions of learning. Some institutions also fear that teaching students about homosexuality could possibly be seen to be aligned with promoting it (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017).

The literature thus reveals a highly troubling pattern of mistreatment, negative consequences, and a dramatic failure on the part of many South African educational institutions to adequately address LGBTQ+-related issues and concerns, leading to a high failure rate among this group of students (Biegel, 2010; Barroso, 2015).

Similarly, in the United States of America, LGBTQ+ students in educational institutions experience an unwelcoming educational culture which affects their well-being resulting in these students experiencing depression, anxiety, stress aggression and low self-esteem (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Education institutions seem to assume that all students and staff members would be heterosexual, which leads to the exclusion of anybody who does not fit into this scheme. There are no policies regulating educational institutions in terms of what they need to do to ensure that LGBTQ+ learners and educators who do not conform to the gender/sexuality norms feel safe and welcome (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Biegel (2010) presents a legal analysis of the rights LGBT students and educators to be publicly out about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the United States. Despite significant advances for gay and transgender persons in the United States, the educational environment was found to continue to be intimidating, even terrifying, as evidenced by numerous high-profile incidents of discrimination, bullying, violence and suicide that were reported. Efforts to protect the rights of (LGBT) students and educators, or to enhance curricula to better reflect the experience of differing sexual orientations and gender identities, had been bitterly opposed in the courtroom, at the ballot box, and in the educational institutions themselves.

### **2.3.3 Gender-based violence**

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any harmful act that is executed explicitly against another person's will and is based on socially-ascribed gender (McBride, 2020). It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, emotional, or sexual harm, such as corrective rape or suffering that includes deprivations of liberty or freedom of movement—for example, stalking. Other forms of GBV may include name-calling, teasing and mocking, slander, damage to their property, threatening behaviour, and sustained bullying (McBride, 2020).

Nela et al. (2017) report negative treatment of LGBTQ+ students in South African educational institutions, which includes overt discrimination and harassment from peers and even from

academics. Black lesbians were raped and kicked by their heterosexual peers for dating other girls. Black lesbian students were scared to go to lecturers' offices because of the fear of what may be said to them (Nela et al., 2017). Such criminal assaults made LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe in educational institutions, and this ongoing sense of insecurity interfered with their ability to succeed in their classes (Jaklitsch, 2017).

Higher education institutions thus become sites of enactment of patriarchal hierarchies, oppression, and violence by more dominant groups of students – and even educators (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017).

### ***2.3.3.1 Homophobia***

Homophobia is a specific form of gender violence and, consequently, of gender oppression (Ready, 2011). Homophobia is described as the fear, hatred, or intolerance of sharing a public space with sexual minorities. Heterosexuality is seen as the only natural practice of sexuality that is acceptable and any nonconformity from heteronormativity is viewed as deviant, unnatural and perverse (Bhana, 2012). According to Jagessar and Msibi (2015), heteronormativity is seen as “compulsory” heterosexuality. Homosexual individuals are rejected by homophobic individuals as being outside the hetero-normative schema for sexual orientation (Evans et al., 2017). Homophobic individuals experience dislike, distaste or even fear towards same-sex sexual partnerships. Kiekel (2012) refers to such dislike as sexual stigma (also referred to as homonegativity or sexual discrimination): the negative regard, or perception of inferior status and relative weakness that homophobic members of society jointly accord anyone associated with non-heterosexual behaviours, identity, relationships, or communities.

The Equality Report (2012) found that 76% of individuals who had attended tertiary institutions in South Africa were homophobic. This implies that LGBTQ+ students are a clear minority group and, as a result, they are often invisibilised, traumatised and pushed to the margins in these educational institutions. This may lead to their reluctance to attend classes or even the termination of their education or training based upon anxiety around their safety in the higher education environment (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2017).

An exploratory survey of homophobic bullying experiences among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered young people in Ireland, found that they experienced “name-calling, teasing and bullying in their everyday lives” (Minton et al., 2008, p.177). On the other hand, Camilleri and Ryan (2006) found that Australian social work students were far more accepting of same-sex



relationships. Wilkinson (2003) found that British psychology students mostly held positive attitudes towards lesbian and gay people, although these students did not support lesbian and gay human rights.

#### ***2.3.3.2 Rejection***

Rejection has been found to be a predictor of negative health outcomes among LGBTQ+ youth. According to Van Vollenhoven and Els (2013), LGBT youths often face rejection and social exclusion. Such social stigma and prejudice endanger the psychological well-being of victims, as they often experience depression, anxiety and destructive behaviour in reaction to such rejection (Rössler, 2016). McBride (2020) posits that hostility towards LGBT youth, based on peer victimisation and staff rejection, increases their likelihood of emotional and psychological distress and suicidal ideation. Msibi (2012) reports heterosexual classmates rejecting homosexual peers as if homosexuality were a contagious disease. South Africans believed that homosexuality should never be accepted, revealing starkly the rejection of homosexuals by heterosexuals.

#### ***2.3.3.3 Exclusion***

Takács (2006) defines social exclusion as “a process whereby LGBT people are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully in society as a result of discrimination. This distances them from benefitting fully from education and training opportunities, as well as social activities. They are placed in a position of perceived inferiority in relation to the centres of power, resources and prevailing values” (p. 12). Another component of social exclusion which impacts LGBTQ+ individuals and is relevant to this study, is the failure to recognise LGBTQ+ individuals as full members of their community. This exclusion tends to follow mostly from a lack of acceptance of their identity as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender person and a human being who deserves to be treated with dignity and respect in the same way as all other human beings (Sithole, 2015).

In South Africa, some studies report issues of eligibility to partake in activities, exclusion from social activities and sport, and problems experienced with their association with heterosexuals. Kiguwa and Langa's (2017) work provides perspectives on the exclusion experienced by LGBTQI students. Students were deliberately excluded from social events or specific social spaces through the use of denigrating comments, which Jagessar and Msibi (2015) refer to as

silencing, naming and shaming. In the same vein, Matthyse (2017) also notes that public spaces were also coded to be heterosexual, and gender non-conforming students were alienated from facilities such as recreational establishments.

Negative perceptions among others in the form of stigmatisation, prejudice and discrimination can lead to negative self-regard, which clinicians in mental health settings often refer to as internalised homophobia (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017). In Kheswa's study (2016), most of the participants expressed a lacking sense of belonging and withdrawal from roommates as a result of stigmatisation. Feelings of emotional detachment were common among the study's participants as they experienced alienation, even when they shared bathrooms at the university hostels. Regular bullying, exclusion, and discrimination exposed them to physical and psychological risk, thus limiting their educational progress. In addition, they were often exposed to hate crimes, persecution and murder threats, and occasionally had their property stolen or deliberately damaged (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Francis & Msibi, 2011). Some LGBTQ+ students reported that they were always stressed, missed classes, and even when present, they could not concentrate, leading to less successful academic performance and some even dropping out of university or college. These students often stopped attending classes on a regular basis, ran away from home, or even started to self-harm (cutting) and attempted suicide.

Exclusion results in individuals becoming 'invisible' in various ways. In this context, Gray (2014) found that the sense of being invisible is related to various manifestations of LGBT prejudice. Invisibility, according to Gray (2014), is defined as the ways in which members of the LGBTQ+ community are "unseen, hidden, alienated and/or excluded from society" (p.29). The lived narratives and articulation of invisibility that emerged from the interviewed participants revealed the lack of legal recognition of LGBTQ+ people. There are different manifestations of invisibility. They can either be institutionalised or passive.

With regard to institutionalised invisibility, Gray (2014) writes:

Institutionalised invisibility is direct discrimination that selectively targets the LGBT community by restricting their human and legal rights in ways that are clearly defined. Passive invisibility consists of silent scorn and ridicule of homosexuality, whereby it remains obscured in shadows and is not regarded by people as a topic suitable for civilised public discussion (p.36).

The theme of the invisibility of homophobia emerged in an article titled ‘Deconstructing matula (taboo)’ by Netshandama, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Matshidze (2017). They report research findings of a rural university in South Africa that denies the existence of homosexuality and problematizes diversity in sexual orientation. In their study, Nela et al. (2017) observe that lecturers made fun of LGBTQI students or pretended that they “did not exist” in their classes. The lecturers made rules about how a girl should dress, walk or talk. They could only understand gender when it was based on male and female genitalia, citing their confusion as to how to address lesbian students who outwardly presented differently to their assigned categorisation. In Netshandama et al. (2017), LGBTI students would often come across situations where staff members would not even respond to their greetings when the students went for assistance to the lecturers’ offices.

#### ***2.3.3.4 Bullying, labelling and stalking***

Stalking violates or invades another person’s privacy and freedom of movement (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017). The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2011) in the United States reported that 32% of LGBTQI students missed at least one entire day of school or college within a month because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable there. LGBTQI students who did not feel safe or comfortable at the college tended to first start missing classes and eventually drop out of college (GLSEN, 2015, 2016).

In some studies, LGBTQI students state that they experienced hate speech and were called derogatory names such as ‘moffies’, ‘faggots’, ‘izitabane’ and ‘ungqingili’ (Matthyse, 2017, Jagessar & Msibi, 2015). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students were also given a range of labels, including ‘sinners, devils’ and being ‘demon possessed’. Their ongoing exposure to such negative labels led to the students that were most affected by those forms of prejudice and violence being less able to concentrate on their studies, and reaching lower academic achievements (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017). Derogatory labelling and associated discriminatory acts, for example, the threat of rape, led many students to conceal their sexual identity, not attend specific classes, terminate their studies and even attempt suicide (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). The same-sex students in Sigamoney and Epprecht’s (2013) study reported derogatory labels used to discriminate against them or talk about them in a negative way. The students felt that they were not treated in the same way as other people.

### ***2.3.3.5 Micro-aggressions / macro-aggressions***

Nadal (2019) defines micro-aggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, intentional or unintentional, that demonstrate bias towards members of historically marginalised groups” (p.1 404). Jones (2011) viewed microaggressions as subtle interpersonal forms of bias that shape the daily lived experiences of marginalised social groups. In the same vein, Sue (2010) posits that micro-aggressions are characterised by intentional or unintentional hate speech, whether it is in the form of derogatory slurs, insults, dehumanising statements, or comments made that aim to further marginalise and exclude minority groups in society. Sue (2010, p.3) characterises micro-aggressions as

- hidden messages.
- They may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of the target group.
- They demean the target persons on a personal or group level.
- They communicate that they are lesser human beings.
- They suggest they do not belong to the majority group.
- They threaten and intimidate or relegate them to an inferior status and treatment.

McBride (2020) defines macro-aggressions as systemic modes of discrimination that manifest themselves both materially and symbolically to exclude identities and/or experiences from institutional life. Kiekel (2012) reported LGBTQI students as experiencing macro-aggressions in the form of constant, subtle forms of marginalisation. Common forms of macro-aggressions include subtle insults or degrading implications made about people from underrepresented groups (Rankin et al., 2010).

These everyday demeaning occurrences may appear trivial and harmless to onlookers, but research suggests that they have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of marginalised groups and their individuals.

### ***2.3.3.6 Hate crimes***

In South Africa, Breen and Nel (2011) define a hate crime as “an act that constitutes a criminal offence and is motivated in part or whole by bias or hate” (p.34). Sometimes, the victim’s actual or perceived identity – such as race, tribe/cultural group, nationality or sexual orientation – may be an influencing factor – a specific form of bias – in the selection of the victim. Breen and Nel (2011) claim that hate crimes have an especially traumatic effect on victims and

suggest that persuasive evidence of greater hurt being caused by hate crimes might justify stiffer punishment on retributive grounds. Similarly, Goodall and Walters (2019) define anti-LGBT hate crimes as “criminal offences that are motivated by, or which demonstrate, hate or prejudice towards the victim based on the victim’s perceived sexual orientation or (trans)gender identity” (p.8). They recommend that legislators should endorse hate crime laws to enable prosecution of the prevalent hostilities that are directed at LGBT people on a daily basis.

Mkhize et al. (2010) do not hold back in their judgement of South Africa as “a misogynist society that uses tradition and culture to justify prejudice and the need for power” where “[w]omen are second-class citizens who will remain vulnerable until this status quo can be changed” (p. v).

In South Africa, currently, neither common law nor statutory law define what constitutes a hate crime, nor do they create a separate hate crime offence category. Laws in South Africa that deal with hate crimes are narrowly interpreted as only affecting issues of race and religion, and not sexual orientation (Mkhize et al., 2010).

Also, constitutional guarantees have not yet addressed systemic homophobic prejudice in its varying manifestations. Researchers have suggested that interventions crafted to address hate crimes require a strengthened partnership between public sector programmes and LGBTQ+ service providers (Breen & Nel, 2011; Goodall & Walters, 2019).

### **2.3.3.7 ‘Corrective’ rape**

‘Corrective’ rape entails the abuse of any member of a sexual minority to ‘correct’ them to a heterosexual orientation (Brown, 2012). Scholars have reported a rise in the incidence of cases of ‘corrective’ rape taking place in South Africa, whereby lesbians are raped, with the perpetrator holding the distorted view that such rape could convert the lesbian victim to heterosexuality (Koraan & Geduld, 2011; Nela et al., 2017). Naidoo (2012), examining the phenomenon of gender-based violence against Black lesbian South Africans, states that ‘corrective’ rape and even the murder of lesbian women were found to have become a serious social problem in Black society, necessitating government intervention. Morrissey (2013, p.73) also reports rape as a “weapon of hate” by Black men against Black lesbians in South Africa.

The next section explores the impacts of these forms of heterosexism on the well-being of students.

## **2.4 Psychosocial impact of heterosexism on LGBTQ+ students**

As shown in the previous section, heterosexism can take the forms of physical violence (Bhana, 2012; Msibi 2013) including ‘corrective’ rape; verbal abuse (Rothmann & Simmonds 2015), including hate speech (Henderson, 2017) and labelling; homophobic academic learning environments (Msibi, 2013; Rothmann, 2014); and other violations of individuals’ rights. These negative experiences at higher education institutions disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ youth, which has been shown to lead to lower levels of feeling a sense of belonging, heightened feelings of being unsafe at the institution, poorer academic performance, increased use or abuse of substances, and an increase in the symptoms associated with depression (Dau & Strauss, 2016).

Dealing with these stressors related to having a stigmatised sexual orientation and identity on an ongoing basis thus often results in chronic emotional distress (Meyer, 2003). Research suggests that hostility exhibited towards LGBTQ+ students has measurable negative effects on these students’ ability to succeed in higher education and may cause mental health problems (Meyer, 2003). As a result of a hostile campus climate or culture, these students may resort to coping mechanisms such as covering or masking, which often result in further psychological and emotional distress and, in turn, in poorer academic achievement or educational outcomes, poorer social adjustment and diminished interpersonal skills development (Kiekel, 2012; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Nela et al., 2017).

### **2.4.1 Identity construction**

Barroso (2015) describes social identity as how people see themselves as a result of belonging to a group they are a part of. Doob (2013) argues that gender, race, sex and class are elements of social identity that intersect in complex ways in the context of education.

The 2010 report of the South African Reconciliation Barometer Survey (2010) found that ongoing racial segregation in higher education institutions in South Africa resulted in challenges to social identity for Black students who were becoming the majority in these institutions (Lefko-Everett, Lekalake, Penfold & Rais, 2010). A later study conducted by Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) found higher education institutions still to be unwelcoming and exclusionary toward Black students, despite the representation of Black students in these

institutions to have continued to grow. Identity adjustment problems were highlighted as affecting the students' psychological well-being.

Black lesbian students experience challenges in negotiating the complexity of their social identity as individuals who do not identify with the majority heterosexual sexual orientation, as well as with these aspects of racial integration (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). This is assumed to be the result of educational systems that had prioritised the Western culture and isolated minority groups of Black students during the apartheid era and tends to still make minority groups feel uncomfortable even close to three decades after the end of apartheid. This may contribute to the narrowing of their educational opportunities – which can even lead to failure – as well as their physical well-being. Gordon (2015), exploring how South African women's lives and identities were affected by living in a culture of violence, found that women who deviated from the dominant cultural identity constructions of femininity were subjected to intimidation since public spaces in South Africa are characterised by male dominance.

#### **2.4.2 Psychological and emotional distress**

Negative experiences resulting from stigmatisation on the basis of sexual orientation can result in LGBTQ+ students experiencing chronic emotional distress. Almeida et al. (2009) explored the impact of sexual orientation-related discrimination on LGBT youth and found resulting depressive symptomatology, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. LGBT youth displayed more emotional distress than did heterosexual students as evidenced by a significantly higher prevalence of suicidal ideation and self-harm and higher depressive symptomatology scores than heterosexuals. A study by Naidoo and Mabaso (2016) found that experiencing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation put students under emotional stress; as a result, these students suffered from depression and exhibited self-harming behaviour, began to miss classes, or even abandoned their studies because of their fear of harassment. Kelleher (2009), in a study of the psychological distress experienced by LGBTQ youth in Ireland, found that the critical, derogatory and oppressive social environment created through sexual identity-related stigmatisation had a negative impact on the well-being of LGBTQ youth, which was associated with poorer academic achievement and educational outcomes.

A 2014 report by the Williams Institute (University of California, Los Angeles) on LGBTQI students in educational institutions found that damaging school policies, practices and

unwelcoming educational institutional culture affected the well-being of these students resulting in depression, anxiety, stress aggression, self-esteem and victimisation. Cooper et al (2016) found anxiety, anger, depressive symptoms, self-injury, and suicidal attempts were some negative obstacles affecting the mental health of LGBTQI students than their straight counterparts. Jones (2011) used a qualitative methodology to analyse teachers' perceptions of homophobia in the United States. Teachers expressed concern about the number of students in tertiary education committing suicide after they had been subjected to homophobic bullying at educational institutions; the educator appeared to be unsure of the appropriate approach to address these challenges. Some LGBTI students who have experienced harassment or bullying have reported suicide attempts (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

A study conducted among LGBT university students in Nigeria found severe homophobic bullying coupled with non-existent protective educational policies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students (Okanlawon, 2017).

Thoreson (2016) records research findings on some students from the LGBTQ+ community being pushed, forced into lockers, or being checked by heterosexual students in educational institutions in the United States to see if they had breasts. Walsh (2016), explored the challenges faced by Black lesbians living in Florida, in the United States, in terms of heterosexism and homophobia and found that they experienced intimidation, rejection, marginalisation and bullying, as well as acts of violence and sexual assault which led to social isolation and loneliness, depression and anxiety, and resulted in these students' social and academic engagement withdrawal.

Kosciw et al. (2012) explored the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in educational institutions in New York, in the United States. The report revealed that 32% of LGBTQI students missed at least one entire day of schooling within a month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. They also reported LGBTQI students experiencing electronic or cyber bullying. LGBTQI students who did not feel safe or comfortable, and felt less welcomed in college, missed or dropped out of college. Such negative educational experiences were reported as leading to negative health outcomes and risky behaviours such as lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, increased alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking and the use of illicit drugs like marijuana (Kosciw et al., 2012).



According to Matsick and Rubin (2018), stigmatising environments have a significant impact on LGBTQI students' health and learning capacity. Experiences of prejudice may result in forms of minority stress, which in turn, contribute to negative psychological health outcomes—either directly, through felt exclusion, or indirectly, or by turning to coping mechanisms such as substance abuse to offset anxiety resulting from discrimination. Individuals may feel vulnerable or socially isolated; they may experience low self-esteem or chronic stress or difficulty establishing intimate relationships and may demonstrate an unwillingness to seek support because of their fear of disclosure and further discrimination (Tetreault et al., 2013). The perceived need to employ such protective strategies, coupled with threats of potential and/or actual discrimination, increases the risks for psychological distress, anxiety and mental health issues, such as depression and suicide ideation (Tetreault et al., 2013).

LGBTQ+ youth develop an awareness of society's negative regard for all that is not heterosexual or gender-conforming as they grow up, and may apply society's negative attitudes to themselves, resulting in a negative self-regard (Kelleher, 2009). Cooper et al. (2016) state that anxiety, anger, depressive symptoms, self-injury, and suicidal attempts are some of the mental health challenges experienced by LGBTQI students more often than by their straight counterparts.

Rogers et al. (2017) investigated the relationship between minority status and problematic alcohol and substance use in LGBTQ+ individuals, and whether these effects differed by sexual orientation (for example, lesbian/gay vs. bisexual). Findings revealed additional support for the link between LGBTQ+-related discrimination, and problematic alcohol and substance use, where both victimisation and family rejection were significant direct predictors of problematic alcohol and substance abuse, which may hinder learning.

### **2.4.3 Poorer social adjustment and less interpersonal skills development**

The increased rates of anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms and other mental health disorders experienced by LGBTQ+ youth may contribute to poorer social adjustment and compromised interpersonal skills development. Starks et al. (2015) highlight the link between the quality of interpersonal relationships and mental health. They state that disruptions experienced in important social or interpersonal relationships are one of three mechanisms by which experiences of stigmatisation result in mental health disparities for

sexual minority populations. The next section explores ways in which students respond to social and institutional forms of heterosexism that impact them negatively.

## **2.5 Strategies used by LGBTQ+ individuals to negotiate barriers to participation and success in higher education**

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ students employ a number of strategies to overcome the barriers to their participation and success at higher education institutions and cope with the negative psychosocial impacts resulting from social and institutional heterosexism. Some of these may increase their agency and social integration; some strategies to prevent exclusion may come at the cost of being open about their identity and thus do not confront or dismantle the forms of discrimination they encounter.

### **2.5.1 Self-regulation**

Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo (2017) describe self-regulation as a practice whereby same-sex couples abstain from or modify their public displays of affection to avoid being challenged by heterosexuals. Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo (2017) explored the experiences of same-sex student couples in negotiating public campus life at a South African university. They found that campuses had both safe and unsafe public spaces. As a result, “couples consistently and consciously monitored their social environments and regulated their public couple behaviour to avoid negative experiences” (Lesch, Brits, & Naidoo, 2017, p.127).

Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo (2017) point out that LGBT people’s acceptance of the possibility of stigmatisation and their avoidance of homophobic interactions by regulating their visibility may protect them against rejection or negative reactions. On the other hand, it may hinder proactive actions and LGBT students’ rights to equal treatment.

Greene et al. (2013) investigated whether self-regulation by LGBTQ+ individuals mediated or moderated relations between felt danger to their safety, verbal harassment and intimidation, and psychological distress in America. Results indicated a relationship between stress and negative mental health outcomes and support the importance of self-regulatory processes influencing sexual and gender minority persons’ capacities to manage environmental stressors of stigmatisation and social threat.

### **2.5.2 Covering or masking**

Hiding, or masking, part of oneself that is not accepted in the dominant culture is a common coping strategy. Successful ‘covering’ may require maintaining social distance (Papadaki, 2015). When students feel invisible and or silent about their ‘difference’, they are less likely to disclose and discuss their identities. Papadaki (2015) explored the experiences of "invisible lesbians" in Greece. The findings revealed that lesbians and gay men often protected themselves from discrimination by not being openly ‘out’ and isolating themselves socially or emotionally to hide their sexual orientation. Those participants who reported that being lesbian or gay did not affect their social life attributed this to the fact that they were treated as heterosexuals. Self-exclusion for the purpose of ‘covering’ led to some students focusing more on their studies and achieving better results.

### **2.5.3 Formation of lesbian–straight alliances**

According to Mims et al. (2016) lesbian/gay – straight alliances are usually student-led, college-based clubs that exist in educational institutions. Their goals involve improving the college climate for LGBTQ+ youth and educating the college community about sexual minority issues. They are open to all members of the student body, regardless of sexual orientation, and advocate for an improved college climate by challenging homophobia (Mims et al., 2016). Such alliances may increase the social support available to sexual minority youth. These associations may help these students find their voice and cultivate relationships with like-minded individuals. This led to a decrease in homophobic remarks and incidents of verbal and physical harassment towards LGBT students in educational institutions where there were gay–lesbian–straight alliance clubs (Mims et al., 2016).

The next section explores strategies that higher education institutions are found to use to dismantle the institutional and social forms of discrimination and exclusion that students may face.

## **2.6 Institutional strategies that facilitate participation and success for LGBTQ+ students**

Beer (2016) states the climate of an educational institution should be supportive for effective learning and teaching to occur. In a study conducted by Henderson (2017), participants voiced their concerns about getting expelled or that their parents would not continue to support their

education if they revealed their LGBT identity. Ultimately, improvements in the cultural climate of these institutions to reduce heterosexism can contribute to greater individual wellbeing and improved academic achievement among students affected by these forms of bias and violence (Breshears & Beer, 2016).

### **2.6.1 Introduction of gender-inclusive language**

An inclusive culture or climate at the colleges for all students may be created by using gender inclusive language at all event communications and ensuring that reactions to reports of harassment do not further stigmatise students who were targeted (Wicht, 2017). Also, gender-inclusive language could be introduced within the colleges' infrastructure – for example, at the toilets, to enable students to be free to use such facilities and therefore become comfortable with their identities.

### **2.6.2 Counselling services specific to LGBTQ**

The importance of creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students and offering counselling services specific to students in the school environment cannot be overstated (Fisher & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013). Kuff et al. (2019) note that in addition to the challenges LGBTQ+ students share with other students, the unique issues that they face may need to be addressed with specialized expertise. Some therapists do not have adequate training to provide individual counselling and support to LGBTQ+ students in relation to their sexual orientation, which may further alienate the LGBTQ+ individuals who are seeking care (Williams & Fish, 2020)

Some researchers have proposed that higher education institutions link with counsellors from local health centres to visit and support LGBTQ+ students who are experiencing negative psychological effects as a result of their exposure to heterosexism and conversion therapy (Russell & Fish, 2016).

### **2.6.3 Introduction of programmes on diversity**

According to Francis (2011), responsible lecturers recognise the diversity of their students and colleagues in all its forms and construct their pedagogical methods accordingly in order to challenge invisible systems of privilege. Such practices invite students to become self-critical and self-reflective regarding their heterosexual assumptions. Collaboration among students,

lecturers, administrators, and psychologists practising in post-school education institutions must occur so that programmes that encourage the creation of awareness regarding gender / sexual diversity, the prevention of discrimination, and intervention in an integrative manner will be developed and implemented to produce positive changes that will improve the lives of the LGBTQ+ students (Francis, 2011). This can be achieved through the establishment of strategic programmes that can promote inclusive education and an inclusive institutional culture of tolerance, dignity and respect for each other. Awareness and tolerance or acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community can also be created through campus activities. Strategic programmes that can be introduced may include, for example, “We all count” or the “No outsiders” projects. Educational institutions must also include all aspects of diversity in their teaching (Msibi, 2012).

#### **2.6.4 Staff training**

According to the 2013 National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2013), students with six or more supportive educators reported fewer academic issues as compared with those students who did not have supportive staff members. These students were less likely to miss college because of safety concerns, they had higher grade point averages, and reported a greater sense of belonging to their college community (GLSEN, 2013).

Msibi (2013) argues that “the lack of appropriate, positive teaching on queer issues in Higher Education programmes greatly inhibits a broadly inclusive transformation agenda” (p.68). Studies recommend that student teachers and employed educators be educated on LGBTQ+ matters to build academic and psychological support for students in the LGBTQ+ community (Msibi, 2013).

#### **2.6.5 Campus diversity policy**

According to Henderson, (2017), inclusion, tolerance and acceptance among peers and educators can help LGBTQ+ students attain a better sense of well-being and find their own sense of tranquillity within the education system. Institutional support may be given through the elimination of ‘hot spots’ on campus by passing of laws and rules that protect sexual orientation and gender identity. That way, students will admit that when they can see themselves reflected in their own school curriculum, they feel more positive about their future and will feel safer if protected by rules and laws.

### **2.6.6 Religious leaders and multicultural / ethnic offices**

Several initiatives that can support faculty and staff awareness of how to create safe and welcoming classroom environments include working with the campus' religious leaders and multicultural / ethnic offices and leaders to engage and address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Other approaches include bringing expert speakers to campus and identifying role models on campus to speak to the complexity of being in a sexual minority.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that while the legislative and policy environment in South Africa supports the rights of individuals of all sexual and gender identities and sexual orientations, their implementation in practice has not yet been achieved, and the enjoyment of equal rights and freedom of choice for LGBTQ+ students is not yet a reality. The literature thus reveals a gap, in the South African context, between the legal status of sexual minorities and their lived reality in post-school education institutions where a culture of heterosexism dominates. The chapter has explored the nature of the social and institutional barriers that LGBTQ+ students experience to participate and succeed in higher education and the psychological impact of these forms of heterosexism. Strategies used by LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as higher education institutions, to confront or dismantle discrimination and exclusion – or, in some cases, to avoid it – were also discussed.

## CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual framework that informs this study. It begins with an exploration of decolonial theory and coloniality. It then introduces African feminism. I also draw on key concepts from Black feminist thinkers, Patricia Hill-Collins and bell hooks – particularly, their concept of intersectionality. Despite the differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, a legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding together Black women (Collins, 2002).

The chapter then discusses decolonial feminism. I have chosen to draw particularly on the work of Oyeronke Oyèwùmí and Maria Lugones because they are not only concerned with exposing oppression but are also concerned with resistance, activism and the politics of empowerment (Lugones, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2002; hooks, 2000; Mignolo, 2012; Oyèwùmí, 1997, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2016).

According to Little (2016), the difference between sex and gender arose in the 1970s, and in terms of this distinction sex refers to the biological traits that distinguish men from women, and gender is understood as the social, cultural and sexual attitude or identity that accompanies the biologically sexed body. Lugones's (2007) theory attempts to explain how the gender structures which are still in place today subjugate women in postcolonial societies in all domains of life and that the transformation of gender relations is central to resisting and dismantling Western hegemony and to restoring, cultivating and developing subjectivities, cultures and traditions erased by colonialism.

According to Oyèwùmí (1997), colonisation and coloniality marginalised local epistemes through “imposing Western categories on non-Western cultures and then projecting such categories as natural” (p. 11). Oyèwùmí's feminist position is rooted in the same fundamental assumptions as those which are so prevalent in African philosophy: the self does not exist in exclusion of the other but *through* the other. Therefore, “sexual difference is freed from the hierarchical and dichotomous logic that results in the exclusion, subjugation and marginalisation of femininity that is historically dominant in the colonial Western gender system and in the construction of modern Western subjectivity” (Coetzee, 2018). According to Oyèwùmí, (1997), identity is fluid and cannot be fixed in a static gender dichotomy.

This study, therefore, adopts the decolonial feminist argument that gender is a colonial imposition. I draw on the concepts of gender, sexual orientation, heterosexuality and heterosexism, as well as their intersectionality with race and other social identities, to understand the experiences of Black lesbian students at a TVET college.

The following sections describe the origins and main tenets of each theory employed as part of the study's conceptual framework and the rationale for its use in this study.

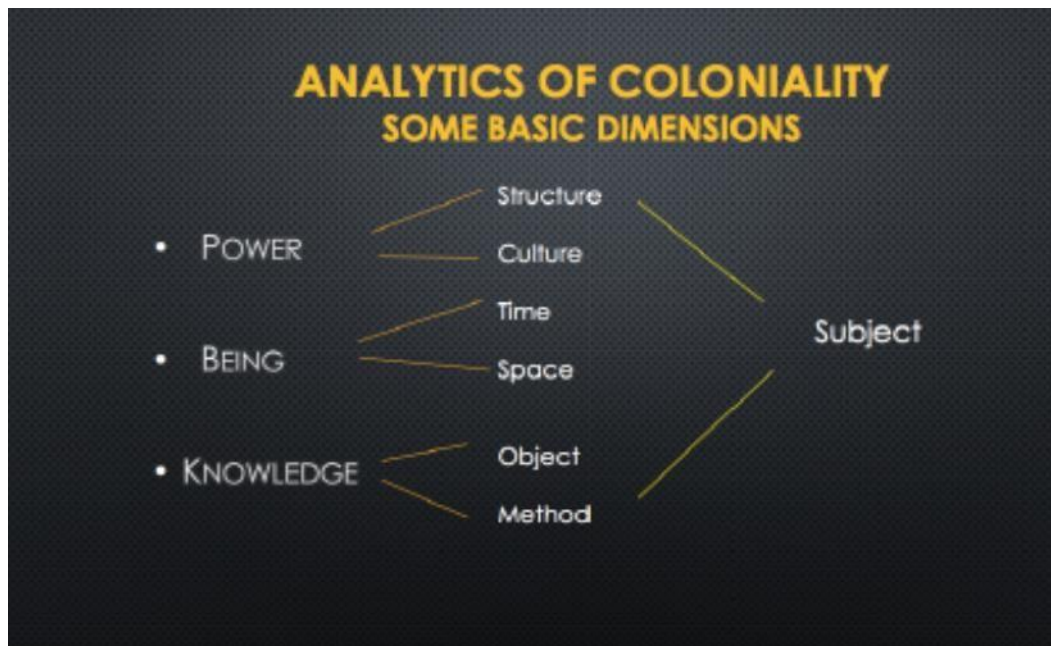
### **3.2 Decolonial theory**

Decolonial theory emerged in Latin America but is rooted in the emancipatory experiences and intersectional projects of colonised subjects across the world (Grosfoguel, Mignolo, & Maldonado-Torres 2011). To decolonise ourselves means starting conversations based on our thoughts. Decolonial theory challenges the insularity of historical narratives and traditions emanating from Europe (Bhambra, 2014). It aims at undoing colonial mechanisms of power, economics, language, culture and thinking that shape contemporary life. The theory rejects an imitation of the West in all aspects of life, calling for the assertion of unique identities and a re-centring of knowledge on approaches that restore global histories, and problems and solutions (Mohamed et al., 2020).

Decolonisation, in the post-school education context, is concerned with addressing the epistemic violence associated with colonial knowledge and colonial thought. It privileges the subjectivity of subjects and is positioned outside of modernity (Bhambra, 2017). In order to overcome the legacy of colonialism, it is necessary for those who have been affected by colonialism to decolonise their minds (Oelofsen, 2015). Knowledge should not be determined by those who are not positioned where the subjects are (Mignola, 2009). Colonised subjects can reject the values, norms, customs and worldviews imposed by former colonisers and redefine their identities and reaffirm their humanness in their social locations (Gatsheni, 2013). Grosfoguel (2014) suggests removing binaries, not considering everything as “natural”, and taking non-Western viewpoints seriously.

The elements of decoloniality, according to Maldonado-Torres's (2016) model of decoloniality are decoloniality of power, knowledge and being, as shown in Figure 3.





**Figure 3 Maldonado-Torres's model of coloniality (2016, p.19)**

### **3.2.1 Coloniality**

Decolonial theorists conceptualise colonialism as the darker side of modernity (Mignolo, 2013). While modernity provides a narrative of progress, this cannot be replicated equally in all parts of the world, because modernity is built on a colonial matrix of power (Christie & McKinney, 2016). Mignolo (2013) states that modernity as a discourse and as a practice would not be possible without coloniality, which continues to be an inevitable outcome of modern discourses. There is thus no modernity without coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

The colonial power matrix is the living legacy of colonialism that continues to shape contemporary society through various forms of social oppression. Modernity has become a hegemonic world system which is predicated on the notion of civilized human versus uncivilized (or subhuman) dichotomy defined by those in power (Grosfoguel, 2014).

According to Mignolo (2012), decoloniality can be defined as a way to delink (to detach) from an overall structure of knowledge in an effort to engage in an epistemic reconstitution of ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed and the logic of coloniality implement. Decoloniality is an activity that requires embodied subjects to come together to create, think, and act to decolonise the sense of being, knowledge, and power (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In this thesis, I adopt the definition of coloniality put forward by Grosfoguel (2007), which views it as the cultural, political, sexual, and economic oppression of subordinate groups by dominant groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations. In this sense, coloniality is understood as the multiple and entangled power relations of superiority and inferiority established under colonialism, which are referred to as the colonial matrix of power. Maldonado-Torres's (2016) model of coloniality consists of the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (see Figure 3), which I also use to unpack the experiences of Black lesbian students in post-school education and training in South Africa.

The term 'coloniality' refers to the way that colonisers undervalued and dehumanised the imaginations and minds of indigenous people. According to Sereto (2018), coloniality exists as "an embedded logic" (p. 3) which continues to enforce domination, exploitation and is always portrayed as being good for indigenous people". Spaces where indigenous people have experienced colonialism need to be revisited since the domains of culture (i.e. the intellect, language, aesthetics, and religion of indigenous people) still remain colonised.

### **3.2.2 Coloniality of power**

Although colonialism has officially ended in most parts of the world, the 'coloniality of power' continues to define relations between the West and the other regions (Sereto, 2018). Fricker (2007) refers to this as "identity power", which is manifested through the identity prejudices we hold about others' identities and our own. The identity of power is embedded within structural hierarchies such as heteronormativity. Colonialism's intrusive policies distinguish between normal sexuality (heterosexual) and 'perverse', 'immoral', and 'dangerous' (same-sex) sexuality (Musisi, 2014).

The coloniality of power gave birth to a modern world system that Grosfoguel (2016) characterises as being a racially hierarchised, patriarchal, sexist, hetero-normative, imperial, colonial, and capitalist system. In the modern post-school system, the coloniality of power exists as an entanglement of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of sexual, political, epistemic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2016).

Heterosexuality is seen as a manifestation of Western imperialism. By presenting heterosexuality as the sexual norm rooted in African cultures, the African elite reproduces the colonial discourse on sexuality (Bertolt, 2018). Thiong'o (1986) referred to this colonial matrix of power as a cultural bomb.

Same-sex sexualities in African culture was harshly judged by colonial entities as barbaric and backward. As a result, Africans distanced themselves from their culture and identified with Western culture and traditions, thereby abandoning their own history (Christie & McKinney, 2016). For this reason, Goody (2006) describes the coloniality of power as "a theft of the history of Africans" who have "found themselves defining the world now through categories, speeches and representations imposed by the West" (p. 1). There are intersectional inequalities that form the colonial matrix of power, which Mignolia (2011) refers to as entangled intersectional categorisation of class, sexuality, race, gender and culture that remain after dismantling colonialism.

### **3.2.3 Coloniality of knowledge**

The 'coloniality of knowledge' refers to the impact of colonisation on the different areas of knowledge production (Seroto, 2018). It is exemplified by specific knowledge being prioritised over other knowledge (Heleta, 2018). Decolonisation of knowledge implies the end of reliance on imposed knowledge (Shapland, 2021). The colonial and apartheid era curricula in South Africa promoted White supremacy and dominance, as well as a stereotyping of Africa as an undeveloped continent. Within such perception and imagery, homosexuality was presented negatively, un-African and as a private matter that threatened the heterosexual social identity (Kaoma, 2016). The current post-school education curriculum still largely reflects the colonial and apartheid worldviews (Ramoupi, 2014). It is disconnected from African realities, including the lived experiences of the majority of Black South Africans. Gender is violently produced, and gendered violence occurs toward others as a means of securing broader systems of domination over others in perpetuity (Ashley et al., 2018).

Decolonisation of post-school education aims to address the epistemic violence of colonial knowledge and colonial thought by privileging the subjectivity of the subjects; it is foregrounded outside of modernity (Bhambra, 2017). It aims to enable learners to redefine their

identities and reaffirm their humanness in their social locations (Gatsheni, 2013). Curriculum revision is promoted by some decoloniality scholars (Mignolo, 2009; Gatsheni Ndlovu, 2015).

### **3.2.4 Coloniality of being**

According to Mignolo (2007), the concept 'coloniality of being' refers to the fact that colonial relations of power did not only leave indelible marks in the areas of authority, sexuality, knowledge, and the economy, but also on the general understanding of being. Coloniality of being addresses the effects of coloniality on the lived experiences of various social groups. Grosfoguel (2016) states that there is a line that clearly separates the colonised subjects from the privileged Whites (colonisers). Those above the line belong to the zone of being, while those who live below the line belong to the zone of non-being. On the privileged side of the line are people with attributes such as superiority, development, Christianity, knowledge, humanity, peace, and democracy, while on the non-being side one finds underdevelopment, violence, invisibility, darkness, heathens, inhuman practices, savages, homosexuals, inferiority, and a host of other deficiencies. Ex-colonies such as South Africa are regarded as zones of non-being and therefore, their indigenous populations are regarded as non-beings while ex-colonisers belong to the zone of being.

### **3.2.5 Coloniality and decoloniality in the South African context**

Before southern Africa was colonised, the curriculum of indigenous knowledge and education consisted of traditions, legends and tales which were not written down but were preserved orally (Seroto, 2011). New technologies were introduced during the colonial era and oral teaching traditions and storytelling were replaced by recorded information (Ngoepe, 2016). This also meant that African knowledge was replaced by formal mainstream education, which was presided over by the colonial masters. According to Sicherman (1995), indigenous African knowledge was seen by the colonial enterprise as simplistic, naïve and primitive. This led to the loss of much of the traditional African knowledge and narratives that had not been recorded. That which survived and was recorded was written often from the coloniser's worldview, further diminishing the voice of Africans (Ngoepe & Setumu, 2017).

According to Seroto (2018), in South Africa, coloniality is still being kept alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our lives and being. In a way, as

modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. For example, South Africa has eleven official languages. English, Afrikaans and nine ethnic languages, of which Zulu and Xhosa are the most widely spoken. While most South Africans can communicate in more than one language, English is the most commonly spoken and is the language of official business and commerce. According to Maluleka (2021), South African textbooks are also written in English, a foreign language to most Africans, and these textbooks build on the experiences, norms and culture of Western society. This is a clear indication that coloniality still exists.

### **3.3 African feminism**

*“The oppression of women in Africa has its origins in the European imperial project inspired by heterosexual patriarchy. This Eurocentric vision is now reproduced by the African patriarchy. The consequences are mainly of three orders: a binarization of gender identities around the masculine and feminine, a reduction of the role of women in the private sphere and rejection of homosexuals through institutionalization of heterosexism.”*

(Bertolt, 2018. p. 3)

According to Dlamini (2006), African feminism is shaped by the histories of the different African communities and their liberation struggles that are diverse for each country. The result of this is that definitions and experiences of feminism are different from region to region within Africa. However, there are fundamental categories that hold together the discourse of African feminism, such as culture/tradition, socio-economic and socio-political issues, the role of men, race, and sex and/or sexuality (Dlamini, 2006). Moreover, African feminism deals with women first and foremost as humans, rather than sexual beings (Goredema, 2010) This is because a woman's sexuality and reproductive role in society has been a point of conflict in determining women's access in the public sphere.

#### **3.3.1 Definition of African Feminism**

African feminism is often defined by identifying what it is not. It is not Western feminism. According to Goredema (2010), African feminism provides arguments which corroborate the experience of women of Africa against a mainstream feminist discourse. African feminist discourse takes care to delineate those concerns that are peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African cultures without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently by the different classes of women. According to Mekgwe (2008), African feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of those

aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African people. Eschewing male exclusion, then, becomes one defining feature of African feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualized in the West. Emecheta (1997) also argued that the gender oppression of African women is interwoven with other political, economic, cultural and social forms of oppression that are not considered in Western feminism.

According to Nokoko (2011), feminism in the African context has largely arisen through the experiences and incursions of colonialism and other forms of oppression. It objects to the Westernisation of feminist narratives and is foregrounded in African experience. Factors that were instrumental in instituting the new form of gender bias that pervaded the African colonised states were Western marriage systems, Christianity and Western education (Nokoko, 2011).

### **3.3.2 Different perspectives within African feminism**

African feminisms focus on the conditions and needs of African women on the continent and the cultural issues which relate to their complex experiences. The different perspectives within feminism include Womanism (3.3.2.1), STIWANISM (3.3.2.2), Motherism (3.3.2.3) and Satanism (3.3.2.4). These concepts are seen as important to restoring women's dignity and equality in their respective societies. According to Emecheta (1997) negotiations of the institutions of marriage and motherhood are also relevant, as they form part of the African dialogue. Below, I discuss each form of African Feminism.

#### **3.3.2.1 Womanism**

'Womanism' is a term coined by African American writer and feminist activist Alice Walker. It represents a black feminist who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Emecheta (1997) emphasizes the importance of activism for African women, along with resisting the epistemological power of Western feminists to define all women's lives. Womanism, according to Emecheta (1997), is a fight against sexism and racism.

#### **3.3.2.2 STIWANISM (*Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*)**

According to Leslie (1987), African women need to be proud of their Black African culture and refrain from copying western culture at the expense of their own customs. This means that

she should, while pointing out the faults of her African culture, be cautious not to be perceived as aspiring to be westernised at the expense of her own African customs. Leslie (1987) offers 'STIWANISM' (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as a viable substitute to Western feminism, stressing importance on social equality with men in Africa.

STIWANISM is concerned with seven principles: (Ogundipe, 1999)

- resisting Western feminism;
- giving specific attention to African women in this contemporary moment;
- bringing to the forefront indigenous feminism that has also existed in Africa;
- belief in both inclusion and participation in the socio-political transformation of the African continent;
- contending with a woman's body, personhood, nationhood, and society and how STIWANISM operates within socio-economic hierarchies;
- being intentionally specific with regard to the individual and collective identity (i.e. religion, class, and marital status); and
- recognizing that there are many factors and identities in Africa and individuals may choose to behave in different and contradictory ways.

### **3.3.2.3 Motherism**

Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture (Getman & Nadar, 2013). The African conceptualisation of motherhood is used more particularly in the context of activism and resistance, without implying biological essentialism. Nadar (2013) notes that while in much of the feminist discourse motherhood has been seen to limit the role of women in the public, banishing them to the home and to domestic matters, in Africa it is conversely linked to women finding solidarity to participate in the public sphere. In fact, Motherism has come to denote something more akin to discrimination, as in *sexism* or *racism* - discrimination against mothers. There is also the realization that women are the most exploited in an aggressive society. There is also the loss of identity suffered by the entire African female world, which tries to imitate European models.

### **3.3.2.4 Satanism**

Falkof (2017) describes gendered violence in South Africa as Satanic violence due to its gruesome nature. These are acts of extreme violence perpetrated by South African men on the bodies of young South African women, especially lesbians. These are acts of human cruelty.

Such acts may include being burnt alive, stabbed to death or being stoned to death. These acts indicate an intolerance to difference and a loss of ubuntu in African societies.

### **3.4 Decolonial Feminism**

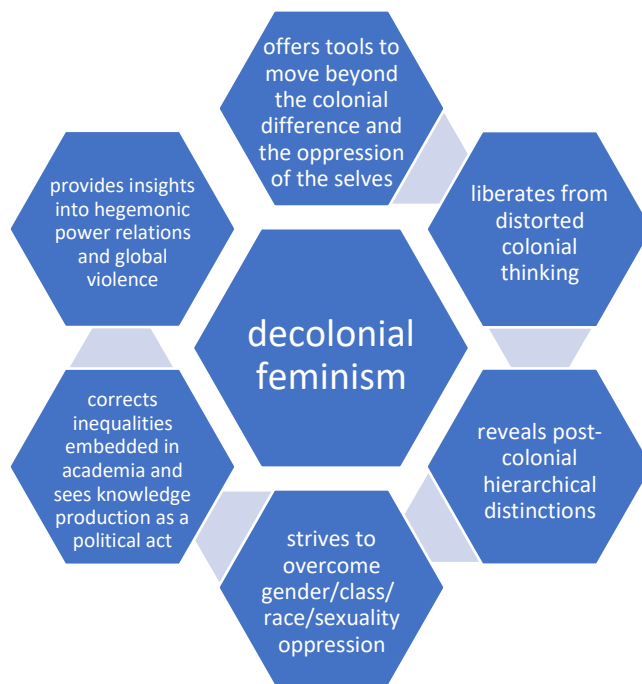
The Argentinian feminist scholar María Lugones coined the term ‘decolonial feminism’, arguing that, in a broad sense, feminism must fight coloniality – referring not just to the historical legacies of colonialism, but also to the effects of the power relationships (Velez, 2019). Decolonial feminism, as a theoretical concept, may, however, have originated from the scholarship of Native-American feminists, Chicana feminists, and the African feminist anticolonial theory published in the 1960s and 1970s. African anticolonial scholars such as Oyeronke Oyèwùmí (1997) have also analysed both the impact of colonisation on women and the colonising discourses of Western feminism. Decolonial feminism is also deeply influenced and shaped by intersectionality theory, which was primarily developed by Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hills Collins and bell hooks (Velez, 2019).

Although the theory arose from the work of an Argentinian scholar, María Lugones (2007), decolonial feminist theory is useful for this study, since it captures the struggles of women against structural sexism and colonialism across the globe.

#### **3.4.1 Aims of decolonial feminism**

According to Lugones (2010), decolonial feminism aims to illuminate the concrete situation of Black women, considering the state of urgency they face, and considering the intersection of sex, class, race and gender relations. Similar to Black feminism, these oppressions are a triad that cannot be considered as being independent, but rather as part of a system where they all benefit from each other. Decolonial feminists position themselves as anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-sexist. Decolonial feminism is a multiplicity of experiences and plans that fight against oppression, adapted to and according to the needs of each territory and reality. These feminists challenge a binary system and criticise false universalisms. Similarly, to this thesis, the emphasis of decolonial feminism is on the experiences of women who are affected by colonialism or coloniality, racism, sexism, and patriarchy. Figure 4 below depicts the aims of decolonial feminism.





**Figure 4 Aims of decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2010)**

### **3.4.2 Themes within decolonial feminism**

Decolonial feminism is an emerging theoretical concept pioneered by Lugones (2008; 2010) that centres decolonial theory in a racial/gendered feminist framework. Decolonial feminist theory engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and Global South indigenous identity and gender, while providing a space for the voices and experiences of silenced, “othered” women (Manning, 2021, p. 2).

#### ***3.4.2.1 Indigenous identities***

From an intersectional approach, Lugones (2007) discussed patriarchy and heterosexuality as constitutive elements of colonialism used to control the expression of sexuality (Bertolt, 2018). Despite the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 and its implementation in all sectors of the country, the oppression of Black African lesbian women in South Africa demonstrates the impact of colonial domination on racialised bodies. According to Amaduime (1997), precolonial African social structure was essentially matriarchal, in the sense that women were rulers in many cultures and societies. Changes occurred in Africa with European colonisation.

According to Runyan (2018), Carolette Norwood in *Decolonising My Hair, unshackling by*

*Curls* describes colonisation as “very much a manipulation, a rape and a destruction – an occupation of the mind, the body, the spirit and the consciousness” (p. 7).

Lugones (2010) argues that not only did colonisation invent the colonised, it also disrupted the social patterns, gender relations and cosmological understandings of the communities and societies it invaded (Bhambra, 2014). In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon posited that colonialism turns to the past of the oppressed natives and distorts, disfigures and destroys it by emptying the societies’ brains of all form and content (Mignolo, 2007).

The post-school education and training institutions in South Africa are still grounded in colonialism and modernity, which focuses on individuals. The colonality of gender continues to oppress individuals through the intersections of sex, gender, class and race as central aspects of the system of power in post-school education. The colonised Black lesbian students inhabit a fractured post-school system constructed by and through the imposition of difference. They find themselves in conflict between their true identity and their lived experiences. Lesbian women challenge male superiority and therefore are “punished for being a threat to the natural social order” (Msibi, 2009).

Feminist theory posits that ‘the personal is political’, which means that personal difficulties are connected to the cultural, social, political, and economic climate in which people live. This feminist principle suggests that the experience of both external oppression and internalised oppression from the larger culture can lead to a whole range of problems, including psychosocial problems and learning problems. The liberation of the self is a necessary mission of decolonial feminism. There should not be any need for these lesbian women to lose their true identity in order to fit into the post-school education and training institutions. They need to fall in love with their own social identities. The process of liberation involves:

*falling in love with a self I did not know, a self that was prohibited, a self that was shunned for no apparent reason, a self that was (and is) beautiful as is*

(Runyani, 2018).

#### **3.4.2.2 The colonality of gender and sexuality**

Regarding the concept of colonality of gender and sexuality, Lugones (2010) argues that normative gender categories are not natural or predetermined and that indigenous societies did

not have a concept of 'gender' prior to colonisation. Rather, they were imposed in Africa by colonial enterprises and enforced through the violent brutalization of indigenous bodies as a way of institutionalizing European powers (Mack et al., 2018). Similarly, Oyèwùmí (1997) argues that the dominant (Western) categories through which we understand the world are not universal, but culturally specific and therefore contingent. She argues that woman/man gendered categories were a colonial imposition that did not exist in Yorùbá culture prior to colonialism. According to Oyèwùmí (1997), in pre-colonial Yorùbá society “body type was not the basis of social hierarchy” and biology was not “the foundation for social ranking” (p. xii). As a result, women were classified into social groups depending on the roles they took up in society, such as traders, hunters, farmers or rulers and this was not determined by sexual body type. These social identities were equally accessible to all gendered subjects. She thus contends that a gendered social hierarchy did not exist either and criticizes feminists who assume so. Nigerian scholar Mama (2001) rejects this, arguing that gender has been a central organizing principle in African societies prior to colonisation; she accuses Oyèwùmí of “inventing an imaginary precolonial community in which gender did not exist” (Mama, 2001, p. 69).

Lugones (2010) makes a hierarchical distinction between the colonised and the European bourgeois man and woman. She argues that the colonisers used this hierarchical distinction present in their culture as a tool to destroy the social relations of the colonised indigenous population by creating antagonisms between men and women. The bodies of women became the landscape on which indigenous men negotiated survival under new colonial conditions. Lugones (2010) calls this systemic sexual violence, the dark side of the modern/colonial gender system. In the colonial narrative, only the ‘civilised’ (advanced by modernity) are regarded as being human. In contrast, the identity of the colonised populations was deemed animalistic and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful. This polarisation articulated by Lugones (2010) is tabulated in Table 1:

**Table 1 Hierarchical distinction between the colonised and the European bourgeois man and woman (Lugones, 2010)**

<b>Bourgeois White Europeans</b>	<b>Colonised subjects</b>
Fully human	Non-human/ animalistic
Heterosexual	Non-gendered
Good morals	Promiscuous
Christian	Sexual and sinful
Civilised	Barbaric

Lugones (2010) argues that the mere acknowledgement of oppression is not enough to fundamentally reverse the system.

In line with the approach of the current study, decolonial feminism also focuses on gender division and violence directed at the LGBTQ+ community. Before the arrival of European settlers, same-sex relations were recognised in several African societies (Bertolt, 2018). Heterosexual and homosexuality sexual categories were imposed during the colonial era in Africa. The prohibition of homosexuality stemmed from a desire to normalise heterosexuality by Western colonisers or missionaries based on their Christian beliefs and the Bible (Bertolt, 2018).

### **3.5 Black feminist thought, standpoint theory and intersectionality**

Black feminist thought was developed through dynamic interaction with Black women's everyday struggles. It uses intersectional analysis to shed light on the relationships between the structural, symbolic and everyday aspects of domination, and individual and collective struggles in various domains of social life (Gines, 2015).

#### **3.5.1 Intersectionality**

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Combahee River Collective theorised the intersections of sexuality, race, gender, and class. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term 'intersectionality', which highlights the importance of understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, which are also highlighted and dealt with in this study's objectives. Women view

the world from the perspective of intersections such as race, gender, social class and sexuality (Harding, 2012).

### **3.5.2 Black feminist standpoint theory**

Feminist theorist Sandra Harding (2004) coined the term ‘standpoint theory’ to describe epistemologies that emphasised women’s knowledge. Standpoint theory argues for the “women’s place as a starting point for enquiry” (Harding, 2004, p. 21). According to Harding (2000), standpoint theories emerged out of critiques of universal objectivity and the use of material experience to build collective theoretical understanding. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) theorised a Black feminist standpoint as a crucial intellectual tool with which to illuminate the complex oppressions of contemporary Black women.

The importance of utilising and applying experience in constructing a standpoint is crucial. However, it is not clear what experience entails and if all women share the same standpoint, since they are all not the same and therefore do not share the same material experiences.

Therefore, this makes it dangerous to base feminist standpoint theory on ‘women’s experiences. Leading from this argument, I decided to use Black feminism to bridge this gap. Black feminists argue that an understanding of intersectionality is important when one aims to further political and social equality, and democratic systems (hooks, 2012). According to Collins (2000), a standpoint in Black feminist thought is of and for Black women. The three key themes in Black feminist standpoint theory are: (1) the interlocking nature of oppression, (2) the matrix of domination and (3) the outsider-within concept.

#### ***3.5.2.1 Interlocking systems of oppression***

Collins (2000) proposed the term ‘interlocking nature of oppression’ as women’s standpoint to investigate oppression. According to Collins (2000), an “intersectional model of oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, instead, oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 18). The assumption is that social systems such as patriarchy, class, sex and race are inextricably interlocking and together create a matrix of dominations, privileges, and oppressions (Collins, 2000), an assumption that is also relevant to this study.

### ***3.5.2.2 The ‘matrix of domination’***

According to Collins (2000), the ‘matrix of domination’ is seen as a spectrum where intersections of oppression meet. Along this spectrum lie the greatly varied experiences of Black women. The matrix has four domains, which reappear across different types of oppression (Collins, 2000). Bell hooks (1994) calls this matrix a “politic of domination” and describes how it operates along interlocking axes of race, class, and gender oppression.

### ***3.5.2.3 Outsider-within concept***

Hooks (1984) proposes that an outsider-within status may assist marginalised women to generate a unique standpoint that can benefit them. According to hooks (1984), “living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out ... we understood both” (p. vii). Therefore, it is through the ‘outsider-within’ concept that marginalised women are placed in a unique position, where they are able to recognise oppressive patterns of behaviour more clearly than those in the dominant culture group.

Collins (2000) used the term ‘outsider-within’ to describe “the position of Black women who do not belong to any one group” (p. 5). They have plural identities developed through engagement with positioning within some kind of community, as well as being excluded from a community. They may be outsiders within their own educational institutions. “Outsiders within are able to gain access to the knowledge of the group that they inhabit, but they are unable to either authoritatively claim that knowledge or possess the full power given to members of that group” (Collins, 2000, p.5). Black women experience the feeling of belonging without truly belonging. Collins saw Black women as ideal examples of outsiders-within, in that they are both dually marginalised (as women and as Blacks), yet they are able to move among a variety of communities.

In this study, Black lesbian students are the ‘outsiders-within’ in those educational institutions in South Africa control the development of sexual identity and govern social understanding of sex and gender (Nduna, 2017). Therefore, these educational institutions exclude homosexuals in the post-school education environment in South Africa. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalised, but it has never determined in an absolute manner the fate of all women in

society. According to hooks (1984), being oppressed means experiencing and suffering because of the absence of choices. However, many women do not join organised resistance movements against their oppression, because sexism has not meant a complete lack of choices for them (hooks, 1994).

### **3.6 Criticism of intersectionality**

The concept of intersectionality developed by Black feminist thinkers has been criticised for being merely descriptive (Nash, 2008). Critics have suggested that intersectionality over-stresses decontextualised categories of identity and over-emphasises racism within feminism. Other critics suggest that intersectionality challenges the primacy of gender oppression, and stigmatises the female category (Carastathis, 2014). Some scholars have attempted to ‘correct’ the presumed limitations of intersectional analysis associated with the exclusive focus on the oppression of women of colour by redeploying the method for the study of all women or all people (May, 2014).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the elements of the conceptual framework used in this study. This includes decolonial feminism, which encompasses black feminist thought, decoloniality and African feminism. The increased visibility of homosexuality has generated heated public opinion and heterosexism by Africans against African homosexuals. Lugones (2010) argues that normative gender categories are not natural or predetermined; instead, they were a colonial imposition formed and enforced through the violent brutalisation of indigenous bodies as a way of institutionalising European powers (Mack et al., 2018). Speaking to the Nigerian context, Oyèwùmí (1997) argues that woman/man gendered categories were a colonial imposition that did not exist in Yorùbá culture prior to colonialism. This study also draws on Black feminist thought, which uses intersectional analysis, to shed light on the relationships between the structural, symbolic and everyday aspects of domination and individual and collective struggles in the various domains of social life (Gines, 2015). Thus, decoloniality is a pluriversalist approach that recognizes that different cosmologies exist in complex and entangled power relations that should be considered. The next chapter (4) discusses the research design and methodology.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the rationale driving the research design and methodologies chosen for the study. The study investigated the educational and social experiences of Black lesbian students at a TVET college. The feminist paradigm provided a platform for participants' stories to be told.

I used a qualitative research approach which, according to Patton (2002), produces a wealth of detail about a broader range of experiences for a much smaller number of people (six students in this study) to gain an in-depth perspective on a phenomenon. A visual narrative inquiry methodology was adopted in which stories were used to describe human experiences. Participants were selected through a purposeful, homogenous sampling procedure, which developed a diverse sample that was representative of the lesbian population in post-school education and training institutions. To identify participants, I used snowball sampling.

Participatory data collection methods assisted in generating participants' narratives; these included: semi-structured interviews, photo voice, focus group discussions, and reflective journaling. Narrative analysis was used to examine the data generated and the NVivo software program was used to check the accuracy of the data. In addressing ethical issues, autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence were taken into consideration. I concluded the chapter by highlighting some limitations of the research study.

### **4.2 Research Paradigm: Feminism**

This study represented a feminist investigation. Feminism grew out of the women's movements and consciousness raising groups of the 1960s (hooks, 2000). Feminism is about seeing the social world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and injustice and, in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice. In other words, feminism seeks to ensure respect and empowerment for women. Feminism aims at "transforming social systems, analysing structural conflicts and dismantling domination" (Jackson & Van Vlaenderen, 1994, p.8). According to hooks (2000), feminism is concerned with the underlying causes leading to the oppression of women and the discriminatory,



humiliating and often criminal behaviours they are exposed to, such as sexism and sexist exploitation, racism, class elitism and imperialism. I have chosen to use the feminist paradigm because it endeavours to "create spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these engrained inequalities" (Parry, 2020, p.2). For the purposes of this study, a feminist paradigm provided me with a framework that enhanced and supported an exploratory, descriptive study utilising narratives as a source of insight and knowledge building. Willsher and Goel (2017) identify three key values that guide feminist research: being honest and value-laden, embracing subjectivities and unique lived experiences, and the construction of knowledge by researcher and participant.

As opposed to traditional research, (i.e., positivist, value-neutral and objective empiricist research), the objectives of feminist research include both the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change (Willsher & Goel, 2017). The epistemological principles of feminism include, firstly, having women and gender as the focus of analysis. Secondly, it emphasises the importance of consciousness-raising and the rejection of subject and object. As a result, feminism values the knowledge held by the participants as being expert knowledge and acknowledges that research that claims to be 'objective' nevertheless always reflects a specific social and historical standpoint (Blewett, 2023). Finally, feminist research involves a concern with ethics and an intention to empower women and change power relations and inequality. The ontology of feminism is that there is a 'reality' that has been created and shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender-based forces that have evolved over time into social structures that are accepted as natural, cultural or in different other ways justified (Willsher & Goel, 2017).

One of the tenets of feminism is reflexivity. Reflexivity is an assessment of the influence of the researcher's own background, perceptions and interests on the qualitative research process. This includes the researcher's personal history (Anney, 2014). I began the research process by examining my positionality to understand the influence my background may have on my analysis of the experiences of Black lesbian students in post-school education institutions (see Chapter 1: Researcher's reflexivity).

I reflected on how certain aspects of my own identity could intersect with my relationship with the participants. For example, I am a Black African middle-aged female lecturer, who is

heterosexual. The participants, on the other hand, are Black African lesbian adolescents, who are my students. Although we share a commonality in relation to culture and race, we are different in that they are lesbian adolescents, while I am a middle-aged heterosexual woman. I engaged the participants in the research process to minimise the power differential between me, in my role as the researcher, and the students, as the subjects of the research, that could present a barrier to them feeling able to express themselves freely or compromise what could emerge during the research process.

Thus, we began to learn from each other during the research process and they gained more trust in me as we shared our experiences on an equal footing. As our relationships developed in the course of the study, new discursive positions became available. I found myself switching between the roles of being more like a researcher and facilitator and being more like a peer. They also switched roles between being the researched and co-researchers and being peers; as they took a more active role in the research they gained new knowledge about themselves. A second tenet of feminism is the ethic of care, which is concerned with human relationships, sensitivity to others, a caring responsibility, attentiveness to contexts and situations, and being responsive to the needs of the research participants (Bowden, 1997; Willsher & Goel, 2017). Taking all these aspects into consideration, Etherington (2011) posited that research relationships should be viewed as a process of consultancy and collaboration. Power issues should be examined within relationships with a view to greater equality. Gaining in some small manner a new sense of power and autonomy will also help create a platform for marginalised groups for their voices to be heard.

The core values of the feminist paradigm were respected in this study, as I was dealing with a vulnerable group of Black lesbian students. One of these was to maintain transparency throughout the study's research process. I informed the study participants of the nature of the research through a briefing session. I gave them an opportunity to ask questions and consider whether or not they wanted to participate in the research. I also explained that the research study was conducted on a voluntary basis, with signed consent forms and pseudonyms ensuring the respect of their right to privacy and anonymity. I adopted a collaborative approach to the research process, based on the principles of sharing knowledge and dialogue between participants and the researcher to gain new and interesting insights into women's lives (Jackson & Van Vlaenderen, 1994).

### **4.3 Research Approach: Qualitative Research**

A qualitative research style focuses on personal narratives that are shared to describe participants' actions and therefore make sense of their social or educational experiences. It involves getting a story from a person who is identified as a knowledge expert or having some experience with the topic of study.

This study was intentionally qualitative in nature because qualitative investigations are most appropriate for situations when a problem or issue needs to be resolved and when silenced voices need to be heard (Creswell, 2014). This certainly applies to Black lesbian students, who are sometimes 'invisible', since there is limited research on their experiences of heterosexism in the TVET college sector (Rolfe & Peters, 2014). The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the lives of Black lesbian students as they navigated their way through post-school education at a TVET college. Thus, a qualitative approach was useful in that it allowed for examining Black lesbian students' experiences and documenting these experiences in detail, or through thick description. As a result, I was able to better comprehend their social and educational experiences and challenges from their own perspectives, rather than making predictions.

### **4.4 Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry**

This study used a visual narrative inquiry, which is an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experiences by utilising both visual (photos) and narrative texts (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is a valid research method when the researcher aims to obtain an understanding of participants' experiences to produce new knowledge. The stories told by the participants themselves become the raw data. Narrative inquiry weaves together a sequence of events, usually from just one or two individuals, to form a cohesive story (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry as a methodology is more than simply storytelling; it also entails a legitimate way of knowing. Narrative inquiry is also often aligned with feminist research. It aims at giving 'voice' (finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others) to the researched. "As a fundamental principle then, the prioritising of women's experiences and voices remains at the heart of most feminist research studies and practices, as applied in this study"( Kiguwa,2019, p.221). Narrative inquiry enabled a deeper

understanding of the students' lived experiences and stories, which could then be analysed to determine how they negotiated their various social identities in a post-school education and training institution.

In this study, I asked participants to tell me their narratives, using semi-structured interview questions to steer the discussion and thereby obtain richer accounts of the topic. I used probes to help them fully describe their experiences of being Black lesbian students at a TVET college. After telling their stories, participants wrote them in their journals, before sharing them in the focus group discussion. During the photo-voice workshop, participants explored different ways of writing their stories, to allow them their own manner of expression. Participants were also able to engage in conversations or dialogues about their experiences in groups during a focus group discussion. I had to elicit information from participants by using photographs to prod and probe any latent memory. This helped participants overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews. Those with similar experiences and lived situations worked in pairs to tell stories of their experiences. Participants voice-recorded their narratives. Narrative inquiry produced rich brocades of individual accounts that have a broad, human collective resonance.

#### **4.5 Using participatory visual methodologies**

Participatory visual methodologies have become a tool for feminist researchers to transform unequal power relations during research by conducting research that begins with the women's experiences and provides women with the ability to decide how they choose to represent their lived experiences (Rouhani, 2019).

Participatory and visual methods are often used in qualitative and narrative inquiry. These methods use creative visual forms and expressions to explore, understand, represent, and even challenge human experiences (Wang, Coemans, Siegesmund, & Hannes, 2017). In this study, I used participatory methods to generate participants' narratives, because they involve women as participants and privilege their experiences.

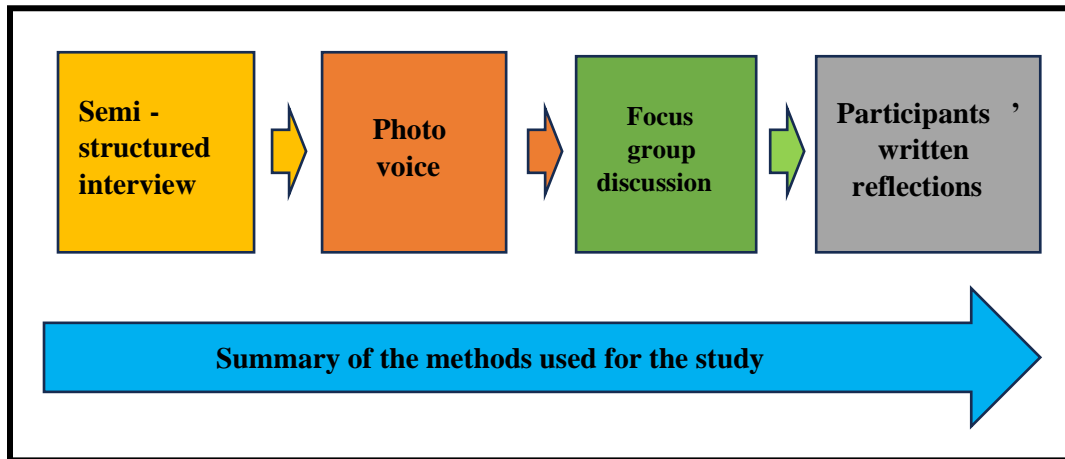
Participatory research is premised on the view that research can be conducted by everyday people, rather than an elite group of researchers. The assumption is that "ordinary people are entirely capable of reflective and critical analysis of their situation" (Cohen, Manion, &

Morrison, 2011, p.37). It regards power as shared and equalised and thus enables participants to become co-researchers rather than objects, who are researched by an expert. Participants thus generate data themselves. The four components of participatory research, according to Liebenberg (2018), are participation, action, research, and social change for social justice, which were enacted in this study through engaging participants in a democratic, knowledge production process.

Moletsane et al. (2009) found participatory methods useful for providing a space where women felt less intimidated to share their stories, especially in a patriarchal context, where it is taboo for women to speak out about important issues that affect their lives. They treat participants as a heterogeneous social group, acknowledge that they do not experience the social world in the same way, and thereby provide a way to capture events in a person's life. Participants can be more independent and be less limited by the conditions set by the researcher.

However, there are several challenges to consider. For many participatory methods, there is an element of self-selection in who participates, and as a result, this may bias the findings. Some participants may lack the necessary confidence to express themselves via the method used – for example, photography or storytelling – and may, as a result, leave out relevant details (Cornwall, 2000). Since participants in this study were from diverse backgrounds, codeswitching of languages was permitted to enable them to communicate in the language they were comfortable with to express their experiences.

This study employed several participatory methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, photo voice, focus group discussions, and reflective journaling as shown in Figure 5. Reflective journals were used during the semi-structured interviews to help participants recall their experiences in more detail. The photos were used as stimuli during the focus group discussions. Next, I discuss each of these methods as they relate to my study as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5 Summary of methods used in this study**

#### **4.5.1 Semi-structured interviews**

“Semi-structured in-depth interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are the most frequent qualitative data source. This method typically consists of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p.1)

This method allows the researcher to collect open-ended and probed data, and enables the researcher to explore participants’ thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic. Semi-structured interviews are advantageous in that they provide opportunities for the researcher and participants to discuss topics in detail. If the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues, probes or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher also has the freedom to probe the participants to elaborate on the original answers or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee.

I compiled a semi-structured interview schedule based on the research questions (See attached semi-structured interview schedule in (Appendix One). Proceeding from there, I invited the sampled students one at a time for individual interviews.

#### **4.5.2 Photo voice**

Budig et al. (2018) describe photo voice as “a visual research methodology that puts cameras into the participants’ hands to help them to document, reflect upon, and communicate issues of concern, while stimulating social change” (p. 1). Photo voice is premised on feminist theory, which posits that women should not be objects of study but rather active participants (Wang & Burris, 1994). Liebenberg (2018) states: “The idea of participation refers to engagement of people in a democratic knowledge production process. Thus, photo voice is collaborative and inclusive of women, based on a nothing-for-us-without-us approach that aims to foster empowerment and liberation in education” (p. 1). The feminist paradigm aims to empower vulnerable populations, thus the use of photo voice in this study was designed to help Black lesbian students to ‘voice’ and represent their individual experiences through discussions of photographs, while they were in small groups. One of the advantages of photo voice is its attempt to narrow the researcher-participant dichotomy by allowing participants to take photographs and analyse the data.

#### **4.5.3 Focus group interviews**

A focus group is described as an interview conducted on a specific topic with a small group of people who share certain experiences or backgrounds (Madriz, 2000). According to Willsher (2017), focus groups are popular in feminist research, because they provide the researcher and the participants with the opportunity to work with situated knowledge. The main advantage of a focus group is that it allows an in-depth discussion of the topic and the issues that pertain to it (Freeman, 2013). They emphasise “the collective rather than the individual, they foster free expressions of ideas, encouraging members of the groups to speak up” (Madriz, 2000, p.838). However, a possible weakness of focus groups is that individuals, especially the more timid ones, can be overwhelmed by the group dynamics and power hierarchies that govern who speaks, when and how much. Strong personalities can dominate discussions, and those who are shy may be reluctant to speak up (Madriz, 2000). Another challenge is also that strong personalities may introduce experiences and emotions that less confident participants then second as their own, so that they do not appear to have fewer experiences.

I used focus group interviews as a methodology to investigate heterosexism at TVET colleges because focus groups, in addition to in-depth interviews, are often deemed suitable for researching sensitive topics. According to Bloor (2001) “participants may feel more relaxed

and less inhibited in the presence of peers ... and they may feel empowered and supported in the co-company of those similarly situated to themselves” (p.16).

#### **4.5.4 Reflective journaling**

A journal is a writing genre that involves recording everyday life experiences, individual views and group perceptions (Hiemstra, 2001). Walker (1985) describes reflection "an important human activity, in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (Walker, 1985, p. 19). Reflection is also defined as a generic term for those intellectual and emotional activities in which individuals participate to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation (Ahmed, 2019). In this study, I used reflective journaling as a way to facilitate participants looking back on their experiences and reflecting on their feelings and attitudes (Stevenson & Cooper, 2009). Reflective journaling is useful in that it allows participants a safe outlet for personal concerns and also promotes internal dialogue (Jones, 2010). According to researchers, writers report experiencing less pressure when they keep journals, which makes it a good way of achieving authentic data (Bashan, 2017).

### **4.6 Developing the research instruments**

The research instruments compiled for data gathering are discussed below.

#### **4.6.1 Semi-structured interview schedule**

I compiled a semi-structured interview schedule, based on the research questions (See Appendix One). Proceeding from there, I developed a photo-voice pre-workshop letter for the participants. The letter informed participants of the venue, date, and the process of the workshop. The starting time (09h00) and ending time (13h00) were included in the letter. Furthermore, the students were informed on what they needed to bring, that is, photographs, story scripts and smartphones, if they had any. In the letter, I also explained to them that they would be respected and supported throughout the workshop, as they would be discussing private and sometimes painful parts of their lives. The students were also informed that the stories they would narrate about their lives and experiences during the focus group would only be used for research purposes and they were to be given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The pre-workshop letter to participants is attached as Appendix Three.



#### **4.6.2 Photo voice letter**

I wrote another letter to all participants, asking them to take photos of spaces or people that had an impact on their social and educational experiences. Such photos were to be used as stimuli during the focus group discussion. The letter contained some prompts such as:

Take photos or use old photos from your photo album that represent for you:

- A sense of belonging as a lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A sense of not belonging as a lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A sense of achievement and success as a Black African lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A sense of failure and difficulty as a Black African lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A symbol of your identity as a Black African lesbian student at the TVET college.
- Any other pictures that you want to include that represent you as a Black African lesbian student at the TVET college.

The letter is attached in Appendix Three.

#### **4.6.3 Focus group interview schedule**

I developed an interviewing guideline or schedule, which I used during the focus group workshop. This guideline or schedule helped me to guide the participants in focusing their stories. While participants were encouraged to tell their own personal stories, the schedule helped 'shape' the narrative. At the same time, using prompts in an interview schedule can reduce the autonomy of voice designated for the participant (Moletsane et al., 2009). For example, the interview schedule contained prompts such as:

- What are your experiences of being lesbian?
- And what effect do these experiences have on you?
- What are your experiences with lecturers and what effects do these experiences have on you?

The schedule also contained questions on biographical information, family background and disclosing one's homosexuality. There were also questions on career choice and access on campus. The last part of the questions concerned the social and educational experiences of

lesbian students, including their experiences of violence. The focus group discussion schedule is attached as Appendix Four.

## **4.7 Piloting the instruments**

“The term pilot study refers to mini versions of a full-scale study (also called ‘feasibility’ studies), as well as the specific pre-testing of a particular research instrument, such as a questionnaire or interview schedule” (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001, p.2). A pilot study is designed to guide the future study. One of the advantages of conducting a pilot study is that it might give advance warning about whether the proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). In this study, I identified and corrected imperfections by piloting or testing the data-gathering instruments with four selected additional participants to establish the clarity and structure of the schedule, and for pre-testing or ‘trying out’ the research instruments. Through piloting, I was able to identify ambiguously formulated questions in the interview schedule, which was evident in participants' discomfort when trying to answer the questions. I corrected this by rewording the questions (found in Appendix One).

## **4.8 Data generation process**

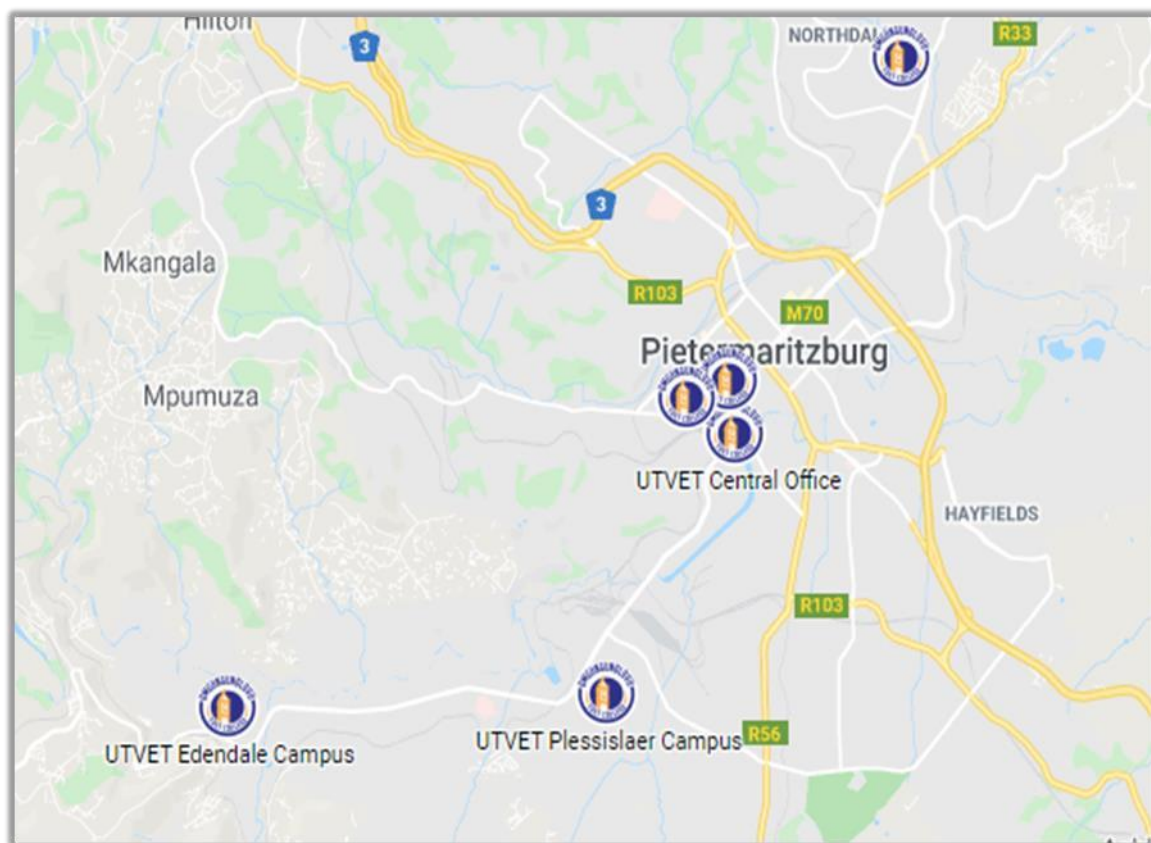
At the time of the data generation process, I was a TVET lecturer at the college where I conducted the study. I was passionate about helping minority groups such as Black lesbian students.

### **4.8.1 Study site**

uMgungundlovu TVET college, situated in the Msunduzi district, in the capital city of Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal province was used as the research site for this study. As illustrated in Figure 6, UTVET College is made up of five campuses. The Plessislaer campus is located in Imbali, a former Black township in Pietermaritzburg. It serves a primarily Black population. It offers Mechanical Engineering programmes, National Curriculum Vocational (NCV) programmes and workshop courses. The Edendale Campus is situated in Edendale, also a former black township in Pietermaritzburg; it also serves a primarily rural and Black population. This campus specialises in the training of Civil Engineering students. The Northdale Campus is situated in Northdale, a former Indian township that is a suburb in

Pietermaritzburg. It served primarily Indian and Coloured students during the apartheid era but currently enrolls black students as well. It specialises in Electrical Engineering, offering both NCV and workshops in this field of study. The Msunduzi Campus is situated in the city centre of Pietermaritzburg and is a Business Studies campus, offering NCV as well as diploma programmes in business-related fields. Under apartheid, it catered for White students, but today is diverse in its student profile. The Midlands Campus is also located in the city centre of Pietermaritzburg. It currently has a mix of all races. The key focus is Engineering, theoretical programmes and Business Studies.

One reason for choosing uMgungundlovu TVET college as the site of the research was that I was working as a lecturer at the time of the study. This gave me ease of access in terms of identifying Black lesbian students to take part in the study. Although I had access to the college, I also had to obtain permission from DHET officially to conduct research at the TVET college (see Appendix Eight).



**Figure 6 Map of the 5 campuses of uMgungundlovu TVET College (Source: Google Maps)**

#### **4.8.2 Identifying participants**

There were two students in my NCV class who had disclosed their lesbian status and were well-known to me. Using the snowball sampling technique, I asked them to help me in identifying and recruiting other students who identified as lesbian and who were willing to take part in the research study.

Inclusion and exclusion selection criteria included:

- Being a registered student at UTVET college
- Willingness to participate in the study
- Race (Black/African)
- Gender (female)
- Sexual orientation (lesbian).

Once identified, I approached each of the students individually and, after explaining the purpose of the study, gave them the opportunity to decide whether they would like to take part. Each of them agreed to take part in the study. Demographic information about each of the six students who took part in the study is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 Demographics of participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Gender identification</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Cultural beliefs</b>	<b>Currently studying</b>	<b>Highest level of qualification</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Family status</b>
<b>Nosipho</b>	19	Zulu	Male	Christian	Ancestral Spirit	Early Childhood Development	Grade 11	Lower	Lives with single mother
<b>Nandi</b>	20	Zulu	Male	Born again Christian	N/A	Engineering And Related Design	Grade 11	Lower	Lives with single mother
<b>Neli</b>	19	Zulu	Female	Born again Christian	Ancestral Spirit	Engineering Fabrication	Grade 12	Lower	Lives with single mother
<b>Noxolo</b>	20	Zulu	Female	Christian	N/A*	Engineering Fitting	Grade 11	Lower	Lives with both parents
<b>Nompilo</b>	20	Zulu	Undefined**	Christian	N/A*	Engineering Automotive Repairs	Grade 11	Lower	Lives with both parents
<b>Nomsa</b>	20	Zulu	Male	Atheist	N/A*	Motor Mechanics	Grade 11	Lower	Lives with both parents

*\*No answer during the interview; \*\*Participant did not define their gender*

### **4.8.3 Sampling participants**

A purposive sampling method was used in keeping with the primarily qualitative approach adopted by the study. Purposive sampling targets a particular group of people (in this study, Black lesbian TVET students). It is a useful method when the desired population for the study is scarce or very difficult to locate and recruit for a study. The research participants were selected according to their gender, age, sexual orientation, and race. My selection process was quite narrow and purposeful because the study targeted individuals with specific minority identity characteristics and pursued an in-depth understanding of their experiences (Patton, 2002). Candidates had to self-identify as a Black African lesbian student at uMgungundlovu TVET college to participate in the study.

In recruiting the participants, snowball sampling was applied, which is a non-probability sampling method. In snowball sampling, I began by identifying a participant who met the criteria for inclusion in the research study. The participant was then asked to recommend others, who also met the selection criteria. Snowball sampling is especially useful when trying to reach populations that are inaccessible or hard to find (Trochim, 2020). In this study, it was a useful approach for recruiting lesbian students who are a difficult sample to identify. The disadvantages of this type of sampling are that while it may satisfy the researcher's need to find participants, it does not pretend to represent the wider population: it is, in this sense, unashamedly selective and biased (Bernard, 2017). Eligibility criteria for study participation included being biologically a Black female and being a registered student at the TVET college at the time.

## **4.9 Data collection**

Once I had piloted the instruments and revised them, I was ready to collect data. Data collection occurred in stages since I was using multiple research methods. The legislation on the National State of Disaster which was gazetted on 29 April 2020 required all education institutions to institute a policy of remote work and study. The college suspended all gatherings that could expose students to potential spread of Covid-19. Students and lecturers were required to work primarily off-campus and communicate via telephone or email. In 2021, staggered learning was introduced and this enabled student to come to college in smaller numbers under strict Covid-19 regulations. I then consulted with individual students regarding their availability and

to agree on the time and place where interviews would be conducted. Once confirmed, I started conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews, as the college Covid-19 policy did not allow me to meet with the students as a group. I also asked them to reflect on their experiences in their journals, as this was something they could do individually. In 2022, more students were allowed to come to college and I then conducted two photo voice workshops, followed by a workshop at which the focus group discussions were held. I aligned each method of data collection with the research question that was to be answered and the rationale for its use, as shown in the table below.

**Table 3 Summary of the research questions and methods used**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Rationale for use</b>	<b>Research question that was answered</b>
<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	Facilitate participants developing their narratives as black African, lesbian college students Provide a platform for participant's stories to be told	How do the social identities of Black female lesbian students contribute to their educational success and participation at a TVET college?
<b>Reflective journaling</b>	Facilitated self-reflection Promote a sense of agency that they can use to negotiate their context	How do Black female lesbian students navigate the contextual dynamics that influence their participation and success at a TVET college?
<b>Photovoice</b>	Promote critical dialogue and knowledge about the experiences of participants through small group discussions of photographs	What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college? What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?
<b>Focus group discussions</b>	Encourage participants to share views and experiences through group conversations	What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college? What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?

#### **4.9.1 Conducting the semi-structured interviews**

I communicated with the study participants telephonically and checked their availability in terms of the venue and time of the interview. Participants confirmed their availability for the interviews which were to be held in my classroom at the TVET college. I established credibility and trust at the beginning of the semi-structured interviews by discussing my own 'lived experience' with the participants as a way of helping them to relax so that they would feel ready to fully describe their own experiences.

I started the interviews by thanking the participants for agreeing to take part in the study and also explained the purpose of the study. Participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity, and it was explained to them that should they wish to withdraw at any time, they might do so, and that their information would be destroyed immediately. After the participant had completed the personal data and consent forms, I proceeded to the interview guide and commenced the interviews. I asked participants for their permission to use a tape recorder during the interview.

During the interviews, I used probes to ensure that the participants fully described their experiences of being Black African lesbian students. The students' responses were recorded and interpreted, and this enabled me not only to gain insight into their experiences as Black lesbian students at a TVET college, but also to garner a deeper understanding of those experiences and their resulting emotions or reactions.

After completing the interviews, I advised the participants that they might be contacted again to ascertain that the content was transcribed and understood as they had intended. I then thanked the participants for their participation in the research study.

#### **4.9.2 Reflective journaling**

Participants were asked to keep a two-week written and dated reflective journal. I trained the students on how to write reflective journals. I provided students with journal templates as a way of giving them a format and a set of guidelines that they could use to fill in an entry. This was useful in keeping the journal focused on the issue to be researched, which in this case referred to their experiences of sexuality, race, gender and class in a PSET institution. I



explained to them that they did not have to follow the prompts strictly, but could use them as organisational tools to provide structure and flow to their journal as needed.

The students were asked to complete their journal entries every evening, looking back over the day and thinking of times, places or events when and where they became aware of their sexuality, race, gender and class in either a positive or a negative way. This may have arisen through comments made towards them by their lecturers or peers, parents, neighbours or other community members. The entries were to include anything relevant that they heard or saw: for example, a look from someone, their reaction to a news story, a song or an image.

In qualitative data collection, there is always the potential for something to go awry. I was disappointed that only three participants kept a reflective journal right until the end of the two weeks. Also, the information in the journals was too brief and some of it was unrelated to the study. The other three participants said that they could not keep a journal, because they were struggling with their college work and found journaling to be an extra burden. Fortunately, this had no negative effect on the study's findings, as I had already collected large amounts of data through the semi-structured and focus group interviews.

For a researcher conducting feminist research, reflexivity is useful. To aid this, I also kept a reflective journal in order to recognise and make explicit any personal biases. My reflexive journal included all events that happened in the relevant environment, my personal reflections in relation to the study, and the phenomena that arose during the investigation.

#### **4.9.3 Photo voice and focus group workshops**

Three sessions were held: two of the sessions were on photo voice and one was for the focus group discussion. The first photo voice workshop provided participants with training to take the photos, and the second session was used to discuss the photos that were taken.

**Photo voice Workshop 1: Training to take photos.** The workshop started with some introductory exercises to introduce the group members to each other. Tea, snacks and other refreshments were served to help participants to relax. All participants introduced themselves. Some of the students who were in the same programme already knew each other, they were the two students who were registered for Mechanical Engineering N5. Three of the students were

in the NCV programme (ERD), two students were studying Fitting and Turning, while the third student was studying Automotive Repair and Maintenance (See Table 2 on participants' demographics).

Participants were then introduced to the study the methodology and methods. They were given an overview of the photo-voice process and taken through the elements of the photo-voice process. These included an introduction to photovoice and the ethics of photography. I also briefed participants on the prompts and what they were required to do.

I gave participants an instruction sheet that specified and explained what they were required to do during Photovoice. I asked the participants to take between one to four photographs with their mobile phones cameras that reflected their academic and social experiences at a TVET institution. Once the photographs were taken, participants were reminded that they were required to bring them along to the second photo voice workshop in electronic or in hard copy. Participants were also reminded about the specific rules and guidelines about the photos they could use. For example, the guidelines had informed them not to take any photos of people without their explicit consent and not to take inappropriate photos, for example, any photos that revealed nudity. Participants were then invited to attend a second workshop at an agreed upon time to participate in a discussion about their photographs.

**Photo voice Workshop 2: Discussion of photos.** The second workshop was on the presentation and discussion of selected photos. During the photo-voice exercise, I asked the participants to select a few photos that they felt best represented their experiences at the TVET college. I made participants aware of a set of questions and asked them to seek relevant photos to align with these questions. Each participant discussed their photos by explaining why they took it and what it meant to them, in relation to the research questions. Participants also identified the major categories from the photo discussion.

**Focus Group Workshop.** During the focus group workshop, I took measures to ensure that participants suffered no harm in any form. I reminded all participants of the ensured confidentiality and guaranteed anonymity regarding their input and personal data, and their own obligations to respect each other's wishes concerning privacy. Discussion during the focus group meeting began with each participant telling the others some biographical information

about themselves, their family background and experiences of 'outness' and coming out. Participants shared some personal stories on their educational and social experiences as Black lesbian students, using some prompts on coming out, everyday spaces, practices, and safety issues. For example, the students were asked:

- When did you first realise that you are lesbian?
- Who did you confide in and what was their reaction?
- How did you decide whether to come out or not?
- What were the factors that influenced this decision?
- State both negative and positive experiences of coming out.

During the focus groups, I made use of themes or issues that arose from the photo-voice exercise as a guide for encouraging conversation as well as yielding focused information. With the participants' consent, the focus group interviews were recorded, using an audio-recorder. All ethical requirements regarding the recording of data were adhered to. The recorded content of the interviews was transcribed and analysed in order to identify links between the data and the theoretical framework of the study.

#### **4.10 Data analysis**

The step that follows after the collection of data is called data analysis which is "a separation of a whole into parts" (Betram & Christiansen, 2014. p. 115). The two common types of qualitative data analysis are inductive and deductive approaches. According to Betram and Christiansen (2014, p. 117), "[t]he key difference between these approaches is that in inductive reasoning, the categories emerge from the data, while in deductive reasoning, the researcher starts with a set of categories, which are then used to categorise and organise the data". The study adopted a deductive approach, which started with a theory in which categories were developed and classified then the researcher tried to find patterns and connections.

Narrative analysis was used to examine the data generated. According to Creswell (2013), narrative analysis is one form of qualitative data analysis that is often used in narrative inquiry. In narrative analysis, the researcher scrutinises the stories participants create, engaging in an inquiry by asking a given question of the narrative 'texts' for a given purpose. This method can assist researchers to understand how participants are representing themselves, or their experiences, to themselves and to others. This inevitably includes issues of identity and the

interaction between the storyteller and the audience (Gilbert, 2008). I adopted a visual narrative analysis approach, which incorporates images into narrative analysis alongside written or spoken text (Butina, 2015, p.6).

Narrative analysis was used to examine the data generated by using the following steps:

- Reference coding
- Reading the text carefully
- Interpreting the findings, making meaning
- Finding connections.

I followed these steps by first reading the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews and the focus group interviews several times. I also analysed the visuals, such as the photographs and listened to the voice recordings. I then highlighted and used in-text comments to sieve out the issues and experiences that were common among these Black lesbian TVET students. I then grouped these experiences into various themes and analysed the data from the codes and categories to themes. Based on the narratives from the participants, I then organised participants' responses according to themes that were broken down into sub-themes according to my research questions. Coding was further facilitated using NVivo 10 software to check the accuracy of my analysis. Initial coding generated codes that were reduced during a second coding cycle, in which the most frequent and significant codes were identified to inform the major categories of analysis that would be used to report the findings (see Chapter 5 on data analysis).

#### **4.11 Addressing ethical issues**

Analysing sensitive or personal data raises the question of identifiability, confidentiality and privacy (Cohen et al., 2017). It is therefore vital that all research adheres to the ethical principles of autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). ). The principle of non-maleficence refers to the ethical obligation of researchers to **do no harm** to the research participants or others; rather, the research should seek to be beneficent— having a positive impact on the lives of participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

Confidentiality and anonymity provide assurance to participants that their privacy will be respected in the way the data collected about them is handled during the research process (Eungoo & Hwang, 2023). Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms rather than using participants' real names. Permission was sought from participants to use their photo voice images. For some photos, emojis were used to cover participants' faces. Cropping of photo images was also used to anonymise the images. The participants were made aware that their personal information would be kept confidential at all times, and that they could withdraw at any time – after which their information would be destroyed. To protect the anonymity, confidentiality, and identity of the participants, all the data has been securely stored and will be destroyed once the study has been evaluated and completed.

To ensure the design of the study met ethical standards for research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Social Sciences Research Ethical Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal to proceed with the study.

Caution was applied to avoid any potential harm to participants in light of the sensitivity of the research topic. The autonomy of the participants was respected through getting their consent to participate in the study. Before the interview, I ensured that there was voluntary agreement with each participant to participate in the study, by explaining the research process and providing a written outline of the purpose of the research (refer to Appendix Five). Once I had ascertained that the potential participants understood the nature and extent of the research, they were able to make a voluntary decision as to whether they were willing to participate in the research. I ensured that a biographical data and consent form were completed and signed (refer to Appendix Five).

#### **4.12 Trustworthiness of the study**

The trustworthiness of this research was ensured by applying the following criteria: credibility (*what was done*), dependability (*how it was done*), authenticity and confirmability (*why it was done*) (Stahl & King, 2020).

##### **Credibility**

Korstjens and Moser (2018) explain that credibility is the demonstration that the findings of the research are plausibly drawn from original data and correctly interprets participants' own

views. Credibility was ensured in this study by engaging intensively with the data (transcripts) to demonstrate clear associations between the data and the interpretations made of the data. Regular discussions were held with participants to ensure that interpretations/findings were a correct representation of their views?

### **Dependability**

For the dependability of this study, care was taken to ensure that the research process was logical, traceable and clearly documented in a reflexive manner by giving a detailed account of the research process.

### **Authenticity and Confirmability**

Authenticity was maintained by piloting the research instruments to ensure that they yielded valid data. Confirmability. This aspect of trustworthiness involves demonstrating that the findings link to the data and do not reflect the researcher's own ideas (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure the confirmability of this study, an audit process was implemented by working forward, as well as backward, through the research process, to ensure that the data and interpretations of the findings were sound and confirmed findings. The intention during the interpretation process was not to generalize findings to a population, but to identify accepted principles and trends related to the research topic.

## **4.12 Limitations of the Research**

Collecting narratives can be an exhaustive procedure. Each complete story provides a large amount of information. The semi-structured interviews were using isiZulu and English languages interchangeably. This may have affected the quality of the data, as some information may have been lost during translation; however, the recordings were supplemented with the notes taken during the in-depth interviews. Some students might not have told me some of their negative experiences as I was their lecturer and they may have feared that I would give them low marks or tell other lecturers things they had told me. them.

## **4.13 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the methodology employed in carrying out this study, including the justification for the methodological preferences. The research approach used was described.

The chapter also provided an overview of the research design and the data collection and analysis methods. The research setting, population, sampling procedures and instrumentation were explained. The approach taken to address the ethical issues associated with this study was explained. A consideration of the limitations of the study concluded this chapter.

## **CHAPTER 5: PERSONAL AND VISUAL NARRATIVES OF LESBIAN STUDENTS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the six narratives of Black lesbian students are presented. I utilised decolonial feminism to demonstrate that these Black lesbian students have agency to speak out. To understand the social and educational experiences of lesbian students at a TVET college, I adopted a narrative inquiry approach.

This chapter presents each participant's narrative as authentically as possible, organized around prevalent key aspects such as:

- biographical information
- family background
- disclosing one's homosexuality
- career choice and access
- on campus social experiences
- educational experiences
- experiences of violence

Each narrative, as presented below, is drawn from the semi-structured interviews, Photovoice, and focus group discussion. In order to present their stories in an authentic manner, I had to be aware of my own experiences, assumptions and worldviews which could influence the write-up of their narratives. The chapter begins with my own narrative (Section 5.2), followed by the participants' narratives.

### **5.2 Researcher's narrative**

To describe the Black lesbian students' narratives in an authentic way, it was important for me to state my own narrative, which I had developed through keeping a reflective journal. To construct my own narrative, I also used old photos that I had kept. The old photos helped to elicit latent memories of my educational and social experiences while growing up.



### **Biographical information**

I was born on April 1972 into a low-class Black family living in an overcrowded four-room dilapidated township house, which I shared with my six siblings, two aunts, an uncle and their children. My cousin was raped as an adolescent and became pregnant with twins as a result.

These babies joined the numbers living in that tiny house.

### **Family background**

Both of my parents were uneducated. My father was a worker at an agricultural factory called Johnson & Fletcher. My parents named one of my brothers 'Johnson' after the owners of that factory. My mother was a housewife who never went out to work. We often joked that she had 'never seen a White man's nose'. My maternal grandfather thought that educating girls was a waste of time, as they were destined to get married and look after their husband's family. My mother was a devout Christian and a dedicated member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and, therefore, we went to church every Sabbath. I was baptised and became a church member when I turned 12 years of age.



**Figure 7 The four-room home where I lived as a child**

It may seem surprising that I, as a Christian heterosexual woman, would be interested in bringing to light the lived experiences of lesbian women. However, my perspective is that speaking out in defence of the oppressed is a key concern of God's expressed gospel throughout the Bible. For example, Psalm 9, verse 9, says: *"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble"*.



**Figure 8 A photograph of my family**

As a Black African female coming from a poor Christian background, I had limited educational opportunities based on my gender, race, and class. In South Africa, during the apartheid era, being Black meant living with various types of subjugation. During those times, education was about serving the interests of those in power. Education was for domestication, as opposed to education for emancipation. There was a belief by most people living in our strictly patriarchal society that educating girls (formally) was a waste of time, and my mother always told me that an educated woman is one who knows best how to do household chores. It was believed to be an important skill for girls to learn so that when they would get married they would be able to

run their home, and they could always find work as a domestic maid working for White families in town.

### **Educational experiences**

My first educational experience was in a Roman Catholic missionary school. Mission education trained young African girls in all the domestic skills such as sewing, cooking, and laundry work. Such training prepared African girls to be good Christian wives and mothers for the Black teachers and preachers in the newly emerging male African elite (Gaitskell, 1982).



**Figure 9 Dusty road to school**

I was sad that even my own parents prioritised my brothers' education. They thought that, as a girl child, I would get married and my duties would be to take care of my children and husband. These educational institutions and societal structures hindered my progress as well as my agency.

Although gender, race, class, and culture had affected my formation as an individual, I did not take the 'Black victim' stance or respond with self-pity. I passed my matric at a very late age because of family problems. I found an opportunity to advance my education through distance learning. I had an age exemption, which enabled me to study at a university. I completed my studies late because I was then a mother, student, and a wife. I had to carry the multiple challenges of having to take care of the household, study part-time and work full-time. I struggled to balance my overlapping identities. Despite these challenges, I managed to obtain a Diploma in Education with a distinction. I then became a teacher and, later, a lecturer.

These life events had both positive and negative effects on my academic experiences and sense of identity. My educational experiences as a Black African girl had made me aware of the fact that my identities would overlap and connect. No single aspect of my identity existed in isolation from the other facets. My experience of one identity profoundly affected my experience of other experiences. Therefore, my struggles were inseparable.

### **5.3 Nosipho's Story**

*After abusing hallucinogenic drugs, weed and alcohol, I found myself in a dilapidated rehabilitation centre. I was a very angry child, because of the environment I grew up in. I had to watch my father abuse my mother, not just physically, but also emotionally, which conjured up bitterness and resentment in my heart. I think this is the case, because I always felt so helpless as I watched my mother being abused. My only escape was doing drugs. I started with cigarettes and when I saw that they were not strong enough, I did weed and eventually ventured into hallucinogenic drugs. I so desperately wanted to ease the pain and trauma I was going through.*





**Figure 10 Nosipho**

*In 2017, my mother divorced my dad. She did not do the 50/50 thing that takes place when partners get divorced, because she was scared that he would kill her. We left the house emptyhanded and rented a one-roomed shack. Sometimes, I would not go to school; because of financial issues, life was very tough. I even tried killing myself multiple times because life was too hard for me. I failed my matric and then decided to quit drugs and get help emotionally. I was helped by social workers who took me to rehab, where I attended therapy. I had come to hate the bitter, drunkard woman that I had become. You see, if you hate the journey that you have chosen, change your path. I believe everyone has certain power to either change their*

*lives in a negative or positive way. I have learned that it is okay to start over, it is never too late. So, I have been clean ever since and I am doing just fine.*



**Figure 11 Nosipho's home**

### **Biographical information and family background**

*My name is Nosipho and I am a 19-year-old student in the NCV programme (Education and Development). I specialise in Early Childhood Development (ECD). I also do motivational speaking on homosexuality and about my rough childhood in my spare time. I predominately express my masculinity and therefore see myself as a butch lesbian. My mother is Zulu, and my father is Sotho, but at home we speak isiZulu. I am a Christian, but simultaneously believe in ancestral spirits. I had an ancestral calling since I was a child. I am now a qualified sangoma (umkhulu) who specialises in Umndawe (healing with water). I passed Grade 11; however, I dropped out of school, because I had drug and alcohol abuse problems. I used drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism since I had family problems and was not accepted as a lesbian. I come from a family of five and I currently stay with my mother, who is a domestic worker, and my brother, who is unemployed.*



**Figure 12 Special dating moments with my partner during recess**

### **Disclosing one's homosexuality**

*I became aware of my sexuality in Grade 7. I used to date a girl who was my desk mate. It started off as something playful, but things became serious over time. Since then, I have been dating girls until now. I have never dated a guy before. I can really say it has been hard being a lesbian, not just around my family, but also around my community. My mom is aware that I am lesbian. She does not approve of it, because she said that she will only buy dresses for me, since I act like a boy. She threatened to disown me if I continued with that lifestyle. I think my other family members suspect that I am lesbian, because of how I present myself and my choice of partners.*

### **Career choice and access**

*I gained access to college through social workers from the rehab centre. I saw college as a place where I could express my sexual identity freely without fear of being judged. I just wanted*

*to have a fresh start. The social workers suggested that vocational training would be good for me, since it might enable me to find a job after completing my studies. It was easy to gain access to college, since I was accompanied by social workers, they only asked for my Grade 11 report. They treated us all the same. I would have loved to do Engineering (Motor Mechanics), since I love fixing cars and would also like to open a car wash in my area one day. Unfortunately, they wanted students who had done Mathematics in high school and I did not qualify to do it. I just took what was available to get my matric.*

### **Social experiences on campus**

*As a lesbian student on campus, some of my classmates do not judge my lifestyle, but others do. What is good is that I have met the love of my life at college. We spend time together and study together. There are some male students around college who giggle behind our backs. We just ignore them and continue going about our activities. On the contrary, I would say the lecturers are pleasant. They do not bother me; they just teach me. My results are excellent except Maths Literacy.*

### **Experiences of violence**

*There is some harassment that I have experienced at the campus, it's not serious though, only giggles behind my back and whispers about 'ukukhohlakala kwethu', which means our 'shameful acts' - according to the perpetrators. Sometimes, they call us drama queens. This normally happens during lunch breaks. I can't report such petty issues, lecturers will think that I am seeking attention. However, I know a lesbian lady, who was in our WhatsApp group, who experienced violence because of her sexual orientation. She liked drinking in taverns during weekends. She was seen by some guys courting other ladies at the tavern. They warned her against doing that, but she did not listen to them. She was walking home with her girlfriend from college when they violated her and stripped her naked and proceeded to burn her clothes. She went to report the matter to the police and the police said they did well by hitting her, why is she dating other women, considering the fact that she is also a woman. They teased, mocked, and laughed at her. Ultimately, the perpetrators did not incur any consequences. Instead, the police said that the perpetrators should have hit her harder.*



## **Educational experiences**

*Educationally, what I have experienced, which is related to my sexual orientation, is that some of my classmates often say that they don't want anything to do with 'izitabane', which are homosexuals. They sometimes even try to give me artificial hair, which we colloquially refer to as bonding, hoping that I will look like a proper girl. I feel unwanted, based on what they have to say about me. They avoid choosing me during group work.*

*I would say that I have achieved success in some subjects, but I still need to fix others. I have experienced some barriers to learning in Maths Literacy, and I don't think it has to do with being lesbian, I am simply not a Maths person. I have received academic support through tutorials. The lessons are on curriculum modules and take only one hour. In terms of my sexual orientation, I have never disclosed to my lecturers that I am lesbian, I can't discuss my sexual orientation with lecturers, as some of them are Christians, they will hate me and say I am a bad influence on other students. There are no programmes or lessons on homosexuality in college, they do not talk about it.*

## **Community perceptions and treatment**

*Outside campus, there are some guys who do not like me, because I attract all the desirable girls. They are obviously jealous of me. The older folks in my community also look at me in a strange way, they say I disgust them. I just want to feel safe and free. What keeps me going every day is that I ignore all negative comments and opinions from people. I am very strong, bold, and fearless. I will live my life on my terms and will not allow anyone the pleasure of dictating how I should live it. I am connected to the LGBT community locally and some members are from this college. We organise events and gigs to entertain ourselves. We also formed a WhatsApp group called "Izitabane zeMbali", where we post motivational messages to each other. We also help those who are looking for partners by posting their photos on the group.*

## **5.4 Nandi's Story**

*I found myself in a mental ward after being admitted for suicidal stress. I had scars all over my body from cutting myself with razor blades when I experienced any rejection or isolation*

*as a result of my sexual orientation. I wanted to remove the pain from my heart and no longer felt any pain now from the act. I actually felt better emotionally after cutting myself.*



**Figure 13 My razor blade scars**

### **Biographical information and family background**

*My name is Nandi; I am a 20-year-old Black lesbian woman. I did not pass at school and enrolled in the NCV (Engineering and Related Design) programme at the TVET college, specialising in Fitting and Turning. I am sexually attracted to other women. I see myself as (Umjita) a guy. I always keep my hair short. As a result, I am often judged for being a girl who looks like a guy. My life has not been the happiest, but I still appreciate it. I was raised by a single parent (my mom). I lost my dad when I was one year old. My mother is not working and uses her grant money to support us, with my brother and sister. She did everything in her power for me to have a better life, which is something she never had. Mina ekhaya basindisiwe. (We are Born-again Christians). As a Christian, my mom is against my sexuality and thinks that it is just a lifestyle, something that teenagers nowadays prefer to identify as. She does not like the fact that I am lesbian. Being lesbian in my Christian community is unacceptable. It is like*

*having a disease that will affect other youngsters or their kids. Essentially, to them I am a bad influence on their children. I had scars all over my body from cutting myself with razor blades when I experienced any rejection or isolation as a result of my sexual orientation.*

### **Career choice and access**

*I applied to go to college after failing matric at school and they accepted me. I failed because of depression. In high school, I had suicidal thoughts due to the rejection and isolation that I encountered, as I feel that everyone hates me because of my lesbian identity. I came to this college because they offer Engineering. I would like to be an engineer one day. I had always wanted to be a medical doctor though but couldn't because of failing Maths and not completing my matric. Engineering was my second choice of qualification. I used my Grade 11 report and did not encounter any challenges in gaining access and that can be greatly attributed to the fact that I did not disclose my sexuality. The registration form has male or female and I simply ticked female.*

### **Life as a homosexual**



**Figure 14 Nandi**

### **Disclosing one's homosexuality**

*I am still trapped in a closet, especially because of my Christian community, and I still think it is the safest place to be in. I was born different and always knew deep down in my heart that there was something unique about me and that I am not straight. I was always attracted to other girls back in high school. I used to flirt with girls and I only came out to my friends. My family is not accepting of my homosexuality, they are judgemental and not supportive of my sexual orientation. They say that I am a girl and thinking that I am a guy is in my head, it is wishful thinking. My community members hate me and don't want to accept me; they say I need a man to see that I am a girl. A few guys from my community beat me and even tried to rape me as a means of 'correcting my sexual identity'. I later learned that this is called correctional rape, which is a haunting reality for a lot of lesbians. I have noted that coming out will always result in rejection. I will just have to stay in the closet, especially in my Black Christian community.*

### **Social experiences on campus**

*There are four lesbian students that I know on campus. They are all out, because at college we are free to be who we want to be and to express our feelings without judgement from family members. As an LGBT student on campus, there are some who respect me, but most do not. I hang out with some guys. They call me "umjita" - one of the guys. Other guys don't trust me as one of their own, though. They don't want me to sit near their girlfriends. If I look at a girl, they question why I am looking at her. These insinuations make me feel disrespected because I also have rights like them.*

*Other students don't bully me openly, but just pass silly comments. Others say I am just an attention seeker. They say I will change my sexual orientation with time. When it comes to talking to lecturers about my lesbianism, I really think that sexual orientation is a private matter, it's hard for me to discuss it with my lecturers, as some of them are as old as my parents. We have formed our own social group as lesbians at college. The problem is that we steal each other's partners and end up fighting. We hang around together at break time and lunch time. We also work together during integrated summative assessments, which is the practical side of Engineering. In my local community, we meet as lesbians and chat; we also go to taverns to*

*drink and have an after-party. We also join marches to Durban with other lesbians (Izitabane zase Mbali).*



**Figure 15 Educational journey**

### **Educational Experiences**

*Educationally, I am working hard. It's only this year, in which I have underperformed, as I have relapsed. There are no support services for improving barriers to learning in relation to sexual orientation in this college. They only support you financially (student fund) and not emotionally. Also, the other student support services that are provided are mainly to do with students' health. A mobile clinic from Imbalenhle clinic often visits the college to give ARVs to students living with HIV and AIDS.*



**Figure 16 Integrated Summative Assessment**

### **Experiences of violence**

*Well, I once experienced violence; however, it was not on the campus. They followed me and attacked me outside the campus. I was attacked by a mob of male students from the college with sticks and stones. They claimed that I was taking their girls. One of them said that his girlfriend had dumped him because of me. They said they were going to show me what real guys do. I tried to beg them by lying that I was not lesbian, the girls were just my friends. They hit me badly and started striping off my clothes as an attempt to rape me. A taxi stopped by, and the driver pulled a gun and promised to shoot them, if they continued with what they were*



*doing. They ran off, leaving me naked and shaken. I thanked the taxi driver and went home. I never reported the incident to the police or college campus management. I was convinced that no one was going to believe me. At home, I lied and said that I was attacked by robbers. It is hard to be lesbian, because you must live a lie to protect yourself from harm.*

*Well, my ex was once attacked by some guys at the campus. They followed her inside the toilet. They pinned her down and took off her pants and molested her. They told her to stop dating girls and come and date them instead. She only told me and did not report the matter to the lecturers. At college, there is no institutional policy aimed at preventing and addressing any form of violence on the college campus, especially concerning non-gender-conforming students.*

## **5.5 Neli's Story**

*After battling with a dual identity of manhood and womanhood under strict rural gender and heterosexual norms, I finally decided to leave my hometown Inkandla. I do not believe in limiting my gender to just one of the two, since I enjoy both attributes.*

### **Biographical information and family background**

*My name is Neli and I am a 19-year-old Zulu Black bisexual student, who is registered for National Curriculum Vocational Training, specialising in Engineering Fabrication. I am a Born-again Christian (ngisindisiwe) and believe in a higher being called uNkulunkulu (God). However, uNkulunkulu is too great to talk to him directly. As a result, I have to talk to him via the spirits who are my ancestors. At home, I am the only child and now I have a child too. We are very poor and have no one to support me financially. My mom is old, single, and not working and no one supports her too.*



**Figure 17 My home**

*I'm bisexual, I have feelings for both males and females. Okay, I didn't know that until I was 16. I was only dating girls, but this guy began pursuing me for almost a year. I ended up giving this guy a chance. I didn't know why I did it, but I did. I won't lie, I was happy to the extent that I even thought that maybe I am not lesbian after all. He then raped me and I fell pregnant, while we were both doing matric in 2018. I had a complicated pregnancy, and he was busy cheating left right and centre. I gave birth to a healthy baby boy prematurely. I took a gap year in 2019 and I went to college in 2020 to do NCV Engineering. It feels as if I live a double life, because I date both males and females, but I don't disclose that some of my girlfriends are my lovers. I prefer deceiving other students, lecturers, my family, and community members to think that I'm straight. In the Zulu culture, parents and community members believe that a girl's destiny is to get married and bear many children for her husband's family. I date males mainly for money, not for love. I exchange my body for money, otherwise, we starve at home.*

### **Career choice and access**

*I was raped and fell pregnant and therefore dropped out of school after Grade 11. My only option was to register at a TVET college since they are not picky. Universities only take those who have completed and passed Grade 12. I registered for any course that was still available. I wasn't interested in this course and took it, because it was the only one in which there was*



*space available. I am just studying to obtain easy money (student fund). I have a lot of problems beyond having to worry about books. I was told that I have kidney failure. I had to do dialysis now and then, consequently, I am in a lot of pain and can't concentrate much in class. My hometown is Nkandla. Colleges in my home area discriminate against homosexuals, therefore I chose this college because it's far away from home and I could come out freely if I wanted to, without being judged.*

*I also choose to study at this college to get the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. I wanted to support my baby and my mother. I applied for NSFAS on registration. I only received R1025 every month. I don't stay at home, so I had to rent a room near college, since they closed the hostel. The rooms cost approximately R600. I remain with very little money for food, supporting my mother, baby, and my girlfriend.*

*Well, I did not experience any challenges related to sexual orientation in gaining access to the college. There was no place on the application form where students had to indicate their sexual orientation. Even if that were the case, I wouldn't disclose my sexual orientation, because I fear that they might not take me, if they know that I am bisexual.*

## Social experiences on campus



**Figure 18 At college**

*I do not feel respected as an LGBT student on campus. There are some guys, who mock us and tell other students that we are crazy, because no guys have ever pursued us. According to his theory, we are basically that we are consoling ourselves by dating each other. There are about eight lesbians that I know on campus including my girlfriend. My girlfriend and I had instant chemistry when we first met, I had an innate inclination that she was my soul mate, although I was in a relationship with the father of my child. There are about four lesbians that I know who are fully out and the other four are still in the closet.*

*Four of the lesbian students who are not fully out stated that they feared being bullied, mistreated, and marginalised by heterosexual students. They are also concerned that their families might judge or reject them. There is also a lesbian student among that group, who is struggling to accept her sexual orientation, since it clashes with her parents' religious and*

*personal beliefs. Sadly, she is not taking kindly to rejection as she has become a bitter and mean person. The four who are out said they felt happier and less stressed by coming out. They are now free to do what they like. They don't mind what other people think. When the college hostel was opened, there was a lesbian couple who worked as housekeepers. They did not hide their relationship. It felt more liberating to talk to them about my sexual orientation instead of resorting to talking to lecturers. The atmosphere at this college is hostile to us lesbians. Most guys feel uncomfortable around us. They follow us, make fun of us, and bully us. They do not face any consequences whatsoever. They should at least have programmes to educate them about us. Even if you don't tell them that you are lesbian, they somehow pick it up and turn it into a joke. My friends have been called by horrible names too, this situation is unpleasant. I wish someone cared enough to intervene. I don't participate in on-campus non-academic activities. Honestly, we don't have many non-academic activities; there is Scripture Union for those who are Christians. I don't go there because I know exactly where I am not wanted. However, I am part of a lesbian community; we study together during exam time and go to taverns together on Friday nights. We hang out as a group during break, and lunch times.*

### **Educational experiences**

*I am failing academically because of health problems, (ubaba wengane uyangihlupha) and my baby's daddy is giving me problems. On the other hand, I have a girlfriend and a child to take care of. Living a lie about my sexuality is also a problem. I can't keep up anymore. I am suffering from physical ailments. I have experienced discrimination, harassment, and violence as a bisexual student, inside and outside campus. One of my male clients said that I should come and live with him to save money, since I could not afford to pay rent. I agreed out of desperation since I had financial problems due to childcare obligations. By then, my feelings of loving other girls were strong. My girlfriend from college would come to visit me. He noticed that I was cheating on him and became aggressive. He told me that I only belonged to him, and he will make sure that no one touches me after he is done dealing with me.*

### **Experiences of violence**

*He then started abusing me. He was hitting me and locking me in the house to keep me away from my girlfriend. He would say he is trying to correct my behaviour of loving another woman. He would also rape me. He burnt my clothes and books. He said he will tell people that I am*

*bisexual and social workers will take my child away, because of my promiscuous behaviour. I would even spend days without eating if he saw me with some women who were my classmates. I felt isolated and I was grief-stricken. I even wanted to kill myself. I would spend some of my NSFAS and child support grant money drinking and abusing drugs, because I needed to relieve the stress I was under. I couldn't study and failed most of my modules. I ended up breaking with him, but I did not report to the police, since he threatened to kill me if I reported him.*

## **5.6 Noxolo's Story**

*After being colonised by the streets, I decided to go back home. I had become homeless, lonely and alone. I had fled from home after brutally disclosing my sexual orientation to my family.*

### **Biographical information and family background**

*My name is Noxolo. I'll be turning 20 this year. I grew up in Pinetown (Chesterville), but now live in Southgate (Pietermaritzburg). I stay with my mother, father and my three brothers. I'm currently studying at college, doing my second year. My main goal right now is to finish all my levels and go to varsity and study Engineering Fitting, so I'll be able to work as a mine worker like my father. I am a femme lesbian. I love to dress in a "girly" manner and I am attracted to butch lesbians, who have dreadlocks and wear baggy jeans. I am a Zulu girl and I speak isiZulu. We are Christians at home. I came to this college because I failed matric. I would have enrolled at a university if I had passed for a bachelor's degree. My father is a mine worker in Johannesburg. My mother is a housewife.*

### **Disclosing one's homosexuality**

*I started dating in 2016. I was still doing Grade 10 and that's when I realised that I'm into girls, because every time a boy approached me, I'd get mad and report him to my parents. Oh, my parents know that I'm lesbian. They said they won't accept it because I'm still confused due to adolescence. They say lesbianism is demonic. My grandmother is not against my lesbianism; she says it's part of the Zulu culture. I often change to 'Umkhulu' (grandfather) when I am demon-possessed. Grandmother has accepted me and some of my family members (from my mother's side). However, some of my aunts say I need therapy to change my mindset. They think that puberty is negatively impacting my mind.*

### **Career choice and access**

*I used to hang out at a tavern when I was doing Grade 10. That was when I met with other lesbians in the area. Because of excessive partying and drinking, I neglected my schoolwork. I used to bring other lesbians home and my mother disliked them. She would chase them out and hit me with a wooden spoon. When I failed matric, I decided to go to the college, because some of my lesbian friends, who had also failed matric, were studying there. I did not need to disclose my sexuality, the college form has male or female, therefore concealing non-binary identities.*



**Figure 19 Coming out**

*I have chosen to come out, as I do not want to live my life based on lies. My girlfriend and I can fully attest to the saying, 'the truth will set you free'. We feel free through coming out and stepping into our sexual identity unapologetically. We sit together in class and hold hands during break time. Some students look at me with malicious eyes when I am kissing my girlfriend, but I don't care what they think of me. We post each other on Facebook or WhatsApp statuses freely. Whatever we do, people will always have negative things to say about us. We*

*no longer care what they think of us. However, I have noticed that they don't invite us if there are religious gatherings, like prayers at college.*



**Figure 20 She is my everything. I adore her.**

### **Social experiences on campus**

*The college environment has provided me with independence to pursue my sexuality freely. Moreover, college has provided me with academic opportunities to pursue my vocational training for me to be an engineer one day. Also, I had the pleasure of meeting other lesbians, who were open about their sexual identities. I feel comfortable to seek assistance and support when experiencing barriers to learning, as lecturers don't judge me. I have made friends with five other lesbians on campus, and this has provided me with a feeling of belonging. We have*

*formed study groups to help each other, and this has helped me to improve my grades. The college also has support programmes like tutorials to assist us especially in Mathematics. I am happy and I am doing well.*

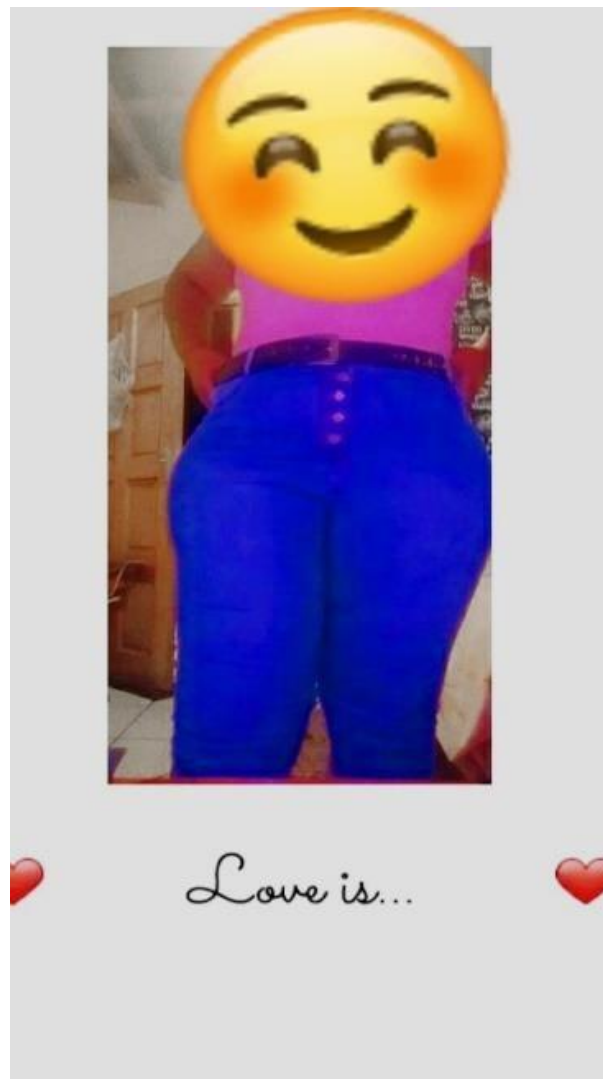
### **Experiences of violence**

*As a lesbian, I have experienced some incidents of discrimination, harassment, and violence on the college campus and outside of campus. I once double-crossed my girlfriend and cheated on her with someone on campus. She was very angry at me. She is friendly with some guys at campus. She told them that I was the one who was stealing their girlfriends. During lunchtime, they asked to talk to me privately. We went to a secluded corner. One of the guys pulled a bread knife and threatened to cut my throat if I ever date any of their girls on campus. I reported them to a male lecturer, but he did not take the story seriously. He asked them to apologise to me and I accepted their apology. They also denied that they had a bread knife. I continued dating my girlfriend. They only stare at us or follow us around and we just ignore them.*

*The same male students once followed my girlfriend, while she was walking home alone. They tried to court her, and she refused. They scolded her and blamed her for imitating them or pretending to be like them. They asked her to take off her underwear and show them her male private parts if she had them. They also accused her of copying Western tradition by dating other girls. She did not report the incident to anyone, but only informed me about what had occurred.*



## 5.7 Nompilo's Story



**Figure 21 Nompilo**

### **Biographical information**

*My name is Nompilo, and I am 20 years old. I am a Black non-binary student, who was assigned female at birth. Although I am female, I hate to be labelled as a femme lesbian, although I think I fall under that category, since I am more attracted to other women. At home, we are Christians. I am in Level 3 in the Engineering NCV programme. I specialised in Automotive Repair & Maintenance. I used to live at the college residence before it was closed due to student protests. I do not like to be labelled as butch or femme, but I date other girls. I am Zulu*



*and at home we speak isiZulu. I had only passed Grade 11 when I first came here, because I failed Grade 12.*

### **Family background**

*I live with my parents, grandmother and my two sisters in Edendale township. At home, we are Christians (sisindisiwe). My mother is a housewife. My father is a factory worker at a furniture shop at Mkhondeni. (Yesh), shaking her head, he doesn't earn much, but we are managing, because we also use our grandmother's pension money to buy food.*

### **Disclosing one's homosexuality**

*I was always aware that I am different, but I used to fight it. I realised that I was lesbian in Grade 7, because there was a girl I had a crush on. We were not dating as such, but we were very close friends. When I came to college, I met other lesbians, and then became comfortable. At home, they seem to suspect that I am a lesbian, because I have lesbian friends. They don't like my friends because they chase them away. My parents often question how I dress and why I do not have boyfriends. I am scared of being rejected or judged by my parents, especially my grandmother. In my Black township, community members view lesbianism as a 'White man's disease'. As a result, I have chosen not to be open about my sexuality to my family and community members. However, I think they know, but do not want to accept it. They treat me like an outsider, as if I am not part of the family because of the life I have chosen. They indirectly say that lesbians are a disgrace. I'm afraid of discrimination if community members find out. I don't want to be labelled 'uSatane' (devil). Some lecturers are strongly Christian, and I just think they might disapprove, if I tell them that I am lesbian.*



**Figure 22 At college**

### **Career choice and access**

*I came to this college to try to gain some skills training, so that I can work and help my parents. At home, we are very poor. I want to have a better life. I also heard in our WhatsApp lesbian group that they were taking students who failed matric in their NCV Engineering programmes. I do not feel respected as an LGBT student on campus. Students around the campus have a mindset that is very judgemental towards me. They pass unnecessary comments that are directed towards me. They ask me, why I live my life like this (lesbian). I often tell them that I did not choose to be lesbian, it's natural. They mock me and say hurtful things about me. They call me a loser, attention seeker and drama queen. At some point, I lost confidence in myself and even doubted my intellectual capabilities. Being criticised, mocked, and alienated by my peers led to me developing a low self-esteem, and potentially impacted my academic*

*performance negatively. I was often absent from college and failed most of my modules. I tried killing myself twice, since I felt like a loser.*

### **Educational experiences**

*Educationally, I need to pull up my socks a bit. I fail to work well with others, especially in groups. It's because they don't take me seriously and I get frustrated if I am not listened to and throw temper tantrums. They find me very bossy in my class. I am also almost always absent since I am being bullied at college. As a result, I have failed most of my modules.*

### **Social experiences on campus**

*As a lesbian at this college, I have experienced some incidents of discrimination, harassment, and violence on the college campus. As I have said above, they call me a loser and bully me in group work during classwork. Well, I was once molested by some male students in the toilet. Fortunately, they did not rape me. They only inserted their fingers in my private part. They also pulled off my bra to check if I had breasts or not.*

### **Experiences of violence**

*In church, I experience harassment and discrimination. They somehow seem to know that I am lesbian and they don't want me there. There are certain verses that they read from the Bible. I think they read them to make me feel unwelcome, as if God does not like me the way I am. A girl from my church once told me straight to my face that sinners like me are not welcome in church. She said that I belonged in taverns and prostitution facilities.*

*People in my community make me uncomfortable. I am forced to be home before dark because our lives are threatened as homosexuals. I can say that I live a double life to protect myself from harassment and discrimination.*

## 5.8 Nomsa's Story

### Biographical information



**Figure 23 Me and my girlfriend**

*I am Nomsa and I am 20 years old. I came to this college to study Motor Mechanics. I am strong and like fixing cars. I am a Black female butch. I have never dated men before. I am Zulu and I don't attend church. My parents are Christians, although they don't show me love like Christians should. Instead, they show hate more than love, especially to me. I think it is because of my sexual orientation. I think I am an atheist because I don't want to attend church. I passed Grade 11 before coming to this college. I did not complete school, due to emotional and verbal abuse that I experienced in high school from my peers and teachers. My Grade 11 teacher used to say, "You make my stomach turn when you pretend to be what you are not". I would then smoke glue excessively to keep stress at bay, and it damaged my brain. I ended up failing and dropping out of school.*

## **Family background**

*I live in my late grandfather's house. I stay with my parents, grandmother, aunts, uncles, and my brother. My father doesn't work. He is a hustler. My uncles are street vendors, they have tables in town, where they sell basic household products. My aunts also do not work (baphila ngemali yeqolo), they depend on their children's support grant. Life is tough at home, it's hard to make ends meet (Yesh), we somehow manage (barely) though.*

## **Disclosing one's homosexuality**

*I don't hide that I am lesbian because everyone knows (my parents, peers, lecturers). I realised I was lesbian at primary school, when I found myself feeling attracted to other girls. I do not conform to feminine gender norms and expectations. I dress in a masculine manner. At college, I like kissing and cuddling other ladies. As a result, I often experience criticism for my behaviour. I am disliked by my peers, who use a derogatory label when referring to me (Unongayindoda). You are a sis boy. They tell tales about my sexuality and say I have both female and male sexual organs. I told my college mates that I am lesbian. They were shocked and had looks of disapproval written on their faces. They don't want to talk about it. They avoid me and talk to me when only necessary. Their disapproval does not affect me. I am a lesbian, and I am happy as I am. I won't conform to their idea of what a girl should be like in my dress, manner, or lifestyle.*

*Community members also know that I am lesbian. They use derogatory names when referring to me (bangibiza umgodi onganukwanja). They call me "a hole which is not sniffed even by a dog". I feel untouchable, since they say they fear me. I know they would not dare to confront me directly, and therefore resort to gossip and say unpleasant things behind my back. I don't care what other people think about me. I can't please everyone after all.*

*At home, I confided to some family members. They are some people who are fine with it, but others are not. My father does not confront me directly; instead, he talks to my brother about my lesbianism privately. My Aunts privately call me unpleasant names like "umjendevu", which means "the unwanted one". My mother is hurt about it. She is a serious Christian (usindisiwe); she wants me to go to church, so that I can be straight. She even threatened to call Umfundisi (the pastor), to come and talk to me about changing my lifestyle (mina angihlangene nje nesonto). I won't go to church, since they made their views known that homosexuality is a sin*

*and that I am not welcome if I am lesbian. I don't want to live a degrading life based on lies. I want to show other lesbians like me that we can be 'out' and survive and even flourish if we want to, it's our choice.*

### **Career choice, access and social experiences on-campus**

*I chose this college because they offer Motor Mechanics. My mother wanted me to be a teacher. She said that's a decent career for a girl (smiling). I simply told her that I will never be a teacher and that I am a different kind of girl, who likes to wear overalls and boots and to fix cars. I don't mind, if they respect me or not as a lesbian at this college (rolling her eyes). My sexual orientation is a private matter (ndiyinkonkoni). I am lesbian, so what? It's a personal matter. I don't owe anyone any explanation; people should simply stop poking their nose in private matters. I don't want to interact with them (heterosexuals) on campus, since they make jokes and ask silly questions about my sexual orientation.*

### **Educational experiences**

*Educationally, it is manageable at college. I do Motor Mechanics. I am doing very well. I wish to own a car garage one day. There are no life skill programmes about homosexuality. Most of the students are heterosexuals, therefore they wouldn't be interested in learning about us anyway.*

### **Experiences of violence**

*On experiences of harassment, discrimination, and violence, I have only experienced name-calling. Physically, they can't touch me. I fight like a bull; most guys fear me. I told them that I will stab them if they dare come near me. However, I make sure that I am home early because they can kill me at night. I have only had threats that they will catch me one day, but I haven't had anything so far. I am happy and content.*

## **5.10 Conclusion**

Themes of masculinity, sexuality, gender, heterosexism, spirituality and class were raised in the participants' narratives. As Black lesbian women, participants were 'crippled' by sexism and patriarchal views. Heterosexism was displayed by participants' family members, since they favoured female-male heterosexual sexual relationships. However, some participants still displayed self-acceptance as lesbians, despite being discriminated against and attacked. These

women accepted their circumstances and embraced who they are, although not all of them had the courage to come out and openly live their lifestyle within their families or communities.

The theme of patriarchy was raised, as some participants related how they were attacked by male students who could not tolerate so-called competition from females. Such attacks were also misogynistic and anti-lesbian, as the assailants were men. They blamed participants for imitating them or pretending to be like them. Also, violence was an important theme, where lesbians were attacked by men and physically assaulted for their same-sex desires.

## CHAPTER 6: DATA ANALYSIS

### 6.1 Introduction

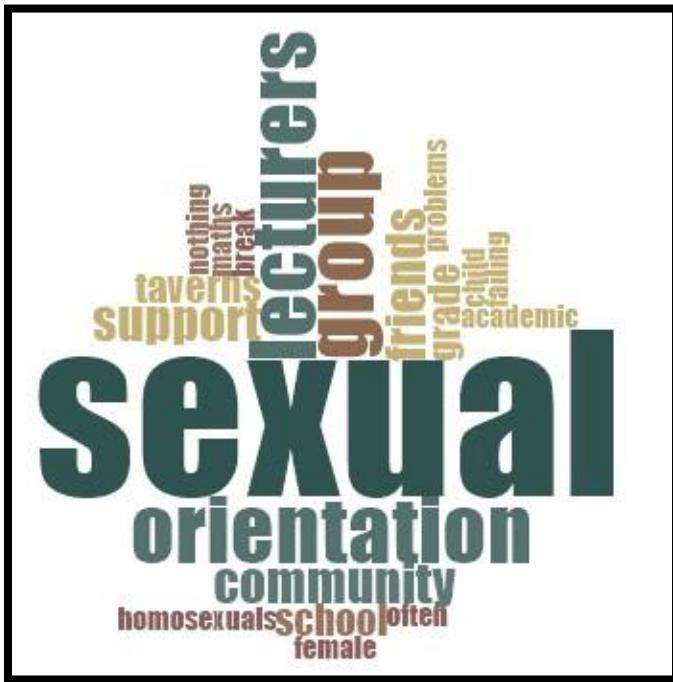
In Chapter 5, I discussed the personal and visual narratives of lesbian students at a TVET college. In this chapter and Chapter 7, the data is analysed to answer the three research questions. This chapter explores the findings related to Research Question 1: *What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college?* and Question 2: *What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?* Chapter 7 explores the findings related to Research Question 3: *How do the social identities of Black female lesbian students contribute to their educational success and participation at post-school educational institutions?*

Narrative analysis was used to examine the data generated. I adopted a visual narrative analysis approach which is a broad approach, encompassing words and images (Butina, 2015). I did this by reading the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews and focus/story circle group interviews several times. I also analysed visuals, including photographs, and listened to the voice recordings. I then highlighted key text and used in-text comments to sieve out the issues and experiences which were common among the participants and grouped these experiences into various themes. Based on the narratives of the participants themselves, I organized their responses according to three broad themes which were broken down into sub-themes aligned with my research questions. The data was analysed using codes, then categories, then themes. Coding was facilitated using NVivo software to store, organise, manage, and make sense of the data. Initial coding generated codes which were reduced during a second coding cycle in which the most frequent and significant codes were identified to determine the major categories of analysis that would be used to report the findings.

### 6.2 Experiences of participation and success at the TVET college

The first research question asked: *What are Black female lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at one TVET college?* This question resulted in three broad topics: on-campus social experiences, educational experiences, and experiences of violence. These results were obtained from studying word clouds, tables and mind maps of students' narratives, as shown in Figure 24 below.





**Figure 24** Word cloud of top 20 most often mentioned words by all participants on their experiences regarding participation and success on campus

Participants mentioned one or more words in reference to education, which included school, support, academically, grades, fail, and maths. Three participants added that support provided on campus includes health and finance. There was minimal effort noted by these lesbian students towards academic support.



**Figure 25** Word cloud of top 20 most often mentioned words by all participants on their educational experiences regarding their participation and success

Two participants stated that the college environment provided them with independence to pursue their sexual identities in privacy and away from their Christian communities. For others, college provided academic opportunities to pursue their vocational training for future employment purposes. Some participants saw college as an opportunity to meet other lesbians who were friendly and open about their sexual identities. They felt comfortable to seek assistance and support from lecturers when experiencing barriers to learning. However, there were some participants who did not feel safe to talk about their sexual identities. Making friends with other lesbians provided them with a feeling of belonging, and they formed study groups with them to help each other to improve their grades, as shown in the photograph below.



**Figure 26 Lesbian study groups at college**

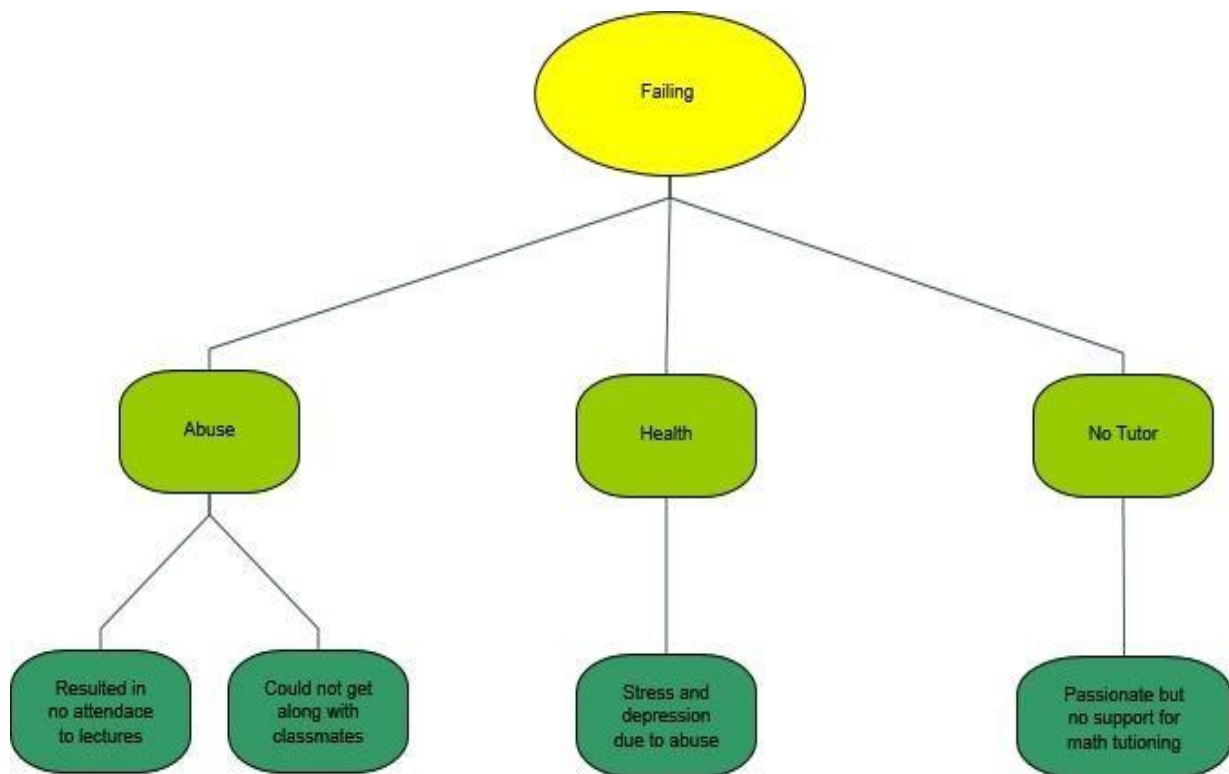
Participants also experienced some barriers to learning related to their sexual orientation, because they felt they were being ignored or excluded by other students or staff. They were called 'drama queens' by some students and were not invited to take part in important educational excursions. The following are some of the responses from the participants that are indicative of their experiences:

*There are some guys who do not like me, though. They treat me like dust. I think it is because I get all the nice girls. They are jealous of me.* Participant 1

*Some male staff make inappropriate comments about homosexuals.* Participant 5

*Students around the campus have the mindset that is very judgemental towards me. They pass unnecessary comments that are directed at me. They ask me why I live my life like this [lesbian]. I often tell them that I did not choose to be lesbian, it's natural. They mock me and say hurtful things about me. They call me a loser.* Participant 5

Looking at the educational experiences, participants mentioned words relating to failing. The factors contributing to their failure were stated as being physical or verbal abuse resulting in poor health and lacking appropriate academic support. The third level shows the results of those factors; many of these Black lesbian students found that they could not interact socially because they tended to be bullied or picked on, which resulted in them experiencing additional stress and depression.



**Figure 27 Mind map showing factors that affected participants' failure on campus (Second level - light green) and the result of those factors (third level - dark green)**

Perhaps one of the other disturbing references, made by Nompilo was that constant verbal harassment resulted in her achieving less than she felt she could have at college. At some point, she lost confidence in herself and even doubted her intellectual capabilities. Being criticised, mocked, and 'hated' by her peers led to low self-esteem, alienation and potentially affected her academic performance negatively. To avoid such harassment and verbal attacks, she was often absent from college and, as a result, failed most of her modules. She reached the point of attempting suicide twice due to a deep sense of failure. According to gender researchers, sexual orientation related discrimination has often been reported in research and LGBTQ+ youth who experience victimisation at post-school education institutions are at risk for suicidal behaviours (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2016). A number of experiences hindered participants from full participation and success at the TVET college. Some participants reported being excluded from group work and social events by heterosexuals which resulted in a lack of epistemic access.

Nosipho stated:

*Some of my classmates often say that they don't want anything to do with [izitabane] homosexuals. They sometimes even try to give me artificial hair [bonding], hoping that I will*

*look like a proper girl. I feel unwanted by what they say. They don't want to choose me during group work.*

Participants experienced violence during their studies at the TVET college or at home or in their communities. In their narratives, they spoke about their experiences regarding violence in some form or other either as abuse by other students, a partner, family, and community members. For example, they talked about having been hit, being locked in the house, being molested in the toilet, and being raped as shown in Table 4 below:

**Table 4 A summary of participants' experiences of violence**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Form of violence</b>
Nosipho	Family – physical and verbal Campus – verbal behind her back
Nandi	Community – men were physical and sexual
Neli	Campus – bullying and hostile Partner (male – physically and sexually abusive Community – someone raped her, and she fell pregnant
Noxolo	Family – verbal Campus – the lecturer did not believe in bullying. Some guy students were physically abusive
Nompilo	Campus – bullying during class and work-group; sexually abused by male students, Church – verbal abuse
Nomsa	Verbal bullying

Themes related to participants' lack of social and epistemic access came up during the analysis by scrutinizing participants' on-campus social and educational experiences and grouping them into codes and categories as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 Codes, Categories and Themes**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name-calling</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Derogatory labelling</li> <li>• Verbal abuse</li> <li>• Exclusion based on prejudices</li> <li>• Invisibility</li> <li>• Mockery</li> <li>• Molesting</li> <li>• Rape</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hostile attitudes</li> <li>• Violation of rights</li> <li>• Gender-based violence</li> <li>• Homophobic violence</li> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Discrimination</li> </ul>	<b>Lack of social access</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The formal curriculum</li> <li>• Staff/student relations</li> <li>• Student/student relations</li> <li>• Gender- &amp; racially-inclusive content</li> <li>• Pedagogic approaches</li> <li>• Assessment policies &amp; practices</li> </ul>	<p><b>Access to the curriculum</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No institutional culture</li> <li>• No institutional policies (the hidden curriculum)</li> <li>• No leadership, staff professional development</li> <li>• No support services (psychological services)</li> </ul>	<b>Lack of epistemic access</b>

### **6.3 Factors that impeded Black lesbian students' full and equal participation and success at the TVET College**

The third research question asked: *What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?* This section looks at the second part of that question: the factors that facilitated students' participation and success at the TVET college.

Based on the narratives, the most common factors that impeded participants' success and participation at college were coded and categorised into four sub-themes: social identity; family background; career choice; and disclosure of sexuality. Each participant's data was first analysed manually and coded using the NVivo software program, a qualitative data analysis

computer software package produced by QSR International. NVivo is designed to assist researchers to organise, analyse and check the accuracy of qualitative data.

### 6.3.1 Social identities of Black female lesbian students

To analyse this question, I examined aspects of participants' social identities, such as gender, race, class, sex and religious/cultural background, to explore how their social identities contributed to their 'educational and social experiences of success and participation at a TVET college'. All six participants were Black, lesbian students from low socio-economic backgrounds, their ages ranged from 18 to 20. Participants reported being rejected, mocked, labelled and called names because of their intersecting social identities. I further analysed these attributes by using the following tools provided in the NVivo software program:

- Word cluster: showing different bubbles and associations to each other Text cluster: showing which phrases were used most in the narratives

The NVivo text cluster feature revealed that the word 'lesbian' was one of the 20 words most frequently used by participants. This is represented by the size of the word in the cluster: the bigger the word, the more frequently it was used by participants in their narratives, as shown in Figure 28.

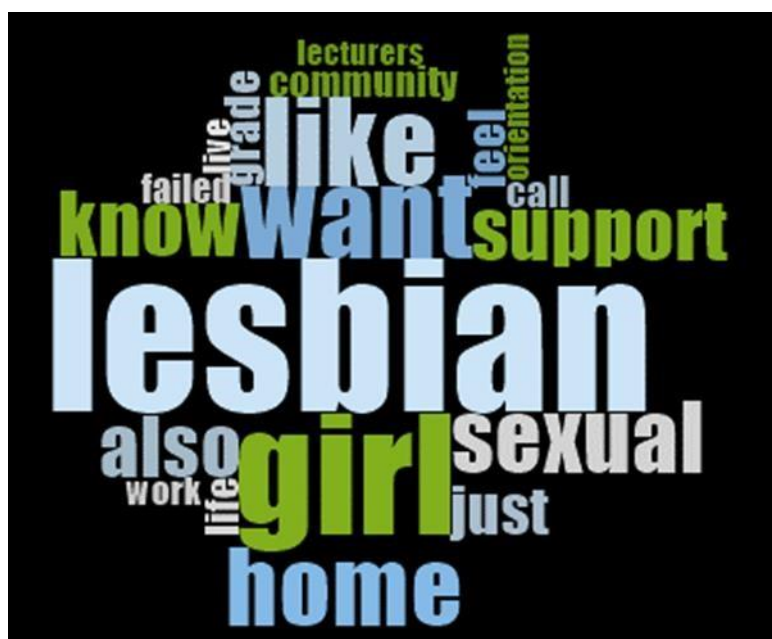
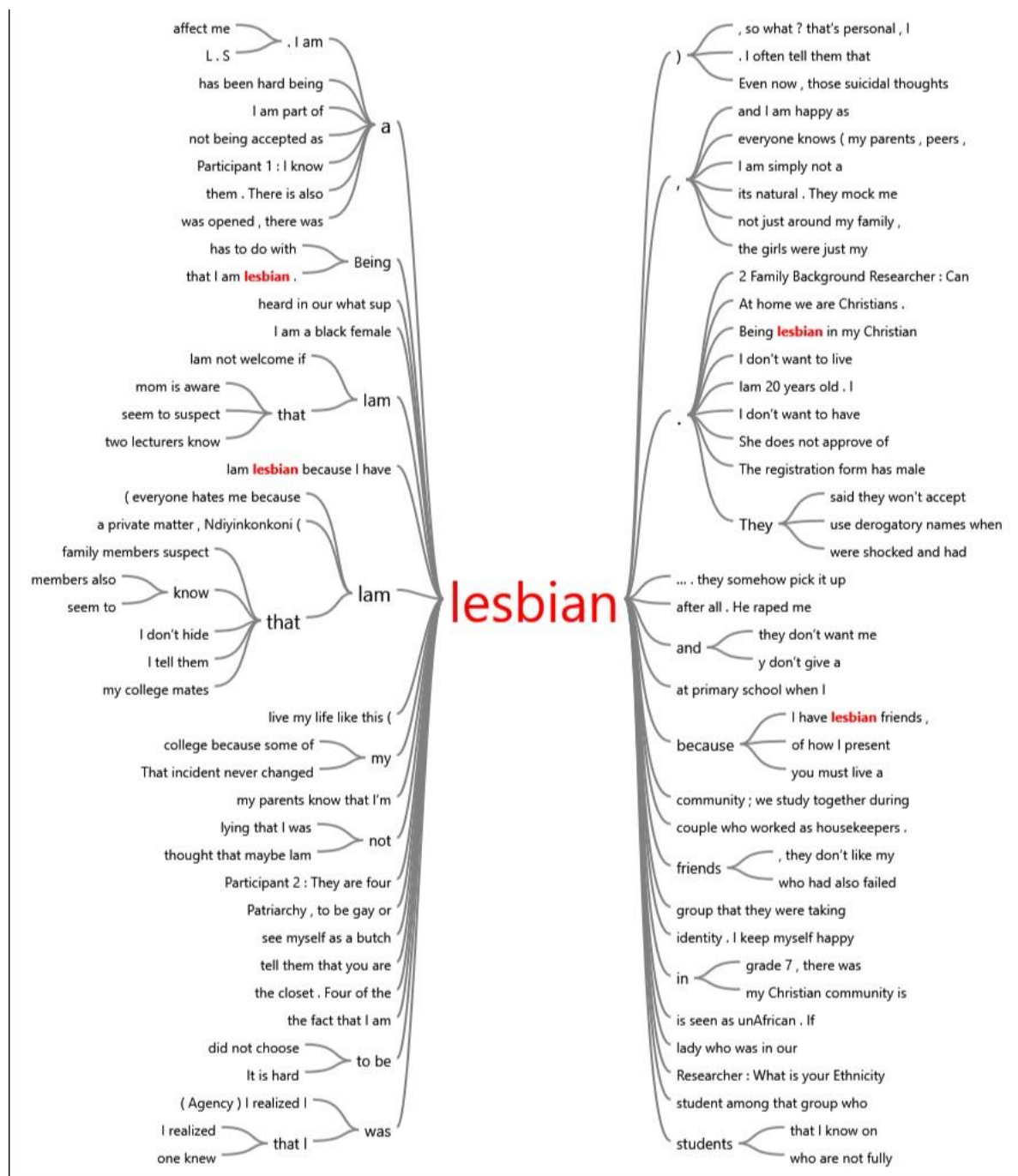


Figure 28 Text cluster showing words used most often in narratives

Investigating the significance of 'lesbian' as the most frequent word, the word tree also showed interesting results. The first branch on the left-hand side of the tree (Figure 29) reflected many references to self-acceptance, as participants used words such as "I am" lesbian, "my" lesbian friends, "I have lesbian friends", even as the branches grew out, there were more references to participants' agency and choices, and their rejection and alienation in society were clearly noted. All six participants acknowledged their non-heterosexual sexuality (lesbian identity) (See Figure 29 below). In terms of race, class, sex and religious/cultural background, 'Black' was assigned as the reference category for race.





**Figure 29 Word cluster showing different bubbles and associations with each other**

In addition, one of Nandi's Photovoice images portrayed her and her friends going on an outing, as shown below.



**Figure 30 My lesbian friends**

Some participants used Zulu terms to describe themselves and I translated the terms into English. For example, one of the participants said:

*I see myself as [Umjita] a guy. I always keep my hair short. As a result, I am often judged for being a girl who looks like a guy (Nandi).*

Noxolo introduced herself as a 'real guy' ['isoka'] and identified her sexual orientation as a femme lesbian and her gender identity as a woman. Nompilo accepted being defined by her sexual orientation (lesbian) but did not want to be labelled as either femme or butch. Neli identified herself as bisexual when she said:

*I am a Black female, bisexual student. I have feelings for both males and females(Neli).*

### **6.3.2 Religious and spiritual context**

Two participants mentioned that they were born-again Christians. Both commented on the stigma they had to face in the local community and their family attached to their sexuality, and that the community and their family rejected the fact that they were lesbian and believed they were a bad influence on others in the church and the community. However, the two participants who mentioned being in tune with their ancestral spirits experienced their community as being

more favourable towards them, as the Zulu culture believes that this is a calling from the ancestors (being lesbian). The photograph below shows Neli burning incense (impepho) and asking the ancestors for a lover.



**Figure 31 Consulting the ancestors about a lover**

*Some old folks, however, say that same-sex relationships are only accepted if a directive has been given by ancestral spirits. If you become demon possessed, for example, idlozi [ancestors] enter you either as a male or female. If you are female, you may be entered by Umkhulu and therefore start talking and acting like him. Umkhulu can choose a wife for you, even if you are female, which then becomes acceptable. No one can go against ancestral spirits' orders (Neli).*

The word cloud below depicts the church as an unwelcoming place for lesbians. They experienced harassment through certain Bible verses that were read to them and through direct confrontation. For example, one participant stated that:

*In church, I experience harassment and discrimination. They somehow seem to know that I am lesbian and they don't want me there. There are certain verses that they read from the Bible. I think they read them to make me feel unwelcome, as if God does not like me the way I am (Nompilo).*



**Figure 32 Word cloud showing religious discrimination**

The next section discusses participants' family backgrounds.

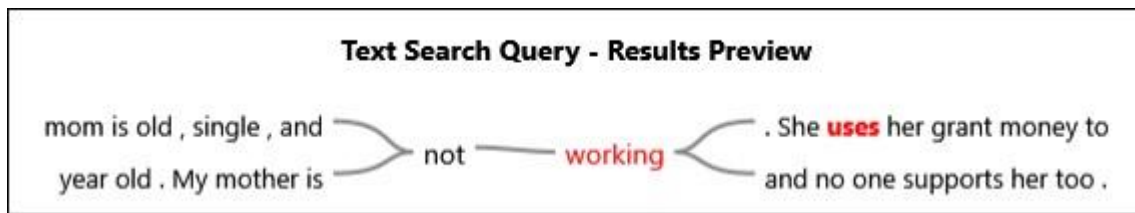
### **6.3.3 Family background**

To analyse the participants' family backgrounds, I investigated their socioeconomic status and their parents' level of education and employment status. Three participants lived with single mothers and three lived with both parents. Their families experienced financial constraints due to unemployment, death of one parent, low-paying job or being dependent on a government social grant, leading to a low socioeconomic status, as shown below:

**Table 6 Family background**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Lives with single mother (n = 3)</b>	<b>Both parents (n = 3)</b>
Mother is domestic worker	1	
Unemployed mother		3
Father working		2
Financial constraints	2	1
Siblings	2	3
Only child	1	
Father passed away	1	
Household depends on social grant	1	2

Data was further analysed using NVivo and the following information came up as results preview as shown below:

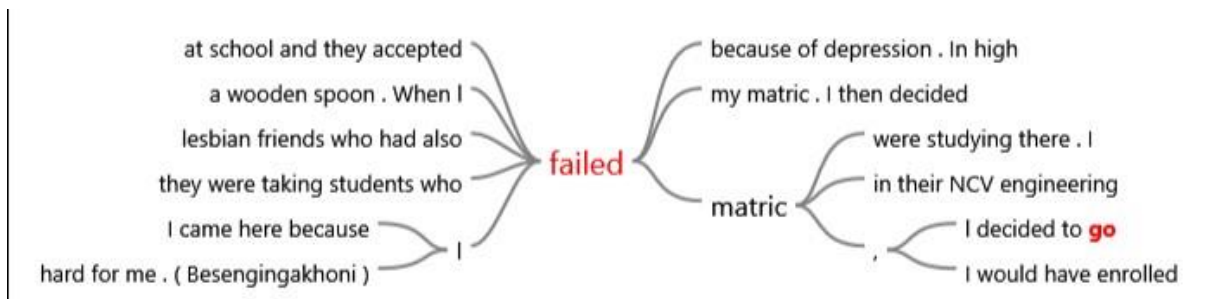


**Figure 33 Preview of results from NVivo analysis of**

### 6.3.4 Career choices

Most words mentioned by participants centred on the factors that led to their career choices.

Failure, sexuality and grade were the three most frequently mentioned words by the six participants. They mentioned that the fact that the highest grade they had achieved in school was Grade 11 had led them to follow their specific career path or course of study (Figure 34).



**Figure 34 Word tree showing branches leading from participants' stated reasons for failure**

Many participants mentioned that choosing a course or college was related to their failing at school.

- One participant stated that due to exploring her sexuality, she used to join other lesbians at the taverns and drink for support; as a result, she neglected her schoolwork. While the family support was not there for her sexual choices, her lesbian friends encouraged her to enrol at the college. She aimed to pass and move on to study for a bachelor's degree.



**Figure 35 Drinking and partying at a tavern**

- Three participants mentioned choosing college as it accepted them without having passed matric. They attributed their presence at college as being a way to express themselves and not be judged. Although some mentioned the stereotyping in college, two students indicated that the support group of friends had motivated them to keep going.
- Only one participant mentioned choosing her career path to get away from an abusive relationship and obtain a grant (NSFAS) to support her child and single mother.
- The student had to move far away from her hometown, as they discriminate against homosexuals. The only course available in college was what she enrolled for.

One participant cited her family background (her father was physically and emotionally abusive to her mother) as her motivation to study Early Childhood Development. She blamed her depression and distrust of men on her father's behaviour during the time she was growing up and its impact on her when she was a child. Because of this, she wanted to focus on building up children's well-being and confidence at a young age. Five of the six participants' career paths were based on artisan qualifications which placed less emphasis on theory and more emphasis on hands-on, practical training. Most of these students felt this allowed them to express themselves through their line of work as shown in the photo below.





**Figure 36 I specialize in engineering fabrication**

### **6.3.5 Disclosure of sexuality**

After coming out, or disclosing their homosexuality, the participants experienced heterosexism from family and community who did not accept their sexuality. One participant experienced sexual violence (corrective rape) including physical and emotional violence. The participants described how discriminatory people in the local community - their family, some people at campus, and their church - were towards them after coming out. As mentioned in Section 6.3, some people (especially the church members and leaders) perceived them as being "demonic" or stated that being lesbian was "a phase that will pass". One participant stated that she was afraid to walk outside late at night as she feared being raped. Others mentioned being physically assaulted by family members. The stories below reflect participants' experiences.

**Table 7 Participants' stories regarding disclosing their sexuality**

	Disclosing one's homosexuality
<p>1: Participant 4</p> <p>Cultural beliefs = Unassigned</p> <p>Gender association = Female</p> <p>Religion = Christian</p>	<p>I started dating in 2016. I was still doing Grade 10 and that's when I realised that I'm into girls. 'Coz every time when a boy is approaching me, I'd get mad and report him to my parents. Oh, my parents know that I'm lesbian. They said they won't accept it 'coz I'm still confused due to adolescence. They say lesbianism is demonic. (heterosexism) My grandmother is not against my lesbianism; she says it's part of the Zulu culture. I often change to <i>Umkhulu</i> (grandfather) when I am demon-possessed. Grandmother has accepted me and some of my family members (from my mother's side). However, some of my aunts say I need therapy to change my mindset. They think that puberty is messing up with my mind.</p>
<p>2: Participant 2</p> <p>Cultural beliefs = Unassigned</p> <p>Gender association = Male</p> <p>Religion = Born-again Christian</p>	<p>As a Christian, my mom is against my sexuality, she thinks that it is just a lifestyle, something that most teenagers prefer. She does not like the fact that I am lesbian. Being lesbian in my Christian community is unacceptable. It is like having a disease that will affect other youngsters or their kids. To them I am a bad influence on their children.</p> <p>I am still trapped in a closet, especially from my Christian community, and I still think it is the safest place to be in. I was born different.</p> <p>I am only out to my friends. I tried disclosing to my family. My family is not accepting of my homosexuality, they are judgmental and not supportive of my sexual orientation. They say that I am a girl: thinking that I am a guy is in my head. (<i>Ayikho leyonto</i> am creating it, it's in my imagination, it needs to be cleared out by spanking [<i>ngenduku</i>]). Community members hate me and don't want to accept me; they say I need a man to see that I am a girl.</p> <p>They are four lesbian students that I know on campus. They are all out, because at college we are free to be who we want to be and to express our feelings without judgement from family members.</p>



<p>3: Participant 6</p> <p>Cultural beliefs = Unassigned</p> <p>Gender association = Male</p> <p>Religion = Atheist</p>	<p>My parents are Christians, although they don't show me love like Christians. Instead, they show hate more than love - especially to me. I think it is because of my sexual orientation. I think I am an atheist because I don't do church.</p> <p>My Grade 11 teacher used to say, "you make my stomach turn when you pretend to be what you are not". I would then smoke glue a lot to keep away stress and it messed up with my brain. I ended up failing and dropping out of school.</p>
<p>4: Participant 5</p> <p>Cultural beliefs = Unassigned</p> <p>Gender association = Undefined</p> <p>Religion = Christian</p>	<p>was always aware that I am different, but I used to fight it.</p> <p>I realised that I was lesbian in Grade 7; there was a girl I had a crush on. We were not dating as such, but we were very close friends. When I came to college, I met other lesbians, then became comfortable.</p> <p>My parents often question how I dress and why I do not have boyfriends. I am scared of being rejected or judged by my parents, especially my grandmother. In my Black township, community members view lesbianism as a 'White man's disease'. As a result, I have chosen not to be open about my sexuality to my family and community members. However, I think they know, but do not want to accept it. They treat me like an outsider, as if I am not part of the family, because of the life I have chosen. They indirectly say that lesbians are a disgrace.</p> <p>In church, I experience harassment and discrimination. They somehow seem to know that I am lesbian, and they don't want me there. There are certain verses that they read from the Bible. I think they read them to make me feel unwelcome, as if God does not like me the way I am. A girl from my church once told me straight to my face that sinners like me are not welcome in church. She said that I belonged to taverns and prostitution homes.</p>

<p>5: Participant 3</p> <p>Cultural beliefs = Ancestral Spirit Gender association = Female</p>	<p>In my hometown, Inkandla, homosexuality is seen as a threat to Zulu patriarchy, to be gay or lesbian is seen as unAfrican. If you are female, a guy should pay lobola for you. A woman should look after her husband and children.</p> <p>Some old folks, however, say that same-sex relationships are only accepted if a directive has been given by ancestral spirits. If you become demon-possessed, for example, <i>idlozi</i> (ancestors) enters you either as a male or female. If you are female, you may be entered by <i>Umkhulu</i> and therefore start talking and acting like him. <i>Umkhulu</i> can choose a wife for you, even if you are female. That then becomes acceptable. No one can go against ancestral spirits' orders.</p>
<p>Religion = Born-again Christian</p>	<p>I didn't know that until I was 16. I was only dating girls, but this guy did approach me for almost a year. I ended up giving him a chance. I didn't know why I did it, but I did. I won't lie, I was happy to the extent that I even thought that maybe I am not lesbian after all. He raped me and I fell pregnant, while we were both doing matric in 2018. I had a complicated pregnancy, and he was busy cheating left right and centre. I gave birth to a healthy baby boy before time.</p> <p>In the Zulu culture, parents and community members believe that a girls' destiny is to get married and bear many children for her husband's family. I date males mainly for money, not for love.</p> <p>When the college hostel was opened, there was a lesbian couple who worked as housekeepers. They did not hide their relationship. I was free to talk to them about my sexual orientation.</p>

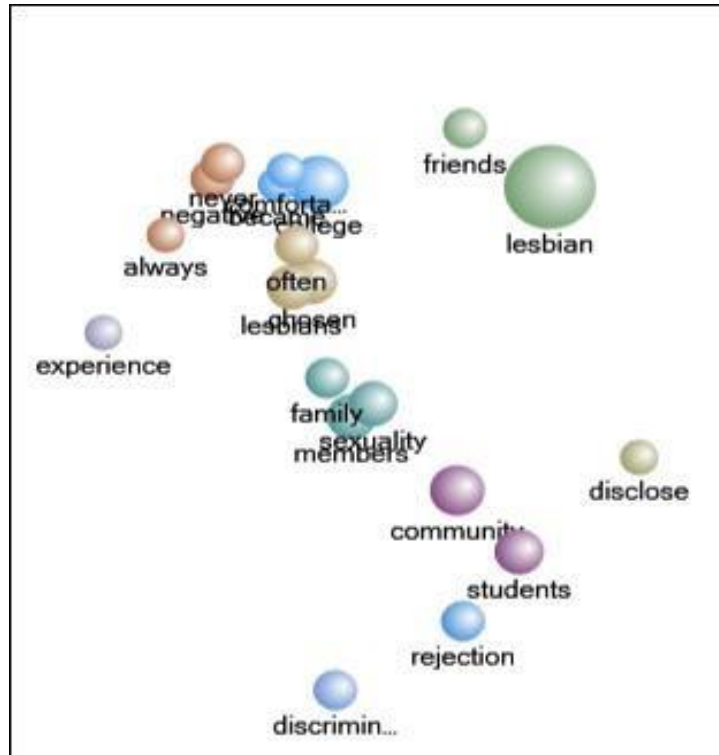
<p>6: Participant 1</p> <p>Cultural beliefs =</p> <p>Ancestral Spirit</p> <p>Gender association = Male</p> <p>Religion = Christian</p>	<p>I became aware of my sexuality in Grade 7. I used to date a girl who was my desk mate. It started off as some playful thing, but things got serious with time. Since then, I have been dating girls till now. I have never dated a guy before. I can really say, it has been hard being a lesbian, not just around my family, but also around my community.</p> <p>My mom is aware that I am lesbian. She does not approve of it, because she said that she will only buy dresses for me, since I act like a boy. She threatened to disown me if I continue with that lifestyle. I think my other family members suspect that I am lesbian, because of how I present myself and my choice of partners. Well, I was once slapped by my aunt. She confronted me, saying that she heard rumours that I sleep with other girls. She even spat on my face and said that I am as dirty as a pig. That incident never changed my lesbian identity. I keep myself happy by dating girls and I am planning on marrying one someday, if I become financially independent. My wish is to explore my sexuality without fear.</p> <p>I sometimes visit my father who is now divorced from my mother. His family does not like me. They treat me like an outsider. They told me that I am demon-possessed because of the rumours they have heard about my lifestyle. My father once threatened that he would deal with me, if I humiliated him by changing my sexual orientation.</p> <p>The older folks in my community also look at me in a strange way.</p>
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From the above information, codes and categories were analysed and the following themes came up: Intersectionality in participants' experiences, poverty and Access as shown in the table below.

**Table 8 Codes, Categories and Themes**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Student-related factors (Gender, race, class and sex) Religious/cultural background	Rejection isolation name calling being mocked labelling Racialized patriarchy	<b>Theme 1:</b> Intersectionality in participants' experiences
Family Background	Socioeconomic status parents' employment status, level of education of parents	<b>Theme 2: Poverty</b>
Disclosure of sexuality	Heterosexism = family and community lack of acceptance Sexuality, masculinity and femininity Gender stereotyping Corrective rape Physical abuse	<b>Theme 3: Violence physical, emotion and sexual</b>
Career Choice	Motivation, preparation for post-school education, support, Choice of college Career choice & field of study College as a safe space	<b>Theme 4: Access</b>





**Figure 38 Cluster analysis of 20 most frequently used words**

#### **6.4.2 Self-acceptance**

According to some participants, self-acceptance and being autonomous were some traits that contributed to participants' success and participation at college. Photographs displayed by Nosipho and Nomsa illustrated autonomy, which is "the ability to make one's own choices or decisions" (Horton, 2017, p.29). Some of the participants relied on their natural trait of being resilient. They had to be strong or tough to be able to face their difficulties. This was evidenced by Participant 6, who stated:

*"I would rather experience sexual victimisation than conform to what they want";*

and Participant 4, who stated:

*"There are some students at college, who look at me with bad eyes when I am kissing my girlfriend, but I don't care what they think of me."*

Also, Noxolo and Nomsa stated that they did not care what others thought of them (indicating self-acceptance) and that, as a result of their resilient attitude and positive self-acceptance, they achieved good exam results.

It is interesting to note that despite these comments about self-acceptance and being resilient, these Black lesbian students mostly complained about being verbally abused or ignored. This could imply that their apparent resilience is a façade to appear brave, covering deep feelings of hurt and rejection.

Nosipho chose the photo shown below to illustrate her sense of autonomy, resilience, and self-acceptance.



**Figure 39 “Special dating moments with my partner”**

The word ‘change’ is the most frequently used word by participants. They did not want to change who they are – an indication of their level of self-acceptance. Self-acceptance was evident when Participant 6 stated:

*I have accepted myself as a lesbian. My sexuality is just part of who I am. Although family means a lot to me, I have to put my needs and happiness first. They may call me names and think I am self-centred, spoiled, and Westernised. It’s their opinion. I feel sorry doing this to them, but I also feel it’s the right thing to do for myself.*



**Figure 40 Word cluster related to self-acceptance**

To prove that they are ‘free agents’, participants have had to face the consequences of their choices, such as being verbally, sexually and physically abused. To enjoy their sexual rights and freedoms, they have had to endure unequal treatment from others. They have been able to define and control their own sexuality, even if it has meant living a ‘double life’, for some.

#### **6.4.3 Resilience and sexual subjectivity**

Besides the word ‘lesbian’, the words ‘sexuality’, ‘judged’ and ‘chosen’ were used frequently by the participants to describe how they felt judged by the community, parents and peers for their sexuality.





**Figure 41 Word cluster on resilience and sexual subjectivity**

Participants experienced disapproval toward their style of dress and their conduct (such as kissing their partner) by the public; this was more so for those who did not take measures to hide their sexuality. Despite such condemnation, some participants choose not to hide their sexuality and displayed their resilience and sexual orientation. For example, one participant stated:

*I don't hide that I am lesbian, everyone knows: my parents, peers, lecturers. I realised I was lesbian at primary school, when I found myself being attracted to other girls. I do not conform to feminine gender norms and expectations. I dress in a masculine manner. At college, I like kissing and cuddling other ladies. As a result, I often experience criticism for my behaviour. I am disliked by my peers, who derogatory label me 'unongayindoda', or 'sis boy'. They tell tales about my sexuality and say I have both female and male sexual organs. (Nomsa)*

#### **6.4.4 Subtle strategies**

Some participants used subtle strategies to keep their sexuality hidden from their families. Moving out of their family home and staying at the college residence was sometimes used as part of such a subtle strategy. This was evident in the case of Nompilo, who stated:

*I had more freedom at the college hostel to pursue my sexuality than at home. My mother loves and trusts me, and because of that, I do not want to disappoint her.*



**Figure 42 Word cloud on subtle strategies**

One of the participants also revealed how they led a double life by saying:

*I live a double life. I date both males and females. I don't disclose that my girlfriends are my lovers. I will be fooling other students, lecturers, my family, and community members to think that I'm straight (Neli)*

Some, however, decided to stay silent about their identity at college to avoid hostility, harassment and discrimination by community members, as shown in the word cloud. The words 'community', 'disclose', 'harassment' and 'discrimination' are closely linked and used frequently. They indicated that they felt safer if they kept their sexuality secret from their families, communities and lecturers, and only disclosed it to their close friends.

*I did not need to disclose my sexuality, the college form has male or female, and you don't need to disclose anything (p. 4).*

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the analysis of the three research questions along with a description of the participants' demographic information. A review of the demographics revealed self-acceptance of their sexual and gender identities, despite their rejection by family, peers, and the community.

They also experienced a lack of social acceptance among or access to their peers and lecturers, which was evidenced by hostile attitudes towards homosexuals at the college. In Chapter Seven, I report findings based on participants' Biographies.

## **CHAPTER 7: EXPRESSIONS OF THE IDENTITY OF LESBIAN STUDENTS AS BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO ACCESS, PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS AT A TERTIARY EDUCATION COLLEGE**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter, Chapter 6, presented the findings related to Research Questions 1 (*What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at a TVET college?*) and Question 2 (*What factors facilitate or impede their full and equal participation and success at a TVET college?*) This chapter explores the findings related to Research Question 3: *How do the social identities of Black female lesbian students contribute to their educational success and participation at post-school educational institutions?* The chapter explores participants' positionality, their experiences of heterosexism, and emerging themes of intersectionality, violence, poverty and access.

Guest et al. (2012) argue that it is the task of the researcher in narrative research to retell the narratives that the participants have shared. In this chapter, I represent a brief biography of each participant focusing on their social identities (Section 7.2). I then reflect on participants' biographies through poetry, in Section 7.3. Section 7.4 explores themes that emerged from the biographies of the participants, which include: intersectionality in participants' experiences (Section 7.3.1), violence (Section 7.3.2), poverty (Section 7.3.3) and access (section 7.3.4). The last section discusses the intersectionality of participants' identities.

### **7.2 Positionality and Black Lesbian Students' Experiences of Heterosexism**

#### **7.2.1 Nosipho**

Nosipho predominately expressed her sense of masculinity and therefore positioned herself as a Black Zulu butch or Black Zulu lesbian woman. Nosipho became aware of her sexuality in Grade

7 when she dated a girl who was her desk mate. That experience served as a turning point where she first acknowledged her homosexuality to herself. Following that experience, she decided to reveal her sexual orientation to her family. As a devout Christian, her mother disapproved of Nosipho's lesbian identity and threatened to disown her if she continued with that lifestyle.

Nosipho came from a lower-class family background, as she highlighted that her mother struggled to support them financially from her income as a domestic worker. They rented a one-roomed shack on the outskirts of a peri-urban former township. Her mother's occupation and her home environment were indications of their low socio-economic status. In the past, there were times she missed school because of financial problems; experiencing economic barriers to learning added to the family's prospect of perpetuated poverty and their disadvantaged class position. After Nosipho came out to her mother, one of her aunts spat in her face and said that she was "as dirty as a pig". However other family members, including her grandmother, were very accepting and believed that her sexual orientation was part of her ancestral calling.

### **7.2.2 Nandi**

Nandi had experienced rejection, isolation, resentment and hurt from society because of identifying openly as a Black lesbian butch. She resorted to self-harming behaviour (cutting herself with a razor blade) and was placed in a mental care institution. Nandi came from a lower socio-economic class family and lived with her single mother. Her father passed away when she was only one-year-old. As a first child, she felt she had responsibilities towards her family. By virtue of being female, she found herself in a challenging position, coming from a poor family with a mother who was uneducated and unemployed. The family's primary source of income was the child grant that the mother received from the government for her two minor children, Nandi's siblings. Nandi had always felt different as a child at primary school. In Grade 7, she was caught kissing girls and was rebuked by the principal. In high school, she became more comfortable about exploring her homosexuality further, and this was not met with open arms by the high school community. In fact, she was shamed and ostracised for expressing her attraction to girls.

Nandi was confronted with a myriad of difficulties around ‘coming out’ at home, since her family members were born-again Christians. She was reprimanded and rebuked by her family when they noticed her ‘strange’ behaviour. Nandi applied to the TVET college after failing her final year of high school and was accepted. She indicated that she had failed matric because of suicidal thoughts caused by her family and the communities’ rejection of who she was, and the resulting isolation she encountered. What had motivated her to study at the TVET college was that it offered a course in Engineering, as she wished to become an engineer one day. She described her acceptance into college as a “smooth sailing process” which she felt was strongly linked to the fact that she had not disclosed her true sexuality.

### **7.2.3 Neli**

Neli positioned herself as a 19-year-old androgynous Engineering Fabrication NCV student, who enjoyed both attributes of manhood and womanhood. She fled from her strong patriarchal rural home, which promoted heteronormativity, as she could not fit into the fixed gender norms that they imposed on her and moved to an urban TVET college to find her own identity and voice. Neli came from a poor family and had a child who was born as a result of her being raped in matric. She had no financial support, as her mother was single and unemployed. She participated in survival sex to support her child and mother due to their low socio-economic status. She did not give any account of her or her mother receiving any social or child grant from the government. She indicated that she was studying to obtain “easy money” (NSFAS student funding), since she had a lot of financial and health problems. Neli was a born-again Christian, who believed in a higher being called uNkulunkulu (God). However, she also believed that uNkulunkulu (God) was too great for her to be able to talk to him directly. So, she talked to him via the spirits, who are her ancestors, indicating an intersection of religion and culture in her life.

### **7.2.4 Noxolo**

Noxolo identified her sexual orientation as femme lesbian and found herself resisting heterosexuality because it imposed limitations on her self-expression. She felt compelled to flee from her home environment, as it served as yet another instrument of oppression in her life. However, as she had nowhere else to go, she became a ‘street kid’. She felt isolated and alone, as

living on the streets was dangerous and tough, being exposed to rain and cold. She slept wherever she could find shelter, with only a blanket of leaves and ragged clothes covering her.

Noxolo positioned herself as a young Zulu woman who was attracted to butch lesbians who had dreadlocks and wore baggy jeans. Her Christian mother was against her sexual orientation and often chased away her lesbian friends, whenever they visited her. She also came from a low socio-economic background, as her father was a mine worker in Johannesburg and her mother was a housewife. Her grandmother was not against her lesbian identity and believed it to be part of the Zulu culture, as Noxolo often changed her behaviour and assumed the gestures of her 'Umkhulu' (grandfather) when she was "demon-possessed". However, some of her family members interpreted this behaviour as a sign of mental illness and believed that she needed medical treatment. Noxolo failed her matric year; she indicated that this was because she used to party and drink excessively in taverns together with other lesbians during her final year. After having failed matric, she decided to enrol at the TVET college, because some of her lesbian friends who had also failed matric were studying there. She did not need to disclose her sexual orientation when registering, as the college form only stated male or female, therefore concealing non-binary identities.

### **7.2.5 Nompilo**

Nompilo identified herself as a 20-year-old Black female lesbian, who did not like to be labelled as either butch or femme, but she dated other girls. She lived in a township together with her parents, siblings and grandparents. Her mother was unemployed and her father was a factory worker and did not earn enough money to support the large family. The family also depended on their grandmother's pension money to survive. Her parents were Christians and they suspected that she was a lesbian, because of her choice of friends and the way she dressed. They openly told her that lesbians were a disgrace and, therefore, she felt rejected and judged because of her sexual orientation. In the Black township, community members viewed lesbianism as a 'White man's disease'. As a result, she had not openly come out about her sexual orientation. However, her family and community members suspected that she was lesbian and therefore labelled her as 'uSatane' (devil). They discouraged their children from socialising with her. Being criticised,

mocked, and alienated by her parents, community members and peers made her feel like a “loser”. She tried to kill herself twice to try to escape from the enormity of the pain in her heart.

Nompilo was informed by other lesbians in her WhatsApp group that the TVET colleges were accepting students who failed matric in their NCV Engineering programmes. Gaining access to college was easy, as the requirements were that prospective students had to have passed Grade 11. Her aspiration was to gain some vocational skills to become employed and help her parents who were struggling financially to support the family.

#### **7.2.6 Nomsa**

Nomsa positioned herself as a Black Zulu-speaking female butch in her early 20s. Although she was an atheist, her parents were born-again Christians, who were against her sexual orientation. She dropped out of high school because of the emotional and verbal abuse she experienced there and then registered at the TVET college. Nomsa presented herself as a fearless autonomous woman who did not conform to feminine gender norms and expectations in her manner of dress and behaviour. She was open about her sexual orientation and as a result was confronted by heterosexism, name-calling and isolation from family and community members, peers and lecturers.

Nomsa came from a lower socio-economic background. She grew up in her late grandfather's township house together with her parents, uncles and aunts all living together in the same home. Members of her family were unemployed and she described them as hustlers. Her uncles were street vendors, while her aunts depended on their children's support grant from the government. Nomsa had disclosed her sexual orientation to her parents, the community and other family members, peers and lecturers. She was “very out” and indicated that she did not intend to live a self-denying or degrading life based on lies. She was keen to educate other lesbians to be ‘out’ to survive and even flourish once they had declared their true identities. She believed in making her own choices about her life. Nomsa registered at the TVET college because it offered a course in Motor Mechanics. She liked wearing overalls and boots and loved to repair cars. It was easy for her to obtain access to the college as she met the college admission requirements for the Motor Mechanics course.



### **7.3 Reflecting on participants' biographies: constructed poems**

According to Byrne (2017), poetry has been used as a method to represent data in educational research because of its ability to represent richly the voices of others whilst making explicit the influence of the researcher. The words in the representation were those of my participants. I then used the data (narrative) and my reflective notes to write poetry (see Byrne, 2017). I used poetry to combine my voice as the researcher with that of the participants. Reflecting on the biographical information the participants had shared, I constructed the following poems for each of them.

**Nosipho (isoka)**

A young Zulu butch, 19,  
living in a  
dilapidated rehabilitation  
centre.  
Connected to ancestors, but  
disconnected from family.  
Torn apart by sexuality  
and divorce.  
I use alcohol and drugs  
to piece me back together  
again  
and salvage my voice,  
but none of it is enough  
to fill the emptiness  
of my heart.

**Nandi**  
*(umjita)*

Wearing scars of rejection,  
isolation, resentment  
and hurt,  
I found myself  
in a mental ward,  
soaking in a pool of blood.  
I had explained my hurt and  
still got hurt.  
I decided to cut through my  
heart,  
My razor blade helped me to  
see the pain ooze out.  
I write with my razor blade,  
the things I would not dare  
to say out loud.

**Neli**  
*(two people at once)*

Wearing a duality mask,  
I am two people at once,  
juggling between manhood  
and womanhood,  
I am two people at once,  
falling off the vulnerability  
wagon,  
of fighting gender binary.  
I cannot deny that I am two  
people at once.  
I finally removed  
my mask of fear,  
wipe away the tears  
accumulated within me  
from years of hiding that  
I am two people at once.  
I am converting from fixed  
gender norms,  
leaving my hometown,  
for duality has given me a  
voice.  
There is no shame in being  
two people at once.

**Noxolo**  
*(Femme lesbian)*

Fleeing from the  
heterosexual world,  
she is engulfed by the streets,  
sleeping under the sky, with  
a blanket of leaves.  
She longs for home,  
for the streets are tough,  
with rain and cold,  
her clothes still smell of dust  
as she packs them to  
lingering thoughts of home.

**Nompilo**  
*(Non-binary identity)*

I am hiding a secret.  
It haunts my existence.  
I am unable to exist freely,  
because I am non-binary  
and it  
interferes with my  
spirituality.  
It creates barriers between  
me and my family.  
I walk as if I am carrying a  
multitude of sins.  
I feel crucified on a cross I  
did not ask to bear.  
I wish they could  
understand that I am queer  
and this is something I  
cannot control or make it  
disappear.

**Nomsa**  
*(Multiplicity identity)*

The caged bird has wings too,  
the caged bird dreams of flying  
by defying gender roles  
entirely.  
The caged bird is neither Black  
or White,  
this or that, he or she,  
there is no category for its  
identity, because  
the caged bird has wings too.  
The caged bird dreams of  
flying  
by redefining genderexpression  
beyond traditional expectations  
of masculinity and femininity.  
The caged bird sings too,  
songs of freedom attained only  
through living its truth.

## 7.4 Identification and exploration of themes

In reviewing Nosipho's narrative, issues of sexuality and especially her masculine-toned expression, and her referring to the gender-specific societal expectations of a young Zulu girl, heterosexism, spirituality and class emerged. As a Black Zulu woman, Nosipho was 'crippled' by sexism and patriarchy, as well as by cultural norms and beliefs, which were all influenced by sexual differences. Heterosexism was displayed by her family members, who believed that only female-male relationships were acceptable.

Nandi experienced violence, rejection and isolation throughout her life from her Christian mother, her school environment and the community. Issues of masculinity and patriarchy emerged as she related how she was physically attacked by males who could not "tolerate competition" from a female who dated attractive girls. Furthermore, she experienced violence from being sexually, emotionally and physically assaulted for her same-sex desires.

Neli's experience of living in two very different geographical locations greatly influenced her experience of her sexuality. As a lesbian in a rural area, she had no access to tertiary education colleges that were LGBTQ+ friendly, since in such areas, there were very few people who were knowledgeable about the challenges regarding LGBTQ+ students. She experienced gender-based violence, which in her village was silenced or normalised through the payment of a goat to the family (inhlawulo). When Neli experienced 'corrective' rape, she was too ashamed to report the incident to the police and rather suffered in silence because of the stigma associated with homosexuality.

Noxolo experienced rejection from her Christian mother, who believed that lesbianism was demonic. She further experienced derogatory labelling, as her lesbianism was also interpreted as a mental illness that her family believed were the side effects of adolescence. Her grandmother, however, interpreted her lesbianism in terms of the Zulu culture since she believed it to be a calling from the ancestors. An intersection between Christianity, the impact of cultural norms, and spirituality was noted in her biography.

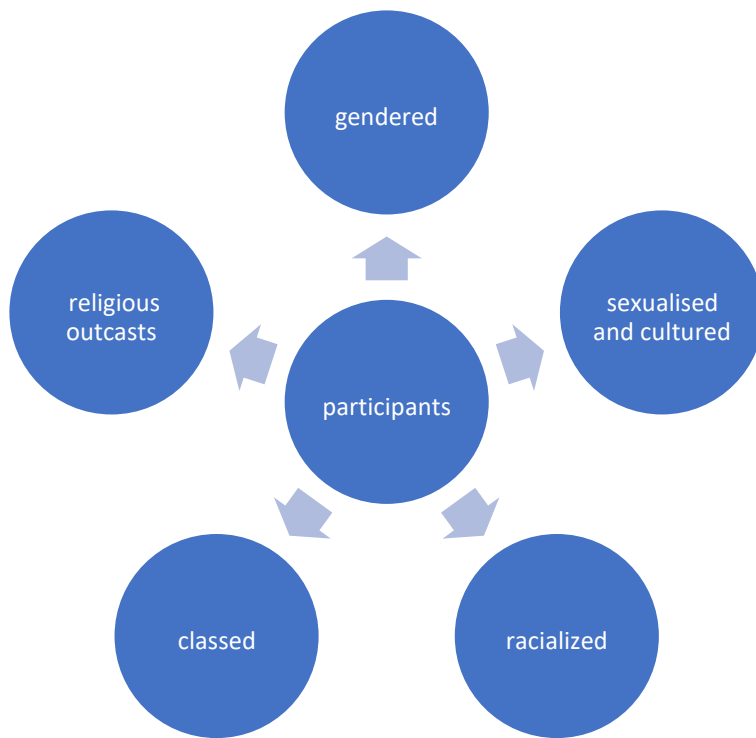
Nompilo experienced heterosexism through rejection, isolation, labelling and being mocked by her family and community members. She experienced gender stereotyping as she felt that her gender was being dictated to her by society. She was forced to be a heterosexual female and

yet, she did not feel like one. She also was exposed to regular mockery by her community because of her sexual orientation.

Nomsa experienced rejection from her family members. Her aunts privately called her unpleasant names such as “isaliwakazi,” which means “the rejected one”. Nomsa also experienced name-calling by community members, who used derogatory names when referring to her, such as “inkonkoni”, which means lesbian. Poverty was an emerging theme as Nomsa came from a low socio-economic background. This was evident when she described the economic status at home as follows: *“Life is tough at home, it’s hard to make ends meet.”*

#### **7.4.1 Theme 1: Intersectionality in participants’ experiences**

The Narratives revealed how Black LGBTQ+ students participating in this study experienced marginalisation and violence in response to their sexuality and gender on the basis of culture and religion. Their family’s low socio-economic status intersected with their experiences. They also reported a range of experiences around access to education, some of which intersected with marginalisation on the basis of their sexuality and gender. They describe themselves as gendered, racialized, classed and sexualised, as shown below.



**Figure 43 Theme 1: Intersectionality in participants' experiences**

#### ***7.4.1.1 Sex and culture***

This study found that although the participants had accepted their sexual orientation, they had not received the acceptance and support they longed for from their families and the Christian communities. For example, Nosipho explained how she was required to change her appearance and behaviour around her community and family in an effort to cover up her true sexuality. Her mother forced her to wear feminine clothes so she could fit in with heterosexual gender norms, despite identifying strongly with being a Zulu butch. Her family even threatened to disown her if she insisted on defying heterosexuality and embracing the lesbian identity instead. To avoid being ostracised continuously, she chose to live a 'double life', pretending to be heterosexual around her family and the Christian community, while secretly having a girlfriend at college. As a Black Zulu woman, Nosipho was 'crippled' by sexism and patriarchy, as well as cultural norms and beliefs, which are all influenced by sexual differences. Heterosexism was displayed by her family members, since they believed that only female–male relationships were acceptable.

Nandi also narrated how being lesbian was viewed as unsound for a Black woman who lived in a township, where rigid patriarchal gender and sexuality norms remain. She was sexually

and physically assaulted by Black male students who felt threatened by her lesbianism. Neli acknowledged that being bisexual and attracted to both males and females was unacceptable to her family and her rural community.

Nompilo rejected the stereotypes associated with lesbianism and refused to be defined by her sexuality or gender identity or by anything else dictated by society or her community. According to gender researchers, the rejection of the use of labels is common among sexual minorities; rejecting such labels may represent an attempt by individuals with minority identities to establish an identity as an 'ordinary' person (Gibson & Macleod, 2012; Coleman Fountain, 2014).

The following extracts from participants' narratives illustrate their experience of feeling like sexual outcasts:

*I used drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism since I had family problems and was not accepted as a lesbian. (Nosipho)*

*In my hometown, Inkandla, homosexuality is seen as a threat to Zulu patriarchy, to be gay or lesbian is seen as "wrong". If you are female, a man is required to pay lobola for you. A woman should look after her husband and children. (Neli)*

*My parents know that I'm lesbian. They said they won't accept it, 'coz I'm still confused due to adolescence. They say lesbianism is demonic. (Noxolo)*

*My parents often question how I dress and why I do not have boyfriends. I am scared of being rejected or judged by my parents, especially my grandmother. In my Black township, community members view lesbianism as a 'White man's disease'. As a result, I have chosen not to be open about my sexual orientation to my family and community members. (Nompilo)*

*My mother doesn't want me to be lesbian, she says that I am demon-possessed. She called a pastor to pray for me to cast out the demon. My mother once caught me with my girlfriend and hit us. She chased me from home and said I can come back when I am done with my evil ways. (Nompilo)*

*They threatened to chase me from home, if they ever find out that I am lesbian, they say I am supposed to wear a skirt and also plat my hair like other girls do. (Nandi)*

In the traditional Zulu culture, parents and community members believe that a girl's destiny is to get married and bear many children for her husband's family. This was confirmed by the following quote:

*In my hometown, Inkandla, homosexuality is seen as a threat to Zulu patriarchy, to be gay or lesbian is seen as "unacceptable". If you are female, a guy should pay lobola for you. A woman should look after her husband and children. (Neli)*

In this study, Black lesbian students' sexual identities clashed with their religious identities. Participants experienced the church as a very unrelenting, unforgiving and intolerant environment and fellow Christians as very judgemental. As a result, they felt unloved, rejected and isolated by fellow church members, despite the church advocating that members be tolerant and accepting toward their fellow Christian church members and give them unconditional love and support. Instead, participants experienced prejudice and discrimination in their Christian communities. The following extracts from participants support these assertions:

*As a Christian, my mom is against my sexuality and thinks that it is just a lifestyle, something that teenagers nowadays prefer to identify as. She does not like the fact that I am lesbian. Being lesbian in my Christian community is unacceptable. It is like having a disease that will affect other youngsters or their kids. Essentially, to them I am a bad influence on their children. (Nosipho)*

*In church, I experience harassment and discrimination. They somehow seem to know that I am lesbian and they don't want me there. There are certain verses that they read from the Bible. I think they read them to make me feel unwelcome ... as if God does not like me the way I am. A girl from my church once told me straight to my face that sinners like me are not welcomed at church. She said that I belonged to taverns and prostitution homes. (Nompilo)*

*My parents are Christians, although they don't show me love like Christians. Instead, they show hate more than love, especially to me. I think it is because of my sexual orientation. (Nomsa)*

In this study, some Black community members viewed homosexuality as a Western or "White" practice and accused participants of copying other cultures.

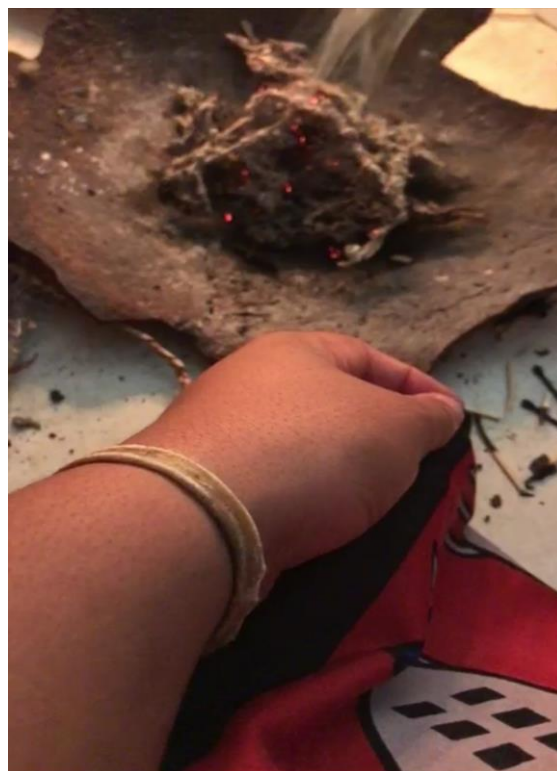
*My grandmother calls lesbianism Satanism. She is too traditional [siphila isiZulu]. She says I am copying Western traditions. (Noxolo)*

*Community members view lesbianism as a “White man's disease”. I'm afraid of discrimination if community members find out. I don't want to be ‘labelled’ uSatan (devil). (Nompilo)*

The photo below was displayed by Nosipho as she described her calling as a Sangoma and how she also appeases the spirits.



**Figure 44 My special ancestral calling**



**Figure 45 Appeasing the ancestral spirits**



According to Dlamini (2006), “Traditional religions of Africa often see spiritual power in sexuality. In some instances, homosexual relations carry some religious and spiritual significance, as in the case of izangoma, izinyanga and other traditional healers (p. 129).

#### ***7.4.1.2 Race***

Race can represent a barrier to the expression of sexual identity, especially where race can be equated with outdated traditional norms and standards. In this study, homosexuality was experienced as an identity that was frowned upon, or even prohibited, in the Black rural areas and townships, and was met with violent heterosexist practices in these lower-class Black locations.

#### ***7.3.1.4 Gender***

In this study, participants expressed their gender differently from the sex assigned to them at birth. This was problematic for these individuals in that some participants had to outwardly dress, speak and conduct themselves according to their parents’ or society’s expectations, although this was contradictory to their own sense of who they were. Where they broke this ‘rule’ and dressed according to their preferred gender role and openly displayed their lesbian identity, it often led to hate crimes and offences by heterosexuals, motivated by prejudice, bias and intolerance of lesbians, based on opposing gender identities and sexual orientation. Participants displayed a photo making a vow which they called a “Pinkie Promise” that they will always love each other despite hate crimes against them as shown below:



**Figure 46 Our Pinkie Promise**

The following extracts describe how participants expressed their sexual orientation:

*I am masculine and therefore see myself as a butch lesbian. (Nosipho)*

*I am sexually attracted to other women. I see myself as (Umjita), a guy. I always keep my hair short. As a result, I am often judged for being a girl who looks like a guy. (Neli)*

*I am a Black female, bisexual student. I have feelings for both males and females. (Noxolo)*

*I am a femme lesbian. I love to dress in a “girly” manner and I am attracted to butch lesbians who have dreadlocks and wear baggy jeans. (Nompilo)*

*I do not like to be labelled as butch or femme, but I date other girls. (Nomsa)*

*I am a Black female, butch. I have never dated men before. My sexual orientation is a private matter, (Ndiyinkonkoni) I am lesbian, so what? That’s personal, I don’t owe anyone any explanation, people should stop poking their noses in private matters. (Nomsa)*

The Black lesbians' narratives also indicated that beyond the strong traditional Black cultural influence, there could also be a lingering post-colonial patriarchal contributor influencing heterosexism. Post-school education and training institutions still reproduce the knowledge, practices and power relations that were typical of the patriarchal colonial era. Lugones (2010) uses a decolonial feminist lens as opposed to a limiting heterosexual lens to describe coloniality as "the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanisation that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonised into less than human beings" (p.745). This was also supported by wa Thiongo's (1986) *Decolonizing the Mind*, which also condemned colonial education and declared it as being responsible for social alienation and disintegration. However, both the colonial era and the traditional Black cultures share a strong emphasis on patriarchy, strict norms and standards of gender roles and the perceived relevant behaviour. While in Western cultures, witchcraft and ancestral spirits are no longer accepted in broader society or under the law, these still play a role in traditional Black cultures.

#### **7.4.2 Theme 2: Violence (Sexual, Emotional, Physical and Verbal)**

A second theme among the participants' biographies was that of violence. Participants reported that they had experienced violence at the TVET college, at home or in their communities. Violence was in the form of abuse by other students, a partner, family, and/or community members. For example, they talked about having been hit, being locked in the house, being molested in the toilet, and even being assaulted and raped. During the Photovoice workshop, Neli displayed a photo and described how her boyfriend had hit her and locked her in this room to keep her away from her girlfriend.



**Figure 47 “My Little Prison” (Neli)**

The following quotes demonstrate the physical and emotional violence these Black lesbian students experienced:

*I was once slapped by my aunt. She confronted me saying that she heard rumours that I sleep with other girls. She even spat in my face and said that I am as dirty as a pig. My father once threatened that he would deal with me if I humiliated him by changing my sexual orientation. (Nosipho)*

*He [father] then started abusing me, hitting, and locking me in the house to keep me away from my girlfriend. He would say he is trying to correct my behaviour of loving another woman. He would also rape me. He burnt my clothes and books. (Neli)*

*I used to bring other lesbians home and my mother disliked them. She would chase them out and hit me with a wooden spoon. (Noxolo)*

*People in my community make me uncomfortable. I am forced to be home before dark because our lives are threatened as homosexuals. (Nompilo)*

*I make sure that I am home early because they can kill me at night. I have only had threats that they will catch me one day (Nomsa).*

### **7.4.3 Theme 3: Poverty**

One of the areas of identity that emerged in this study was the low socio-economic status of the participants' families, which I refer to as 'class identity'. All six participants alluded to the fact that their family background played a very important role in their childhood and adolescence experiences. Their Narratives demonstrated their low socio-economic class through descriptions of their homes, their parents' occupations and employment, and indicators of poverty. Poverty resulted in challenging physical conditions (cramped living conditions of multi-family households) and psychological consequences. During the photo voice workshop, Nomsa displayed a photo of her home and described how she grew up in her late grandfather's township house together with her parents, uncles and aunts all living together in the same home.



**Figure 48 My home (Nomsa)**

The following statements by participants demonstrate the socioeconomic status of their families:

*I currently stay with my mom, who is a domestic worker, and we rent a one-roomed shack. (Nosipho)*

*I was raised by a single parent. I lost my dad when I was one-year-old. My mother is not working. She uses her grant money to support us, with my brother and sister. (Nandi)*

*At home, we are very poor. I have no one to support me financially. My mom is old and not working and no one supports her too. I applied for NSFAS. I only got R1025 every month and the rooms cost R600 or more. (Neli)*

*I stay with my mother, grandmother and my three brothers. My father is a mine worker in Johannesburg. My mother is a housewife. (Noxolo)*

*My mother is a housewife. My father is a factory worker at a furniture shop at Mkhondeni. [Shakes her head]. He doesn't earn much, but we are managing, because we also use our grandmother's pension money to buy food. (Nompilo)*

*My father doesn't work. He is a hustler ['uyahlanganisa']. My uncles are street vendors: they have tables in town where they sell stuff. My aunts also do not work ['baphila ngemali yeqo'], they depend on their children's support grant. Life is tough at home; it's hard to make ends meet. Yesh. We somehow pull through. (Nomsa)*

#### **7.4.4 Theme 4: Access**

In this study, participants chose to enrol at this TVET college because they knew some LGBTQ+ students, who were studying at the college. This enabled them to form an LGBTQ+ community group. Some choices were also influenced by the type of courses offered by the college.

*I chose this college because they offer Motor Mechanics. My mother wanted me to be a teacher. She said that's a decent career for a girl [smile]. I simply told her that I will never be a teacher and that I am a different kind of girl who likes to wear overalls and boots and to fix cars. (Nomsa)*

*I decided to go to the college because some of my lesbian friends, who had also failed matric, were studying there. (Nompilo)*

Some participants chose to study at a TVET college because they had dropped out of high school, failed matric, or had been pushed out of the education system because of their sexual orientation and discrimination at school. They had Grade 11 as their highest qualification. The following extracts confirm this information.

*I came here because I failed matric; I would have enrolled at a university if I had passed with a bachelor's degree. (Noxolo)*

*I was raped and fell pregnant and therefore dropped out of school in Grade 11. My only option was to register at a TVET college [sad expression] since they are not picky.*

*Universities only take those who have completed and passed Grade 12. (Neli)*

*I failed my matric as I did not like school. The headmaster did not like me and said I was teaching other students bad habits – like kissing other girls, smoking, and drinking.*

*(Nandi)*

*I did not complete school due to emotional and verbal abuse that I experienced in high school from my peers and teachers. (Noxolo)*

Participants were reluctant to choose certain other colleges, especially those that had a reputation for being hostile to LGBTQ+ students — including Christian institutions. Others had been looking for institutions that were far away from home, so that they could have some freedom away from parental supervision and interference.

*My hometown is Nkandla. Higher education institutions in my home area discriminate against homosexuals. I chose this college because it's far away from home and I could come out freely without being judged. (Neli)*

*I gained access to college through social workers from the rehab centre. I saw college as a place where I could express my identity or sexuality freely, without fear of being judged. (Noxolo)*

Some participants' decision to study at a TVET college was influenced by the access it provided to NSFAS, a government-funded financial scheme that assists students from low-income families. Besides using the money for their studies, they also use it to support their families.

*I also chose to study at this college to get the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. I wanted to support my baby and my mother. (Neli)*



None of the participants experienced challenges related to their sexual orientation during the process of registration at the college. The registration forms required them to identify as male or female, however, and did not offer options that allowed them to indicate a more complex or fluid gender identity or sexual orientation.

The photo below shows Neli gaining access at the TVET college after fleeing from her rural home.



**Figure 49 Gaining access at the college**

### **7.3.5 Theme 5: Patriarchy**

The patriarchal hierarchy is firmly upheld in black educational institutions with a strong impact on social norms regarding gender identity. Patriarchy has backed the constant disempowerment of women and marginalisation of sexual minorities. No one questions heterosexuality, it simply exists. It is assumed normativity and has been institutionalised universally over time (Kang, 2012). According to Miller (2021), “masculine lesbians are particularly vulnerable to patriarchal wrath because by not presenting feminine and not cantering one's life around men they are doing the opposite of patriarchal expectations” (p. 2).



In this thesis, Nosipho (the Zulu Butch) had a long-term alcohol and drug problem, which she said was caused by the “sheer bitterness in her heart from being rejected as a young Black Zulu butch”. Similarly, Nandi is also marked with scars of rejection, isolation, resentment and hurt inflicted upon her by society because she declared herself a Black lesbian butch.

#### **7.4.5 Discussion**

According to hooks (2002), the intersectionalities of factors such as class, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation affect how LGBTQ+ individuals’ experiences are shaped and lived. It is during tertiary education that the majority of students are at a stage where their adult identities are being shaped. Barroso (2015) defines social identity as “individuals’ self-concept as a result of them belonging to a group they identify with and are part of” (p. 40). Some Black lesbian students in this study had chosen careers that allowed the expression of their identities; for example, the butch students preferred careers in motor mechanics and this increased their chances of academic success.

Patriarchal systems foster the belief that males / men (both sex and gender) are superior to others, resulting in them oppressing and exploiting those with other identities, such as Black lesbians (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). Prado-Castro & Graham (2017) assert that: “There are aspects related to patriarchy within the different cultures in South Africa, which oppress women” (p. 105). The threat of ‘corrective’ rape, for example, was constantly present in the lives of Black lesbian students in this study. While patriarchy is present in all cultural groups in South Africa, it is especially dominant in traditional, Black cultures and certain religious groupings. Black lesbian women are seen as a group that breaks with these unwritten rules and is thus challenged and made to feel unsafe. This continuous fear compromises their mental and emotional well-being and their educational achievements.

Expression of class and religious identity may also have an effect on students’ participation and success at college. Because of being poor, some students in this study had to carry the double burden of using their bursaries to support their families in addition to paying their fees. In terms of religion, participants experienced religious spaces as unfriendly to them, as lesbians – not only in their homes or their communities, but also at college. They were not invited to

religious events by their peers at college because of their sexual orientation. This led to lower self-esteem and a sense of alienation and affected their academic performance negatively.

Race plays a prominent role in identity expression and this may have an effect on students' academic work. In South African society, many forms of racial and structural violence are embedded in Black lesbians' daily lives (Bagnol, Matebeni, Simon, Blaser, Manuel, & Moutinho, 2010). To a large degree, the White race remains culturally and economically privileged (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). This then promotes perceptions among many that the Black identity is inferior (Barroso, 2015). In this study, students experienced internalised racism based on their poverty, poor primary education, and where their parents were living, which made them feel inferior to White students, despite the fact that the majority of students at TVET colleges are Black. In a study conducted by Boonzaier and Mkhize (2018), students reported “feeling Black” as opposed to “being Black”, based upon the negative narratives surrounding their racial identities. Such negative feelings seem to be internalised by many Black students, and especially those who drop out of school, fail exams, drop out of college and believe that they ‘never had a chance’.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored participants' experiences from a feminist standpoint that recognises the structural and cultural forces that can constrain women's access to education. The data revealed that these young Black lesbian women were faced with a wide range of challenges, including gender-based violence, sexism, poverty and discrimination. Patriarchal cultural traditions are still used to discriminate against women instead of protecting them, despite the fact that South Africa's Constitution (1996) prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and gender and protects the equal rights of individuals, enshrined in the Bill of Rights. The themes that emerged from the narratives also indicated that Western and colonial influences and structures, expressed in the past apartheid era and the continuing overarching influence of patriarchy, exacerbate inequalities between heterosexual individuals and Black lesbian women in South Africa.

The next chapter, Chapter 8, discusses participants' access to, participation at and success at a TVET college.

## **CHAPTER 8: STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY: PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS AT THE TVET COLLEGE**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have investigated the development of the participants' social identities and their experiences with regard to being lesbian woman in the contexts of their homes and communities, as well as at the colleges. This chapter explores more deeply the intersectionality of these women's social identities and experiences with their educational journeys and looking at how this has impacted their access to education.

This chapter contains five sections. In the next section (Section 8.2), I re-story the participants' narratives of their experiences of access to, and participation and success at, the TVET college. In Section 8.3, I examine factors that impeded the participants' access to full and equal participation and success at the TVET college. These factors included lack of social access (8.3.1), lack of epistemic access (Section 8.3.2) and lack of safe physical access (8.3.3). In Section 8.4, I explore the factors that facilitated their access to full and equal participation and success at the TVET college. These factors included financial access (8.4.1) and lesbian-friendly environments (8.4.2). In the final section (Section 8.5), I discuss barriers and enablers to access, participation and success.

### **8.2 Participants' educational trajectories**

This section summarizes the findings arising from participants' narratives of their educational trajectories at the TVET college. A brief synopsis of the information given by each participant is provided for context.

#### **8.2.1 Educational trajectory of Nosipho**

Nosipho gained access to the TVET college through the assistance of social workers from the rehab centre where she was living. She experienced the TVET college as a place where she could express her true identity or sexuality freely without fear of being judged. At the college, she also met "the love of her life". They spent time together and studied together. However, some students made it clear to her that they did not respect her, based on their prejudice regarding her sexual orientation and her lifestyle. Nosipho had experienced hostility from male

students, who mocked and teased her behind her back when she was walking together with her girlfriend. She stated:

*I think it is because I get all the nice girls. They are jealous of me.* (Nosipho)

Nosipho also experienced malicious gossip, as male heterosexual students whispered to each other about her “shameful acts” of dating other women and she experienced name-calling during lunch breaks and was referred to as a “drama queen”. She was scared to report such incidents to lecturers for fear of being mocked even further and seen as an attention seeker.

Her girlfriend also experienced violence because of her sexual orientation. Male students from college followed her on her way home. She then experienced a traumatic and criminal violation of her human rights, as the male students stripped her naked and proceeded to burn her clothes. Although she reported the matter to the police, the perpetrators did not suffer any consequences for the hate crime they had committed. Instead, Nosipho and her girlfriend were teased, mocked, and laughed at even more by these perpetrators at college. It should also be noted that the police had defended the perpetrators’ actions by implying that they should have “hit her harder” for her “crime of courting other women”.

Nosipho also experienced rejection from her classmates in relation to her sexual orientation, as they openly expressed that they did not want anything to do with “izitabane”, which is a Zulu derogatory term for homosexuals. Some of her classmates even tried to give her artificial hair, which is colloquially referred to as bonding, and expected her to use the hair to make her look more “like a proper girl”. They also avoided working with her during group work.

Despite the negative experiences with other students, both males and females, Nosipho had good relationships with the lecturers and, as a result, was able to study efficiently and achieved success in most of her modules. She attributed her good relationships with lecturers to not disclosing her sexual orientation to them, as some of them were openly Christians and opposed to homosexuality. She felt that disclosing her sexual orientation to lecturers would have made them judge and “hate” her and think of her as a bad influence on other students.

### **8.2.2 Educational trajectory of Nandi**

Nandi (P2) had dropped out of high school because she had felt rejected by the other learners when she had come out as a homosexual. This meant that she had not passed matric and thus

had limited options for further education. She then found she could enrol at a TVET college, where she joined the NCV programme, majoring in Engineering and Related Designs (Fabrication). On campus, she felt far more comfortable than in high school, and she met other lesbians with whom she became friends. However, she encountered some Black males on campus, who called her “umjita” (real guy), and they did that to keep her away from their girlfriends. Some Black males saw her as a threat; as a result, they would “monitor her”: they kept close enough to her to make sure she did not approach any of their girlfriends or potential girlfriends, and yet far enough that they did not have to speak to her. Sometimes, rather than open bullying, other students passed “silly” comments about her sexual orientation and called her an attention seeker, saying she would change her sexual orientation in the future.

Her relationship with lecturers was unaffected by her sexual orientation because she believed that sexual orientation was a private matter, which should not be discussed with lecturers who "were as old as her parents". She had formed a LGBTQ+ community with some friends, with whom she planned and executed some campaigns on LGBTQ+ matters. They also had casual gatherings, where they had fun. Though this community was small, it made her feel very welcome and alive as a human being. However, this comfortable and friendly space also presented its own challenges. One of these was that the community members constantly competed with each other over romantic partners. At one point, this competition became very aggressive. She had experienced barriers to learning during her time at school, especially in maths, which were never addressed. She had hoped that the TVET college would be able to offer her and her lesbian peers emotional support, in addition to the financial and health support they received. She said:

*There is a mobile clinic from Mbalenhle clinic that frequents the college to give ARVs to students living with HIV and AIDS, but there is no support for sexual orientation-related issues.*

Nandi also reported that there were no policies in place at the TVET college to address sexual orientation matters. She expressed that she did not have a sense of belonging, but instead was rejected by her classmates based on their prejudices and stigmatisation.

Nandi described an incident that had happened on her way home one day. A mob of Black male students had harassed her and then tried to rape her, stripping her naked. They shouted at her that this was what males did to women who were lesbian or were not submissive. She was saved by a taxi driver who was passing by, who pulled out a gun and threatened the perpetrators. The attackers fled, leaving her naked and shivering with fear. As she was fearful of what these men could do to her in the future, she did not report the incident to the police and told no one. She feared that if she told anyone, she would be compiling a case against herself as a homosexual. She indicated that a friend, who was also a lesbian, had been molested by the same students, who had harassed and attacked her in a toilet at the college. All these violations were not reported to the police or to the lecturers. She felt that she “had no voice to tell the tale”, and she also feared being judged by others.

### **8.2.3 Educational trajectory of Neli**

Neli (P3) was raped and fell pregnant when she was an adolescent. Because of this, she dropped out of school in Grade 11. Her only option for studying further was to register at a TVET college. She enrolled for a National Curriculum Vocational training programme specialising in Engineering/Fabrication. Neli was motivated to study at the college as it included the benefit of receiving “easy money” (the NSFAS student fund) that would allow her to support her mother and son. However, she experienced the college environment as hostile towards lesbians. Neli was mocked for being a lesbian by some of her classmates, who told jokes about her. Some of her heterosexual peers called her “crazy” because no guys ever proposed to her. They said that she was consoling herself by dating other girls. Some male students stalked her and her girlfriend, laughing about them, mocking them and making jokes about their relationship. Neli also experienced bullying and name-calling from classmates. She expressed disappointment that these individuals had not been disciplined by the college for committing these degrading acts – although it was not clear whether she had actually reported the incidents to the college.

### **8.2.4 Educational trajectory of Noxolo**

Because of partying and drinking a lot during high school, Noxolo (P4) neglected her schoolwork and, as a result, failed matric. She decided to register at the TVET college as some of her lesbian friends who had also failed matric were studying there. She did not need to

disclose her sexuality to be admitted to the college. Noxolo disclosed her homosexuality to her peers at the college, as she did not want to live her life based on lies. However, she experienced disapproval from her heterosexual peers for holding hands and kissing her girlfriend during recess. In addition to the disapproval that was openly displayed by the other students, she was not invited to religious gatherings, such as prayers at the college. Noxolo had good relationships with her lecturers and therefore felt comfortable seeking assistance and support when experiencing barriers to learning, as she did not feel judged by them. Noxolo made friends with five other lesbians on campus and they formed study groups to help each other, which helped her to improve her grades. As a result, Noxolo experienced academic achievement and success at the college. She aspired to become an engineer one day.



**Figure 50 I am an aspiring engineer (Noxolo)**

One day, during lunchtime, Noxolo was threatened with a bread knife by some Black male students, who accused her of taking their girlfriends away from them. She reported the incident to one of the male lecturers, but he did not believe her story. After this incident, these students began to stalk her. They also followed her girlfriend while she was walking home on a secluded road from college. They tried to talk her into going out with them, and she refused. They

shouted at her and accused her of imitating them and pretending to be a man. They forced her to take her underwear off to see if she was anatomically male. They also accused her of copying Western traditions by dating girls. She did not report the incident either to the police or the college.

### **8.2.5 Educational trajectory of Nompilo**

Nompilo registered at the college to study NCV Engineering to make it easier for her to eventually find employment. She had negative experiences at the college. Nompilo was mocked by her Black classmates, who often passed unnecessary hurtful comments about her lifestyle as a lesbian. She also experienced name-calling: she was called a “loser”, “attention seeker” and “drama queen”. The mocking and name-calling she experienced from her peers made her dislike going to the college and studying. She was often absent from college and failed most of her modules. She tried to kill herself twice, convinced by the negative comments that she truly was a “loser”.

In class, she experienced bullying. Her classmates did not like working with her in group work. She was also molested by some Black male students in the college toilet. These male students felt between her legs to check if she was male or female, thus criminally violating her human rights. They also pulled off her bra to check if she had breasts.

### **8.2.6 Educational trajectory of Nomsa**

Nomsa registered at the TVET college to study Motor Mechanics, as she wished to start her own business someday. At college, Nomsa (P6) experienced criticism for kissing and cuddling other women. Peers called her derogatory terms such as “unongayindoda” or “sissy boy” and ostracised her. She said:

*They call me names like ‘a hole which is not sniffed even by a dog’.*

Some peers claimed that she had both female and male sexual organs. Others avoided her and only spoke to her when absolutely necessary.

Educationally, Nomsa experienced success. She passed her modules in Motor Mechanics and had good relationships with her TVET lecturers. Based on her educational success, she aspired to owning her own car garage someday. However, she always made sure that she was home



early after college lectures, because of the threats that some Black male students had made to her, indicating that they were going to rape and kill her.



**Figure 51 Motor Mechanic Workshop at the TVET College**

### **8.3 Factors that Impede Participation and Success of LGBTQ+ Students**

The narratives were derived from semi-structured interviews, photo voice, focus groups and journals. I used analysis of narratives to come up with themes. Research participants interpreted their own experiences through narratives. As a researcher, I interpreted the construction of their narratives. Participants experienced hostile attitudes, a violation of their rights, gender-based violence, and homophobic violence. These negative experiences resulted in name-calling, bullying, derogatory labelling, verbal abuse, mockery, molestation and rape by heterosexuals, resulting in a lack of social access. A lack of epistemic access was also experienced as a result of the institutional culture, as the college did not provide support services or inclusive content. Also, the lack of toilets and change rooms suitable for the participants resulted in a lack of safe physical access. These themes are used to organise the discussion of findings in the sections that follow.

### 8.3.1 Lack of social access

Lack of social access was experienced by participants as a result of the forms of discrimination they experienced: hostile attitudes from peers and violation of their basic human rights, including gender-based and homophobic violence. Such stigma and prejudice were driven by patriarchal power structures rooted in deep cultural beliefs about gender roles of masculinity and femininity in Black society. These Black lesbian students experienced name-calling, bullying, derogatory labelling, verbal abuse, mockery, molesting and even rape. This occurred in lecture rooms, on sports fields, on the way to and from college and in toilets or change rooms.

Such negative and often violent experiences had an effect on these students' physical and psychological health, leading to absenteeism and failure of exams. Achieving lower academic results than their heterosexual peers disadvantaged them further. Psychological health problems, such as loss of confidence, isolation, homelessness, self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse, were reported by participants in this research. The following quotes illustrate these experiences:

*Some of my classmates often say that they don't want anything to do with "izitabane" homosexuals. They sometimes even try to give me artificial hair (bonding), hoping that I will look like a proper girl. I feel unwanted by what they say. They don't want to choose me during group work. (Nosipho)*

*There is some harassment that I experience on campus. It's not serious though, only giggles behind our backs and whispers about our shameful acts as lesbians. Sometimes they call us drama queens. This normally happens during lunch breaks. I can't report such petty issues; ... lecturers will think that I am seeking attention. (Nosipho)*

*Some guys from college hit me and even tried to rape me to prove to me that I am not a man on my way home. (Nandi)*

*They just giggle behind my back or whisper in each other's ears and laugh, and I feel it in my bones that it has to do with my sexual orientation. They don't bully me openly; they just pass silly comments. Others say I am just an attention seeker. (Nandi)*

*The atmosphere at this college is hostile to us lesbians. Most guys feel uncomfortable around us. They follow us, make fun of us, and bully us. Nothing is being done to them. (Neli)*

*One of the guys pulled a bread knife and threatened to cut my throat if I ever date any of their girls on campus. I reported them to a male lecturer, but he did not take the story seriously.*  
(Noxolo)

*They mock me and say hurtful things about me. They call me a loser. At some point, I lost confidence in myself and even doubted my intellectual capabilities. I was often absent from college and failed most of my modules. I tried killing myself twice, since I felt like a loser.*  
(Nompilo)

*I don't want to be social with heterosexuals on campus since they make jokes or ask silly questions about my sexual orientation.* (Nomsa)

### **8.3.2 Lack of epistemic access**

Implicit heterosexism also took place through discriminatory education. Students experienced a lack of epistemic access as the curriculum did not include LGBTQ+ issues. On the positive side, registration forms did not require them to indicate their gender identity or preferred sexual orientation, thus not exposing their true identity. At the same time, there were no counselling services or programmes available to support LGBTQ+ students' mental health. Also, there were no rules or laws that they knew of or had come across that prohibited bullying or physical violence towards LGBTQ+ students. The TVET college's institutional policy did not include sexual orientation and gender identity education. Such lack of institutional support had a negative effect on the academic motivation of most of these lesbian students, leading to feelings of disconnectedness and even suicidal ideation. These emotions and attitudes were reflected in the narratives as indicated below:

*There are no programmes or lessons on homosexuality in college, they don't talk about it.*  
(Nosipho)

*There are no support services for addressing barriers to learning related to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in this college. They only support you financially and not emotionally. The student support services that are provided are mainly to do with students' health. A mobile clinic from Imbalenhle clinic often visits the college to give ARVS to students living with HIV and AIDS. That has nothing to do with sexual orientation.* (Nandi)

*They should at least have programmes to educate them about us. Even if you don't tell them that you are lesbian ... they somehow pick it up and turn it into a joke. (Neli)*

*I did not need to disclose my sexuality. The college form has male or female, and you don't need to disclose anything. (Noxolo)*

*I need to pull up my socks in my academic work. I fail to work well with others, especially in groups. They don't take me seriously because I am lesbian. I am also always absent at college and as a result, I have failed most of my modules. (Nompilo)*

*There are no life skills programmes about homosexuality. Most of the students are heterosexuals; they wouldn't be interested in learning about lesbians anyway. (Nomsa).*

During the workshop Neli displayed a photo and explained that most of the classwork was on Engineering Theory and Practice and nothing on sexual orientation as shown below:



**Figure 52 We learn about metals and machines (Neli)**

### 8.3.3 Lack of safe physical access

Facilities such as toilets and changing rooms were not gender-inclusive, and they did not cater for students' preferred sexual orientation or reflect the existence of a diverse student body. While these two symbols clearly did not provide for anybody who did not identify as a male or a female, if the college were to create a separate toilet for "other", this would brand or label individuals who used these toilets and potentially put their safety at risk, as they could then be clearly targeted for an assault. Thus, the true desire of these Black lesbian participants was for safe facilities, where they would not be attacked.



**Figure 53 Restrooms on campus are gender/sex specific**

## 8.4 Factors that Facilitate Participation and Success of LGBTQ+ Students

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) facilitated students with tuition fees, transport and housing allowances leading to financial access. Not disclosing sexual identity, forming groups, attending events and marches with other lesbians resulted in a lesbian-friendly environment. Also, good relationships with lecturers led to academic success. These factors are discussed in detail below.

### 8.4.1 Financial access

Financial access was one of the themes that facilitated the participation and success of participants at the college. According to Matukane (2017), the South African Government introduced a funding scheme, referred to as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to improve the access to tertiary education for poor students at universities as well

as at TVET colleges. The purpose of the scheme was to provide student bursaries and loans to academically deserving but financially needy students at all public universities and TVET colleges. Previously, before this scheme had been introduced, the lack of funding increased the likelihood of under-enrolments at tertiary educational institutions from this population group. In this study, participants all came from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore benefitted from NSFAS financial support and this facilitated their participation at the college. Apart from using NSFAS for their educational needs, they also used the funding to support their families. Participants said:

*I also choose to study at this college to get the NSFAS. I wanted to support my baby and my mother. (Neli)*

*As a first-born female child, I have to take the responsibility of providing for the family through my student financial aid. (Nandi)*

#### **8.4.2 Lesbian-friendly environment**

Having other Black lesbian students as friends on campus facilitated improved social access, success and participation for these students. They socialised at break times and worked together during practical sessions. Participating in LGBTQ+ events, such as marches, also helped them to build supportive relationships with other lesbian students at the college. Such events made them feel free and gave them the feeling that they could also be who they wanted to be. The following photograph was displayed by one participant as an example of a lesbian-friendly environment.



**Figure 54 We enjoy dancing and drinking alcohol (Nomsa)**

The following quotes support these assertions:

*I am connected to the LGBT community locally and some members are from this college. We organise events and gigs to entertain ourselves. We also formed a WhatsApp group, where we post motivational messages to each other. We also help those who are looking for partners by posting their photos on the group. (Nosipho)*

*I am friends with other lesbians at this college. We hang around together at break time and lunchtime. We also work together during integrated summative assessments, which is the practical side of Engineering. (Nandi)*

*We meet as lesbians and chat and also join marches to Durban. In these events, I feel free to be who I want to be. (Nandi)*

*I am part of a lesbian community; we study together during exam time and go to taverns together on Friday nights. We hang out as a group during break and lunch times. (Neli) I have made friends with five other lesbians on campus, and this has provided me with a feeling of*

*belonging. We have formed study groups to help each other, and this has helped me by improving my grades. (Noxolo)*

*I also heard in our WhatsApp lesbian group that they were taking students who failed matric in their NCV Engineering programmes. (Nompilo)*

Having good relationships with lecturers enabled students to achieve success, as evidenced by what Participant 4 said:

*I feel comfortable to seek assistance and support when experiencing barriers to learning as lecturers don't judge me. (Noxolo)*

One participant displayed a photo of them having dialogues on LGBTQI matters as the “PRIDE CURATED” group.





**Figure 55 The “Pride curated dialogue” Workshop**

### **8.5 Discussion: Barriers and enablers to access, participation and success**

In this section, I first highlight the key findings of previous studies on the experiences of sexual minority groups in post-school education. Then, I summarise the commonalities and differences across the studies in relation to my own study. These experiences are summed up through the discussion of the sub-themes of the violation of rights; hostile attitudes; gender-based violence; and patriarchy regarding the barriers to effective learning or studying. The themes of financial access, good relationships with lecturers and having lesbian friends are discussed as enablers of learning.

Previous students have identified low levels of participation by the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population in post-school education (Cooper, 2016; Jaklitsch, 2017). LGBTQ+ students may feel unsafe or uncomfortable in educational institutions because of the mistreatment they have experienced that has impacted their ability to study effectively and succeed. These students have been found to stay away from classes and some have even dropped out of their university or TVET college courses (GLSEN, 2011). Similar findings emerged in this study, where some participants stated that they were often absent from classes or stayed away from the college because they were feeling unsafe and uncomfortable. Some of the participants resorted to self-injury (Nandi) or attempted suicidal (Noxolo) during times that they were depressed and feeling hopeless; while these attempts to hurt themselves were not fatal, they led to these students failing exams. Below, I discuss some of the barriers these lesbian students experienced when trying to study or learn.

#### **8.5.1 Violation of rights**

In this study, participants experienced dominant heterosexism in their TVET institution of learning, putting them at physical and psychological risk and thereby limiting their ability to concentrate, study and improve their education. Naidu and Mutambara (2017), in their research, found that Black African lesbians' experiences in institutions of tertiary education were impacted by oppressive behaviours by peers reflecting that "discrimination among this minority group remains extensive" (p. 35). In the same vein, Vollenhoven (2013) found that LGBTQ+ students' human rights regarding their sexual orientation were violated at institutions of higher education. This indicates that "while human rights are guaranteed in the South African Constitution, they are often difficult to implement in practice" (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016, p.9). The findings of these different studies suggest that the bullying, discrimination and violence affecting these sexual minorities must be addressed to ensure these groups' human rights.

#### **8.5.2 Hostile attitudes**

In this study, hostile attitudes by heterosexual individuals, and especially by Black males, formed barriers to social access, as well as for meaningful participation and success in the TVET environment, for these Black lesbian students. Hostilities included name-calling, bullying, derogatory labelling and verbal abuse. Such behaviours led to some lesbian students

aiming for “invisibility” in an effort to remain safe and not be judged; for others, the hostilities included becoming victims of criminal attacks in the form of molestations, assaults and even rape motivated by an aim to ‘correct’ the ‘deviant’ sexual orientation. South African researchers found that these factors hindered effective participation at tertiary education institutions and academic success among sexual minorities because of the oppression and discrimination they had to experience (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015). Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2015) state that verbal abuse, such as derogatory labelling, and violence, such as being targets of ‘corrective’ rape, are some of the serious barriers to these students’ success. Kiekel (2012) also reported macro-aggressions being committed against lesbian students. Some findings in the study revealed that students had feelings of not fitting in, and they experienced personal, family, and other relationship and health problems (see also Ochse, 2010). A smaller number of researchers reported that a poor choice of subjects or field of study were factors that hindered the lesbian students’ participation and success (Bhana, 2014; Dwyer, 2019). This could also be the result of these students’ more limited choice of tertiary education, based upon their dropping out of school or failing matric and thus not being able to study at university. It could also be based upon many of these students not having high maths results and thus not qualifying for other courses at the TVET college, or courses already being fully subscribed, leaving a limited choice available.

Most South African studies on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education have indicated the external emotional pressure experienced by lesbian students formed barriers to their success. Heterosexual Black male students claiming that homosexuality is immoral has presented an emotional barrier that has hindered the success of LGBTQ+ students in post school educational institutions (Jones, 2018; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Nela, Vawdab, Mbokodo & Govender, 2017). Black lesbian students were harassed and physically attacked because of their sexual or gender identity. This is an indication that legislative support for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals is not adequate to eradicate discrimination against sexual minorities, but that social change, too, is needed.

### **8.5.3 Gender-based violence**

According to Henderson (2017), homophobic attitudes and behaviours are constant reminders that society is still not fully accepting of the LGBTQ community. Despite the language of inclusivity and tolerance in post-apartheid South Africa, many South African institutions,

including educational institutions, continue to reproduce patterns of heterosexism (Francis & Msibi, 2011). According to Farvid (2015), heterosexuality is generally defined as a sexual or relational identity (belonging to individuals or groups) and as a social institution (which structures daily life) and can be used to describe a belief system that positions the ‘superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality’ (p. 5). It is, therefore, an attitude, action, or practice that is backed by institutional power – that subordinates’ people because of heteronormativity. It is oppression (discrimination plus prejudice) against homosexuals on the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. The participants in the study were sometimes subjected to gender-based violence, including sexual assault and rape. These attacks on Black lesbian women are an example of the intersections of their race or culture and sexuality, where Black men feel they have “the right” to subject women to their sexual needs, based on patriarchal norms and traditions. These experiences result in feelings of powerlessness, anger, fear and hopelessness which, in turn, lead to poor academic achievement and the risk of these students not being able to obtain qualifications.

#### **8.5.4 Lack of intervention by lecturers**

Intervention by lecturers could play a vital role in providing a safe and productive learning environment for all students, including LGBTQ+ students. This study revealed a lack of intervention by lecturers in addressing heterosexism within the TVET college. Some lesbian students suffered from emotional distress because of having to "live on the margins". At the same time, many lecturers were not even aware of any problems being encountered by the LGBTQ+ students, as most cases were never reported to or observed by the lecturers.

As in this study, Jaklitsch (2017) found a lack of intervention by lecturers, even when they observed LGBTQ+ students being bullied and harassed by their heterosexual peers and where they could see that this was a factor that hindered the LGBTQ+ students’ participation in educational activities. Pearson (2007) found that students who experienced same-sex attraction had a weaker sense of attachment to the college because of having experiences of trouble with educators and peers. These students may then resort to the use of drugs and alcohol to help them to cope with rejection, isolation and loneliness, or even self-inflicted physical harm, further obstructing their educational success.

### **8.5.5 Enablers to Access, Participation and Success**

Two participants reported having positive relationships with their lecturers and achieving academic success. The National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2013) conducted research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students at PSET institutions and found that students who had six or more supportive educators reported fewer academic challenges compared with those students who did not have supportive lecturers or staff members. The better-supported students were less likely to miss classes as they also did not have major safety concerns, achieved higher point averages, planned to pursue their education and reported a greater sense of belonging to their college community. Also, lesbian students reported that having lesbian friends on campus facilitated their social participation and academic success in that they helped each other during class activities.

A presentation by Wicht (2017) on creating an LGBT-inclusive educational climate suggested the following actions regarding the factors that facilitate more effective participation and success at college:

- “Using gender-inclusive language on all event communications, including invitations
- Ensuring that reactions to reports of harassment do not further stigmatise students who were targeted
- Reviewing anti-bullying policies with input from students, families, educators and the community.”

Kosciw (2012) suggests some factors that facilitate the effective participation and success of LGBTQ+ students in post-school education as:

- “Identifying areas where bullying takes place
- Making those spaces safe by taking immediate corrective actions to eliminate ‘hot spots’ on campus
- Training and assigning students or staff to monitor these areas
- Preparing counsellors and educators to support students, who are coping with the emotional side-effects of conversion therapy
- Formulating and passing of discrimination policies that protect sexual orientation and gender identity”.

Research also revealed that colleges that offer clubs, also known as gay–straight alliances, (GSAs), had better environments in terms of addressing the harassment, discrimination, and prejudice experienced by the LGBTQ+ students. GSAs are student-led, college-based clubs open to all members of the student body, regardless of sexual orientation, that advocate for an improved college climate by challenging homophobia. GSAs promote respect for the larger college community, educate all students and faculty about LGBTQ+ issues, and provide support for LGBTQ+ students and their allies (Mims, 2016 & Kosciw, 2012). Involving counsellors to advocate LGBTQ+ youth was suggested in the report as students reported that they would be most comfortable talking with counsellors.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

Largely consistent with prior work, I found that Black lesbians in PSET education have to function within a predominantly heterosexual culture. Power structures that were formed during the colonial era and apartheid, characterised by deeply embedded patriarchal beliefs, continue to increase inequalities in tertiary institutions (see also Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, & Mogotsi, 2017). The pedagogic approaches and curriculum for TVET colleges are not gender-inclusive or racially-inclusive, despite the Constitution asserting equality and the enactment of laws and policies to eradicate the inequalities that were present during the apartheid era. The Black lesbian participants in this study said that there was very little content or teaching about homosexuality in their programme. Heterosexual peers and lecturers were silent about homosexuality. According to Francis (2019), teachers' silence on non-normative sexualities not only serves pedagogically to bolster heterosexuality as the dominant norm, but it also dismisses these minorities' sexual identities. Some researchers have found the inclusion of homosexuality as a topic in the curriculum promotes greater feelings of safety in the college environment and tends to lower the incidents of anti-LGBTQ+ remarks and victimisation (Russell et al., 2021; Baams, Dubas, & van Aken, 2017). There is thus a need for higher education institutions to become proactive about heterosexism and this can be achieved through designing more contextually relevant and holistic programmes that realise the importance of locating heterosexism as a problem for all the citizens of this country (Francis & Msibi, 2011, p.169). However, positive experiences were found that facilitated social and academic participation and success. These included meeting new friends on campus who shared the same sexual orientation; establishing positive relationships with lecturers; and finding college to be a space in which to explore their sexuality.

## **CHAPTER 9: RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE: PARTICIPANTS' AGENCY IN THEIR RESPONSES TO HETEROSEXISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TVET COLLEGE**

*“Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin. We understood both.”* (hooks, 2000, p.341).

This quote by bell hooks speaks to those who are located on the margin – which includes Black lesbian students. According to hooks (2002) "those located in the margin can choose to use that space as a site of resistance in response to domination and as a space of radical openness" (p. 34).

### **9.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 8, I discussed the study findings that related to the second research question, regarding participants' experiences of participation and success at the college. This chapter examines how the participants navigated heterosexism at the college. In Section 9.2, I give a brief account of how each participant navigated heterosexism at the college followed by a summary of participants' accounts in Section 9.3.7. Next, I examine the mechanisms used by the participants for negotiating heterosexism in Section 9.4. These mechanisms included personal strategies (Section 9.4.1), social strategies (Section 9.4.2) and negative coping mechanisms (Section, 9.4.3). Finally, I identify viable tools for resistance in Section 9.6; these include education and knowledge (Section 9.6.1), LGBTQ+ therapists, coordinators and counsellors (Section 9.6.2), LGBTQ+ inclusive college policies (Section 9.6.3), inclusive curricula (Section 9.6.4) and sexual orientation intergroup dialogues (Section 9.6.5).

### **9.2 Participants' accounts of navigating heterosexism at the college**

The following section summarizes the findings arising from students' narratives of how they navigated heterosexism at the TVET college. Brief information is first provided about each student to set the context.

### **9.2.1 Nosipho**

Nosipho introduced herself as a motivational speaker and a positive thinker. Prior to coming to college, she had experienced heterosexism from family and community members. Her initial transition to college was positive, as she entered into a personal relationship that boosted her sense of self-worth. She saw college as a place where she could express her sexuality freely and without fear of being judged. However, she experienced micro-aggressions from heterosexual peers, but developed a secure social network of lesbian friends. She indicated that she felt autonomous and did not want to change herself. She was very optimistic about the future. She prioritised her rights and displayed high self-esteem. Academically, she performed well in her studies and her success contributed to her self-efficacy.

### **9.2.2 Nandi**

Nandi accepted herself as being lesbian. Prior to coming to college, she had experienced and been confronted with a strong heterosexist bias from her family and the Christian community. She had also been raped. This forced her, at the time, to shield her true sexual identity. She ‘came out’ only to her immediate friends. At college, she hoped to adopt a more visible sexual identity. However, she experienced verbal, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, which was misogynistic in nature. Despite this, she remained open-minded and had aspirations of becoming an engineer one day. At college, she gradually made friends with other lesbians; they spent their time together during breaks and worked together during practical sessions. However, her feelings of rejection and hurt were profound, and she started to cut herself with a razor blade whenever she experienced any form of rejection. She realised that such actions could have serious consequences for her wellbeing. Therefore, she sought help from a private psychologist and psychiatrist.

### **9.2.3 Neli**

Prior to coming to college, Neli had been in a relationship where she had experienced domestic abuse. She was raped by her partner, fell pregnant and then dropped out of school in Grade 11. She had also experienced heterosexism from her family and the community, who refused to accept her as a bisexual woman. While she was glad that she was able to study at the TVET college even without having earned a matric, she experienced name-calling, bullying and



stalking on campus from heterosexual Black men. However, she fell in love with a lesbian peer and the reciprocal feelings boosted her confidence. Neli stated that she was part of a lesbian community at the college, where they studied together during exam times and went to taverns together on Friday nights. They spent time together as a group during breaks and at lunch times. She was independent in her decision-making and believed in herself and her capabilities. Being bisexual, Neli dated both males and females. She did not disclose to her male dates that her girlfriends were her lovers. She thus portrayed to other students, lecturers, and her family, as well as community members that she was 'straight'. Neli was promiscuous, dating males mainly for money and not for love, in an effort to cope financially as she had to support herself, her child and her mother.

#### **9.2.4 Noxolo**

In reaction to her sexual orientation, Noxolo had experienced significant discrimination and isolation prior to coming to college. This had forced her to run away from home and live on the streets for some time. At college, she established positive relationships with the lecturers and achieved good academic results. This level of success and a sense of believing in herself enabled her to feel free and independent to pursue her sexuality. Moreover, the college provided her with academic opportunities to pursue her vocational training towards becoming an engineer. At college, she met other lesbians, who were friendly to her and open about their sexual identities. That also provided her with a sense of belonging. Her positive traits were that she was resilient and aspired to be an engineer one day. She wholeheartedly embraced her sexual orientation, despite the limitations imposed on her, and had no wish to change who she was.

#### **9.2.5 Nompilo**

Prior to coming to the college, Nompilo was exposed to regular rejection, isolation, labelling and mockery by her family and the community because of her sexual orientation. Unfortunately, she also had negative experiences at the college, as some heterosexual Black male students mocked her and said hurtful things about her. They called her a 'loser', 'attention seeker' and 'drama queen'. She developed low self-esteem and lost confidence in her abilities,

which had a negative impact on her academic performance. Her positive characteristics included being an open-minded woman and an androgynist, despite her low self-esteem.

#### **9.2.6 Nomsa**

Nomsa presented herself as a fearless and autonomous young woman; judging from her manner of dress and behaviour, she did not conform to feminine gender norms and expectations. She was open about her sexual orientation and, as a result, was confronted with heterosexism, including name-calling and isolation from her family and community members. It was noteworthy that she was also not easily accepted by her peers and lecturers, possibly because of her outspokenness and assertiveness. She was confident and felt free to express her sexuality, which made her an autonomous person. She was 'very out' and did not intend to live a self-denying or degrading life based on lies or hiding her true identity.

#### **9.2.7 Summary of participants' accounts**

Nosipho introduced herself as a motivational speaker who is self-actualised and a positive thinker. She was able to seek help by going to a rehab centre to deal with her alcohol and drug addiction. Nandi described herself as open-minded and having accepted herself as being lesbian. She had dreams and aspirations to become an engineer. She was able to go for counselling when she felt suicidal. Neli described herself as an androgynous and confident young woman who hoped to adopt a more visible sexual identity at the college. Noxolo described herself as loving herself, being very resilient and aspiring to be an engineer.

Nompilo's positive characteristics included being an open-minded androgynist. Nomsa was confident and felt free to express her sexuality, which made her an autonomous person. From these findings, I identified the mechanisms the participants used to navigate heterosexism.

These are discussed in the next section.

### **9.3 Mechanisms used to navigate heterosexism**

The participants were found to use a range of mechanisms to navigate heterosexism. These are grouped into the following categories in this section: personal strategies (Section 9.4.1), social strategies (Section 9.4.2) and negative coping mechanisms (Section 9.4.3).

### 9.3.1 Personal strategies

The Black lesbian students in this study identified personal solutions for reducing their vulnerability to heterosexism. These included self-acceptance, with regard to their sexual orientation (Section 9.4.1.1), silence or concealment of their sexual identity (Section 9.4.1.2), self-determination (Section 9.4.1.3) and exploration of expressive writing as a strategy (Section 9.4.1.4).

#### *9.3.1.1 Self-acceptance with regard to sexual orientation*

Participants' acceptance of themselves was characterised by refusing to change themselves or to act differently when with heterosexual people. It entailed becoming or remaining fearless, autonomous and being open about their sexual orientation. Some participants accepted themselves as lesbians despite rejection by their families and friends. Noxolo (P4), for example, wholeheartedly embraced her sexual orientation despite the isolation and rejection imposed on her. She had no wish to change who she was, as evidenced in the following extract.

*I have chosen to be out, as I do not want to live my life based on lies. Telling the truth has made us feel free with my girlfriend. We sit together in class and hold hands during break time. Some students look at me with bad eyes when I am kissing my girlfriend, but I don't care what they think of me. We post each other on Facebook or WhatsApp statuses freely. Whatever we do, people will always have negative things to say about us. We no longer care what they think of us. I have accepted myself as a lesbian. My sexuality is just part of who I am. They may call me names and think I am affected by adolescence, it's their opinion.* Noxolo

Nomsa (P6) indicated that she would not change herself to suit other people. She did not act differently in different contexts, despite the possibility of being provoked. She refused to conform to feminine gender norms and expectations, as explained below:

*I don't hide that I am lesbian, everyone knows. Their disapproval does not affect me. I am a lesbian, and I am happy as I am. I won't conform to their idea of what a girl should be like in my dress, manner, or lifestyle.* Nomsa

During the photo voice workshop, she displayed a photo and wrote a caption underneath as shown below:



**Figure 56 “This picture shows that I won’t change myself for anybody.” - Nomsa**

Accepting oneself also involves being self-reliant and independent. Participants displayed photos to demonstrate that they were fearless and undaunted. Self-reliance was also linked with issues of survival, while independence was displayed through making their own decisions and believing in themselves.

*I keep myself happy by dating girls and I am planning on marrying one someday if I become financially independent. My wish is to explore my sexuality without fear. (Nosipho)*

Nosipho displayed the following photo and explained that she had proposed to her girlfriend, who had accepted her proposal (as shown in the photo).



**Figure 57 “This picture shows that I am engaged to my girlfriend.” - Nosipho**

### ***9.3.1.2 Staying silent or concealing one’s sexual identity***

Being silent about their sexual orientation was a strategy used by participants if they wanted or needed to avoid hostility and discrimination. In this study, some participants came out about their true sexuality only to their friends and hid their sexual orientation from their lecturers, as they believed that they would fail in their studies if they were open about who they were. For example, one of the participants said:

*Some lecturers are strongly Christian, and I just think they might disapprove if I tell them that I am lesbian. I don’t want to have low grades; my friends know though.* (Nompilo)

One participant said that she would not have disclosed her homosexuality if the college had asked her to indicate her sexual orientation during registration, as she had feared that they would not enrol her as a student.

*I wouldn’t disclose my sexual orientation, because I fear that they might not take me if they know that I am bisexual.* (Neli)

Attempting to conceal her lesbian identity was a strategy used by one participant (Nompilo) to deal with the pressures to be heterosexual in her strongly patriarchal rural home, where being lesbian was viewed as being demonic and un-African. Nompilo said:

*In my Black township, community members view lesbianism as a 'White man's disease'. As a result, I have chosen not to be open about my sexuality to my family and community members. However, I think they know, but do not want to accept it. They treat me like an outsider, as if I am not part of the family, because of the life I have chosen. They indirectly say that lesbians are a disgrace. I'm afraid of discrimination if the community members find out. I don't want to be labelled 'uSatane' [devil].*

Concealing their true sexuality was a way of avoiding difficult situations with heterosexuals for these participants. They were acting or playing a part to 'fit in' and still belong within the confines of the family or the community and, therefore, they chose to act as if they were heterosexual around heterosexuals. They were afraid that their sexuality would lead to ridicule and exclusion or isolation. Leading a double life was also part of concealing one's identity. This strategy was characterised by asserting one's femininity so that any suspicions or rumours about them being lesbian were countered. This entailed altering their actions, dress, and mannerisms in social contexts when they were not with their lesbian friends: for example, at church, around family and in the community. It also entailed lying or using deceit to hide their true sexual identity from others.

*I only date males mainly for money and not for love. [Laughs]. Please don't crucify me for that: I must exchange my body for money, otherwise, we starve at home. (Neli)*

#### **9.3.1.3 Self-determination**

Self-determination entailed having a positive self-image and being highly motivated. The participants were, in most cases, highly motivated and had clear goals and aspirations and, consequently, experienced successful transitions at college. Self-determined students were very optimistic about the future. They prioritised their rights and had high self-esteem. Students' self-determination enabled them to successfully navigate heterosexism and to achieve good academic results. Self-determination was evident in several students' narratives and photographs. Nosipho, Noxolo and Nomsa were motivated to achieve and, as a result, attained good academic results. This is demonstrated in the following extract from one of the participants:

*I do Motor Mechanics. I am doing very well. I wish to own a car garage one day. – Nomsa*



**Figure 58 “This picture shows that we are determined to pass” – Nomsa (Motor mechanics workshop)**

Self-determination was less evident in Nompilo’s narrative; this might explain why she struggled to complete her diploma and almost committed suicide.

#### ***9.3.1.4 Exploration of expressive writing as a strategy***

Research demonstrates that engaging in emotion-focused expressive writing about a heterosexist event leads to reduced psychological distress (Collins, 2018). Writing down personal experiences can be used as a therapeutic form of disclosure for issues that cannot be

easily discussed (Aksoy, 2022). In this study, participants were asked to express their feelings in a reflective journal on how they navigated heterosexism. This allowed them to explore expressive writing as a strategy they could use to mediate their experience of heterosexism.

The students were asked to describe their experiences and discuss their feelings about them. They responded to questions such as:

- Write a description of a heterosexist experience (Examples: being insulted or bullied, being harassed, being denied access, and so forth).
- Please let us know what happened and how you navigated that experience.
- Who was there?
- How did it make you feel, and so forth?

The students thus practised using expressive writing as a coping mechanism to mediate their experiences of heterosexism by expressing their feelings in their journals. Participants indicated that the expressive writing exercise was helpful as a coping mechanism to mediate their experiences of heterosexism.

### **9.3.2 Social strategies**

The findings suggest that the participants largely recommended social solutions to reduce their vulnerability to heterosexism at the TVET college. These social strategies included: creating lesbian-friendly contexts or spaces (Section 9.4.2.1), social support networks (Section 9.4.2.2), accessing support (Section 9.4.2.3) and engaging in activism (Section 9.4.2.4).

#### ***9.3.2.1 Creating lesbian-friendly contexts or spaces***

Research has demonstrated that being part of a group is important for successful transitions. (Glazzard, Jindal-Snape, & Stones, 2022). The formal support provided by their lesbian community provided these Black lesbian students with a safe space and a sense of cohesion (see also Meyer, 2001). All participants drew on their peer networks to support them through the educational trajectories they experienced, rather than accessing support from their parents or siblings. During their time at the college, these students experienced enjoyable and empowering experiences with their lesbian peers. These included falling in love, developing sexual relationships, establishing new social networks and friendships, and having fun when



attending lesbian events. For two of the six participants, it was a time that they could explore and develop their self-identities in safe, accepting environments among other Black lesbians. However, the other two participants felt that they had to modify their behaviour, so as not to transgress heterosexual norms. In lesbian-friendly contexts, these participants reported being openly affectionate with other women and ‘letting their guard down’, discussing their sexuality freely. This was confirmed by Noxolo:

*I have made friends with five other lesbians on campus, and this has provided me with a feeling of belonging. We have formed study groups to help each other, and this has helped me by improving my grades.*



**Figure 59 “This picture shows that we love and support each other” - Noxolo**

#### ***9.3.2.2 Social support networks***

Access to social support networks that comprise others who share the same minority status, can provide individuals with a sense of solidarity and a positive affirmation of identity (Meyer,

2003). Participants formed collectives and joined social networks with other lesbian students. They formed a strong WhatsApp group and this supported their resilience, and especially so, when they encountered problems at college. Friendships were mainly established through participation in the lesbian WhatsApp group referred to as '*izitabane zaseMbali*'. None of the participants identified family as a strong source of support. For some participants, relationships with family members had become impaired and hurtful, after they had disclosed their true sexuality or gender identities (Nosipho and Nompilo). Participants mentioned that they had joined marches with other lesbians from other institutions and engaged in a peer mentoring programme, which provided them with agency.

#### ***9.3.2.3 Accessing support***

Accessing support when needed was one way in which participants demonstrated agency. Nandi had decided to seek private counselling and psychological services, as she became involved in self-destructive behaviour (cutting herself with razor blades). Eventually, her mental health and physical well-being improved. Based on this professional support, she was able to continue studying at the college. Nosipho had drug and alcohol abuse problems. She also sought help and was taken to a rehabilitation centre by social workers. As a result, she was able to come and study at college.

*I was helped by social workers who took me to rehab. I was at the rehab for 3 months and I attended therapy. (Nosipho)*

#### ***9.3.2.4 Engaging in activism***

Participation in activist groups has been confirmed to have numerous benefits for minority groups, including decreasing the negative mental health effects of discrimination (Elliott, 2018). Research finds that heterosexism can motivate Black minority group women to participate in critical action to address oppression (Montagno & Garrett-Walker, 2021). After being rejected as a lesbian woman, Nosipho indicated that heterosexism made her more sensitive to the problems of prejudice and discrimination against others, and in turn, this led her to fight for her rights and the rights of others. This was evident when she said,

*I also do motivational speaking on homosexuality and about my rough childhood in my spare time. (Nosipho)*

### **9.3.3 Negative Coping Mechanisms**

Participants also identified some negative coping mechanisms. These included drug and alcohol abuse (Section 9.4.3.1) and self-harm (Section 9.4.3.2).

#### ***9.3.3.1 Drug and alcohol abuse***

Previous research revealed that female sexual minority groups reported higher rates of substance abuse than heterosexual women (Meyer, 2003; Bjorkman & Malterud, 2012). Consistent with this, the participants in this study highlighted that they had problems with substance and drug abuse, which they blamed on having wanted to overcome the feeling of rejection that they were experiencing as members of a minority group. Some had started this abuse already at school, when they sniffed glue, and later escalated this to alcohol and ‘heavy’ drugs. Nosipho indicated:

*I used drugs and alcohol to cope with family problems and not being accepted as a lesbian.*

#### ***9.3.3.2 Self-harm***

Participants highlighted self-harm as a form of coping with their feelings of rejection, hurt and isolation. In this study, Nandi highlighted self-harm as a form of coping with the negative feelings she had, such as feelings of rejection, hurt and anger when faced with heterosexism. She said:

*I get very angry for being bullied. I buy a box of razor blades and cut my body if I experience any discrimination. A lot of blood comes out. I feel better after cutting myself.*

## **9.4 Tools for Resistance**

During the focus group workshop, students discussed viable tools they could use to set boundaries against heterosexism in post-school education and training. The following ideas emerged as tools for resisting heterosexism or setting effective boundaries at the college: education and knowledge; LGBTQ+ therapists, coordinators and counsellors; LGBTQ+ inclusive policies; inclusive activities and services; curriculum; and intergroup dialogues.

#### **9.4.1 Education and knowledge as tools for resistance**

Meyer (2015) asserts that “resilience is the quality of being able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity” (p. 210). Education and knowledge are tools that can be used to set boundaries and assert resistance. Participant 4 reported that many of the meaningful relationships they had with other Black lesbian women had developed at the college, because there they had a supportive community of lesbian women whom they could rely on. Constructive and positive student-staff relationships were also identified as a mechanism for promoting students’ resilience in education and reducing heterosexism.

#### **9.4.2 LGBTQ+ therapists, coordinators and counsellors**

Providing students with a quality education includes facilitating a positive environment at the educational institution, as well as providing professional social and emotional support that fosters healthy developmental outcomes. For LGBTQ+ students, such support can be especially important to ensure that they are provided with a learning environment that enables them to reach their full potential. Lack of such support can adversely affect their academic achievement, reduce their motivation and lead to feelings of disconnectedness, exclusion, isolation and even suicidal ideation.

In this study, participants indicated that they encountered discrimination and even sexual violence and would benefit from counselling services, or culturally competent support, being offered. They have few people to whom they feel they can disclose relationship violence or sexual assault, as many families, communities and church organisations do not accept their status. For that reason, they may turn to a trusted staff or faculty member on campus for help.

#### **9.4.3 LGBTQ+ inclusive college policies**

The participants advocated for the inclusion of a sexual orientation and gender identity institutional policy in the college’s Code of Conduct to prohibit harassment on this basis. This would assist the college in protecting LGBTQ+ students as, should any incident occur, the college would be able to act to enforce an explicit policy.

#### **9.4.4 Inclusive curriculum**

Including a curriculum on social justice may help to reduce negative attitudes towards stigmatised groups (Gutiérrez, 2016). Some researchers argue that such an approach can improve the attitudes of both liberal and conservative students (Jayakumar, 2009). Inclusive instruction and an amended curriculum can offer LGBTQ+ experiences. Although there were topics on inclusion and diversity in Life Orientation (LO) lessons, they focussed mostly on special needs and disability. Lessons on inclusion and diversity could have been easily embedded into participants' English literacy module but were not. This absence of LGBTQ+ representation in the curriculum did not support the participants' experience of a sense of belonging and, thus, had a detrimental impact on their academic transitions. This aligns with existing literature (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Researchers have proposed an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum with topics on sexual and gender diversity in textbooks to be taught across subject areas and not only confined to the LO subject (Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2012). However, the knowledge base should be inclusive without either privileging and or othering sexually diverse students (Bhana, 2012).

#### **9.4.5 Sexual orientation intergroup dialogues**

One of the tools suggested by participants in this study was a dialogue-based intergroup programme. This is a post-conflict intervention, which involves members from minority groups and heterosexuals. Such a programme focuses on rehabilitating relationships between members of these groups. A study of sexual orientation dialogues found that heterosexual students increased their awareness of heterosexism and developed a commitment to disrupting heterosexism (Dessel, 2013). Having regular intergroup dialogues with homosexuals and heterosexuals may help to create a condition of equal status between the two groups. According to research, intergroup dialogue (IGD) is a direct method, because it encourages open discussion of injustices and prejudices, as well as incorrect perceptions and misunderstandings during a dialogue with a focus on improving intergroup relations, developing a critical awareness of social identities and related inequities, and developing capacities to address those inequities (King, 2014).

#### 9.4.6 Structural and environmental tools

Upgrading infrastructure entails having gender-inclusive facilities, such as toilets and change rooms that are LGBTQ+-friendly and inclusive. However, adding an extra category to toilets or change rooms would clearly brand and label lesbians and homosexual men as being outsiders, and would not improve these individuals' safety. Instead, it would make them easier to target for assault and rape. One participant displayed the photo below and added a caption, as follows:



**Figure 60 “This picture shows a lack of names that recognise the existence of a diverse student body.”**

From the mechanisms and tools for navigating and addressing heterosexism discussed above, the theme of sexual agency emerged. This theme is discussed next.

### 9.5 Sexual Agency

Sexual agency can be defined as the strategic negotiation of individuals to situate themselves and their choices in a social context, maintain relationships and make sense of experiences (Cense, 2019). Negotiating sexual agency refers to individuals' ability to act on behalf of their sexual needs, desires, and wishes (Wood et al., 2007). Agency is also strongly connected to power relations among individuals. The World Health Organization (2011) defines sexual agency as a basic sexual right: for example, having the right to choose one's sexual partners.

A theme emerged from participants' narratives and photographs that revealed sexually free, assertive young women, who are independent and empowered despite traditional gender stereotypes and prejudices that are still rife on college campuses.

Participants appeared to experience sexual agency about their lesbian identities as depicted by their intimacy in the photographs. Sexual agency allows individuals to make their own choice as to whether they self-disclose their sexuality and to choose the way to do this, so as to have their sexual identity accepted first by themselves and then by others (Baiocco et al., 2020). Such agency refers to the acknowledgement and authenticity of their lesbian identities. All six participants acknowledged their non-heterosexual sexuality (lesbian identity) as evidenced by the quotations below:

*I am masculine and therefore see myself as a butch lesbian.* (Nosipho)

*I am sexually attracted to other women. I see myself as a guy. I always keep my hair short. As a result, I am often judged for being a girl who looks like a guy.* (Nandi)

*I am a Black, female, bisexual student. I have feelings for both males and females.* (Neli)

*I am a femme lesbian. I love to dress in a 'girly' manner and I am attracted to butch lesbians who have dreadlocks and wear baggy jeans.* (Noxolo)

*I do not like to be labelled as butch or femme, but I date other girls.* (Nompilo)

*I am a Black, female, butch. I have never dated men before.* (Nomsa)

One of the participants displayed a photo of herself and wrote a caption as shown below:



**Figure 61 “This picture shows that I am a butch lesbian.” – (Nosipho)**

The participants’ photographs depicted authenticity, pride and casting off any theoretical shame about who they are and whom they love. This was evident when one of the participants displayed the following photo:





**Figure 62 “This picture shows that I love my girlfriend.” - Nompilo**

Those participants who chose to be openly identified as lesbians, showed a sense of agency as well as resistance when they renamed and re-identified themselves. hooks (2000) suggests that one uses this position as a way to challenge the dominant narrative and actively build a counternarrative. She challenges people on the margins to use this social position and vantage point as ‘a site of resistance’, to honour the position of marginality and hold onto it, navigating from the centre to the margins and back again.

Some participants used subtler, less assertive strategies by keeping their sexuality hidden from their families, communities and their lecturers. Sometimes moving from their rural home and staying in a township college’s residential environment was part of such a non-assertive strategy. This was evident when Neli said:

*I have more freedom at this college to pursue my sexuality than in my rural home.*

Others decided to stay silent to avoid hostility and discrimination. For example, Nandi said:

*Coming out will cause me rejection. I will just have to stay in the closet, especially in my Black community.*

To prove that they are ‘free agents’, participants had to face the consequences of these choices, which often included being verbally, sexually and physically abused. They enjoyed their sexual rights and freedoms, while enduring discrimination and rejection. They were able to define and control their own sexuality, even if it meant that they had to live double lives.

*It feels as if I live a double life because I date both males and females. I don't disclose that some of my girlfriends are my lovers. I prefer deceiving other students, lecturers, my family, and community members to think that I'm straight. (Neli)*

When navigating at the margins within educational institutions, it is clear that these Black lesbian students hold an unusual social location within the webs of power and prejudice as a result of the intricate, interlocking forms of discrimination they experience. Yet, they need to operate within heterosexist institutions. This necessity builds a natural duality of seeing and living both inside and outside these systems and institutions. According to hooks, “Black lesbian women on the margins of society must learn how to navigate these power structures to build meaningful and life sustaining relationships” (hooks, 2000, p.341).

## **9.6 Conclusion**

Most of the Black lesbian participants demonstrated a strong sense of resilience and resistance, which helped them navigate each of the different transitions successfully. Each participant recounted some positive experiences at the college, which served as protective factors. The participants presented themselves, in most cases, as bold individuals who were prepared to challenge inequality to advance an agenda for social justice. Regarding the intersection with heterosexism, all participants reported that being a Black lesbian woman made them vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination or prejudice, and it was clear that this resulted in negative experiences. Black lesbian women bear the brunt of discrimination against them among their families, communities, church and even on campus, based on their race or culture, sex/gender, and sexual orientation, which creates difficult, stressful, and painful experiences for them. Their courage in addressing discrimination to advance equality and social justice for themselves resulted in empowerment, which enabled them to stay resilient. In the next chapter, I discuss the final argument based on my key findings, as well as the limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

## CHAPTER 10: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 10.1 Introduction

*We brought the needle to sew the torn social fabric,  
not the knife to cut it. (Bantu proverb)*

This proverb speaks of traditionally-accepted forms of repairing harm between victims and offenders in traditional peace-making circles. These traditional circles create obligations for those responsible for having caused harm to make things right so as to be integrated back into the community.

This chapter synthesises the findings of this study, highlights its contributions to the literature as well as its limitations, and makes recommendations for practice and for further research.

The study investigated the primary research question:

*What are Black lesbian students' experiences of participation and success at one TVET college?*

To engage with this research question, two sub-questions were used:

*What factors facilitate or impede the full and equal participation and success of Black lesbian students at a TVET college?* and

*How do Black lesbian students navigate the contextual dynamics that influence their participation and success at a TVET college?*

The study was located within the feminist paradigm, whose objectives include both the construction of new knowledge and finding ways of bringing about meaningful and positive social change (hooks, 2000). The theoretical framework centred on de-colonial feminism and Black feminist theoretical frameworks in the interpretation of sexuality and gender.

Decolonial feminism challenges coloniality, modernity and patriarchy of Western, gendered systems (Lugones, 2010; Oyèwùmí, 2002). This approach initiates an epistemic break from

Eurocentric knowledge which was exported from Europe through colonization and led to the rewriting, exclusion, and domination of indigenous ways of knowing (Oyèwùmí, 2002; Lugones, 2010). Gender theorists propose a ‘de-colonial turn’ as a solution through delinking from Western knowledge, and relinking with indigenous ways of knowing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007), arguing that Eurocentric ways of knowing are no longer able – or, perhaps, have never been able – to solve the problems they have created (Mignolo, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2002).

According to Lugones (2010) and Oyèwùmí (2002), the universalised ontology of modernity organises the world into homogenous, separable categories, arranged through hierarchical dichotomies that have erased indigenous women from aspects of control over their gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity. Decolonial feminism aims at creating a plurality of knowledge, whereby all cultures are regarded as being equal and as such, all people have the right to be authentic, and individuals will differ, but everyone is considered equal. The theory challenges male or masculine Western epistemologies that have come to dominate African culture and the ways of life, thereby encouraging heterosexism and silencing the voices of indigenous women to become agents in the production of knowledge from the perspective of the gendered colonial difference. Some gender researchers have also reported that post school tertiary educational institutions are actively reproducing normative gender binaries that had been established during colonialism and apartheid. These hegemonic, gendered social structures privilege heterosexuality and lead to homophobic bullying in some of these educational institutions (Breshears & Beer, 2016; Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, & Mogotsi, 2017).

Decolonial theory and decolonial feminisms (Lugones, Oyèwùmí, & Intersectionality) encourage indigenous women to confront and disrupt normative gender binaries that are often oppressive, contributing to social change. I sought to encourage the participants to identify and reflect on their experiences of heterosexism by engaging them in critical dialogue so as to identify opportunities, tools and strategies for social change. Exploring the experiences of Black lesbian students through these theoretical lenses enabled me to understand knowledge as situated and embedded within a social, cultural, historical and political time and place that reflects contextual features and lived experiences.

In this study, a visual narrative inquiry methodology was used to investigate the ways that heterosexism continues to shape the social and academic experiences of LGBTQ+ students at higher education institutions in South Africa. The study gathered in-depth insights and information from the perspectives of six Black lesbian students at a TVET college.

## **10.2 Synthesis of findings**

The study found that the Black lesbian participants experienced heterosexism at the TVET college, as well as in their homes and communities and in public places. The findings revealed that the impact of exclusion and discrimination resulted in a range of psychosocial issues, which led to academic failure and dropout, as well as attempts at self-harm, in some cases. The participants identified key barriers that impeded their participation in and success at the selected TVET college. They also identified strategies they have employed that have enabled their learning, as well as tools that could be used at the college level to enable their learning.

### **10.2.1 Intersectionality in participants' experiences**

The intersection of race, class, religion, geographical area and sexuality was evident in the narratives of these Black lesbian students. They experienced heterosexism at home, in church and their communities, and at college. This took the form of being marginalized and ostracised, on the one hand, or being targeted with verbal or physical abuse on the basis of their sexual orientation. All the participants came from low socio-economic backgrounds and had experienced poverty, often living with single parents or unemployed parents. They also experienced heterosexism in relation to their homes' geographical location, where townships and rural areas comprised mostly poor, extremely traditional, patriarchal families that rejected different forms of sexuality. Traditional gender and sexuality norms were expressed by Black students at the TVET colleges as well.

### **10.2.2 Barriers to learning**

**Social barriers.** Participants experienced a range of social barriers to learning as a result of their sexual identity and orientation, such as being bullied, teased, rejected and discriminated against. Many had been exposed to verbal and physical abuse; some had experienced rape. At times they were ignored or excluded by other students and staff. Being criticised, mocked, and 'hated' by their peers led to many of these lesbian students developing low self-esteem,

experiencing severe stress, depression and a sense of alienation. These negative experiences also led to many finding it difficult to attend classes or study groups, and this had a negative impact on some students' academic performance. These experiences were reflected against the lack of support from these students' families and Christian communities, which also contributed to barriers to learning.

**Lack of inclusivity of the curriculum as a barrier.** The current curriculum was also seen as rigid as it did not include social justice subjects or courses addressing discrimination against minority groups, gender issues or heterosexism. Research has found that addressing such issues through the curriculum could help to foster inclusive attitudes among all students, regardless of the subject they chose to study (Ngidi & Dlamini, 2017).

**Environmental barriers.** The findings also revealed that environmental barriers were experienced by some of these Black lesbian students. Some students felt that they should be allowed to use the male toilets because some of them identify as masculine. On the other hand, they felt that such behaviour could expose them to further discrimination as they would not be accepted and would be at risk of being targeted for assault and rape.

**Economic barriers.** Economic barriers to access to the institution and to learning included difficulty affording accommodation, food and other fees, as they came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, with many having unemployed parents. Their situation was worsened if they had a child to care for or had to support their extended family with their NSFAS allowance.

### **10.2.3 Enablers to learning**

Enablers to learning at the college included individual strategies (using their own agency) as well as strategies that the college could initiate. This included stronger support from lecturers to contribute to lesbian students' participation in class and their academic success. Finding ways to become more socially active and meeting other lesbians who were open about their sexual identities was also another enabler to learning, as it provided these students with a sense of belonging. For many, experiencing acceptance of their sexual orientation within an LGBTQ+ community also enabled them to accept their sexual orientation as part of their identity, while they had often not experienced acceptance by their families, communities,

churches and fellow-students. They formed study groups to help each other, which had a positive impact on their academic achievement. Personal qualities and attitudes, such as self-acceptance and being autonomous, also enabled these students' success and participation. Financial enablers to be able to attend a college and study were present in the form of the NSFAS grant, which covered their study costs and also enabled them to provide support to their families.

### **10.3 Contribution of the study**

Results from this investigation can help to identify possible methods for reducing heterosexism, and its destructive effects, in education. To date, there has been little research conducted on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education (Reygan & Lynette, 2014). Some studies have reported on the intersections of different aspects of the identities of young lesbians, especially at South African universities (see Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Although gender has received some attention in terms of policy and research in higher education, it is rarely intersected with other structures of discrimination, especially in TVET colleges. This study thus contributes to the body of research on the intersectionality of class, race, culture, sex, gender and location, especially in the TVET college context.

This study also contributes to the current discourse on the transformation and decolonisation of tertiary spaces by focusing on the subjective experiences of Black lesbian students at a TVET college. Supportive school environments have been the focus of some research in South Africa (Breshears & Beer, 2016). While it is clear that the campus environment plays a significant role in how LGBTQ+ students experience college, little has been established empirically about the experience of this population at historically Black institutions (Msibi, 2012).

### **10.4 Limitations of the study**

Although this study makes a significant contribution to the literature addressing heterosexism in tertiary education colleges, there are some limitations to the study. Prior to this study, I became acquainted with two of the participants, who were in my NCV class who had identified themselves as lesbians. As their class lecturer, I daily observed the prejudice these lesbian students experienced in the college environment. Also, I saw how heterosexism affected their educational trajectories. I then approached them and told them about my study, and they

indicated that were excited to join it. They then led me to other lesbians around the college until my sample snowballed. Because sexuality is a sensitive subject to discuss, it is important to recognise that the pre-established relationships among the participants and the researcher may have affected the participants' level of comfort to discuss lesbian identities, which could have influenced the findings. As I was their lecturer and as I am a Christian, heterosexual woman, they may not have felt that they could disclose some information to me that could have benefited the study, or they may have felt pressure to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, out of concern that I would give them lower marks or talk badly about them to other lecturers. These power issues were addressed at the beginning of the data collection stage, where I assured them that I would maintain confidentiality, which I did throughout the study.

As the sample size was small (six Black lesbian students), the findings cannot be generalised to encompass the social and academic experiences of all South African Black lesbian students at TVET colleges. The study was limited to Black African lesbian students at an urban TVET college, although some of the students came from rural areas. This may narrow the transferability of the study to urban settings. The Covid-19 pandemic forced TVET colleges to utilise remote and staggered learning and teaching. Data was gathered late during the staggered learning under strict Covid rules. Some participants were not comfortable speaking with their masks on and their responses were sometimes not audible, which may have impacted the quality of the results.

## **10.5 Recommendations**

### **10.5.1 Recommendations for programme interventions at the level of government**

The current interventions by government to support marginalised students focus on financial aid provided to students in the form of bursaries and health support through mobile clinics. However, stronger interventions are needed to support marginalised minority groups, such as Black lesbian students, to ensure that they are offered an equitable opportunity to pursue tertiary education.

According to Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez (2012), intervention strategies such as educational policies and programs and a supportive environment improve the social climate for LGBTQ+ students at secondary schools and universities.



This study found that Black lesbian students were subjected to ostracism and targeted for verbal and physical abuse on the basis of sexual orientation in the college environment, resulting in negative social and psychological consequences that, in turn, affected their participation and success in education. The negative impact of the discrimination they experience on their performance further jeopardizes their chances to improve their lives and by finding meaningful employment, thus breaking the cycle of poverty.

To enable students to achieve their full success and participation, safe educational, environmental and social spaces must be created at the TVET colleges, within their families and the larger communities to enable these students to freely express their authentic social identities.

It is recommended that government integrate intentional and consistent interventions into higher education spaces to support the psychological, emotional and social well-being of LGBTQ+ students, such as the Black African lesbian students in this study. Two specific types of interventions were identified by the participants in this study that could be used for creating supportive, healing spaces. These methods are indigenous and decolonial in nature.

### **Circles of Support**

Circles of Support are designed to support a transition from corporal punishment to the restoration of offenders to communities by combining education, support, and accountability, for both offenders and members of the community-at-large through interdialogue. In this approach, crime is viewed as a consequence of community disorder and family instability (Wilson & Prinz, 2002). The literature suggests that Circles of Support, through intergroup dialogue courses, have been found to significantly improve awareness of social inequality, and relationship-building towards social action (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Intergroup dialogue is a face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action (Zúñiga, 2003, p.9). During intergroup dialogues, students engage in open and constructive dialogue, learn more about themselves and others, and explore issues concerning intergroup relations, conflict, and social justice. This approach could be instituted to support Black lesbian students in using their agency to resist heterosexism or shift heterosexist views in those who hold them.

## **Restorative justice**

Restorative justice is a theory of equality that emphasises repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behaviour. It is best accomplished through inclusive and cooperative processes (Van Ness, 2005).

In this study, some community-based solutions for addressing heterosexism were identified by the students. In one case, Nosipho (Participant 1) had experienced an ancestral calling as a child and had become a qualified sangoma (umkhulu), who specialised in umndawe (healing with water). She was assaulted by one of her aunts, who would not accept her lesbian sexual orientation. A peace-making family meeting was conducted between her, as the victim, and her aunt, as the offender. During the peace-making family circle meeting, her aunt apologised and slaughtered a white chicken to appease the spirits for assaulting her niece, since Nosipho believed that it was her ancestral spirit (umkhulu), who choose a wife for her.

When Neli was raped, the offender was made to pay a goat at a community circle sentencing traditional court, which was attended by families of the offender and the victim, neighbours and traditional leaders. These incidents were conducted to facilitate healing for the victims by making the offender acknowledge their crime and make some form of restitution.

These two incidents provide examples of an indigenous form of traditional restorative justice through circle sentencing, which is sometimes referred to as a ‘peace-making circle’. These traditional circles create obligations for those responsible for having caused harm to make things right. They are a traditionally accepted form of repairing harm. Other forms of restorative justice should be explored as strategies for addressing discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals to promote acceptance of Black lesbians in the broader society, as well as among students on campus.

Personally, I aim to act upon this recommendation as a TVET lecturer by initiating a restorative justice workshop, together with the student support officer, for Black African lesbian students, the relevant communities and family members. The workshop will adopt circle sentencing, where restitution will take place where the offender first admits to the wrongs caused and then ‘pays’ for the harm caused towards the victim through financial payments, return or replacement of property, performing direct services for the victim, or in any way the parties agree to (Umbreit, 2001). Currently, there are 15 individuals who have expressed interest in

participating in this workshop. The workshop will be designed in alignment with the philosophy of indigenous processes described by Van Ness (2005), where justice seeks to repair the torn community fabric following a crime. The guest presenters for the workshop will include lawyers, traditional leaders, correctional service officers or practitioners who are experts on legal matters, gender activists, religious leaders, student support officers and councillors. As this approach is one that is widely accepted in Black African cultures, and especially those living in rural areas, but not one that is known or accepted by other race groups, it remains to be seen how cross-racial misdemeanours would be handled.

### **10.5.2 Recommendations for programme interventions at the college level**

At present, there are hardly any Black lesbian student-focused interventions to challenge heterosexism at TVET colleges. To address this, I make the following recommendations:

#### **TVET college institutional policies (Code of Conduct)**

Given the inconsistency of legal protection for LGBTQ+ students, it is important for TVET colleges to include sexual orientation and gender identity institutional policy in their codes of conduct, regardless of its inclusion in governmental policies. Also, instituting antidiscrimination and anti-bullying policies can be useful. Perpetrators should be held accountable through imposing appropriate consequences. Colleges should develop clear and inclusive policies for the admission of, and support for, lesbian students.

#### **LGBTQ+ coordinators and counsellors at TVET colleges**

TVETs must have funded LGBTQ+ coordinators to lead programmes addressing stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals on campuses of the college, making it easier for LGBTQ+ students to identify supportive school staff. College counsellors should be appointed to focus on working with LGBTQ+ students and their families to be more inclusive and affirmative. LGBTQ+ students may have few people to whom they feel they can disclose relationship violence or sexual assault. For that reason, they may turn to a trusted staff or faculty member on campus for help.

#### **TVET college institutional activities and services**

The college should offer information on LGBTQ+ issues in orientations for new faculty and staff and discuss the best approaches for creating conducive environments to support the

success of LGBTQ+ students. Colleges should allow LGBTQ+ students to self-identify on surveys and forms so that they can be offered support.

### **Toilets**

New college buildings should always include 3-5 individual toilets (like those provided for handicapped individuals or for families) to provide an alternative for individuals who feel uncomfortable entering the main toilet blocks for any reason.

### **Curriculum**

The TVET curriculum should address issues around LGBTQ+ equality seriously, as they currently remain invisible in the curriculum. A curriculum on social justice can be introduced. Lecturers could incorporate positive representations of LGBTQ+ students and topics into their teaching to ensure that LGBTQ+ students feel represented in the classroom. Colleges could introduce Intergroup dialogue courses, which aim at engaging students from two different social identities with a history of conflict. Furthermore, colleges may consider using restorative practices that focus on building good relationships amongst homosexual and heterosexual students. Using diverse assessment methods can also be useful.

#### **10.5.3 Recommendations for further research**

The study's limitations point to the need for future research in this area. There is a need for further research on heterosexism in TVET colleges as most studies have targeted universities (see Francis & Msibi, 2011). Currently, there is a dearth of educational research about how lecturers understand and address heterosexism in TVETS. Future research should target college lecturers to assess their views on the possibility of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students' issues and discrimination in the curriculum and a teaching intervention strategy. There is also limited research available on how heterosexism may contribute to absenteeism, poor academic performance and dropout among LGBTQ+ students in TVET colleges. It could strengthen the contribution of this study to conduct a follow-up study to explore if and how the Black lesbian student who participated in this study benefitted from participation in this study over time.

To promote dialogical space, further studies could focus on perceptions and attitudes of homosexual students towards heterosexuals. The discrimination experienced by Black lesbian students in TVET colleges contradicts the national policies on inclusive education, which seek

to promote social justice, equity and inclusivity for all students in Higher Education in South Africa. While the Department of Education (2002) has ensured that sexuality is a critical part of educational development, there is a need to evaluate how sexuality is taught at the various levels of education. There is a need for the Department of Education to make specific reference to homosexuality as a key area for debate, knowledge and information (Bhana, 2012). Secondary research should establish what the different curricula prescribe at this stage.

Research is also needed to understand the challenges facing LGBTQ+ lecturers, administrators and campus managers, and the possible role they could play in actively challenging heterosexism at college without necessarily disclosing their sexual orientation. Further research is also needed to explore ways in which parents of LGBTQ+ students and community members can be supportive in challenging heterosexism and accepting children or community members who have different sexual orientations. It will be equally important to assess the role of the churches and religious leaders, their prejudices and behaviours towards LGBTQ+ members in their communities.

## **10.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has synthesised the findings of this study, discussed its contributions to the literature and its limitations, and made recommendations for interventions at the national level, and the level of the TVET college, as well as making recommendations for further research.

The study highlighted that heterosexism was a problem for Black lesbian students in PSET colleges that needed to be addressed effectively so that these students could experience safe learning environments. Poverty is an ever-present challenge for large sections of South Africa's population, access to quality education is thus imperative to enable individuals to challenge this reality. This goal must, at all times, include Black lesbian women and all other minority, marginalised, or disadvantaged groups, and discrimination must be fought on all fronts. Black lesbians are still not accepted by the heterosexual majority, be it within their families, their communities or in tertiary education institutions. This highlights the need for safe spaces for Black lesbian women, where their voices can be heard and they can experience the freedom to discuss issues of discrimination as a means of achieving social justice. Finally, it is crucial to delink from ways of knowing and being that derive from colonial and Eurocentric constructions of identity and modernity, including the myths and misconceptions about homosexuality. While the public sector, including higher education institutions, has an important role to play

towards achieving these goals, families, churches and communities will also have to come to the fore to support positive change.

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## **APPENDICES**

<b>Appendix One:</b>	<b>Semi -Structured Interview Schedule</b>
<b>Appendix Two:</b>	<b>Reflective Journal</b>
<b>Appendix Three:</b>	<b>Pre-Workshop Letter to Participants</b>
<b>Appendix Four:</b>	<b>Focus Group Discussion Schedule</b>
<b>Appendix Five:</b>	<b>Informed Consent to participate in research</b>
<b>Appendix Six:</b>	<b>Gatekeeper Permission</b>
<b>Appendix Seven:</b>	<b>UKZN Ethical Clearance Certificate</b>
<b>Appendix Eight:</b>	<b>DHET Permission Letter</b>
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<b>Appendix Ten:</b>	<b>Second Editor's Letter</b>
<b>Appendix Eleven:</b>	<b>Turnitin Certificate</b>

## Appendix One: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

### Biographical Information

1. Can you tell me about yourself?

<b>Name:</b>	
<b>Age</b>	

<b>Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation</b>	(Please indicate how you identify in terms of your sexual orientation)
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<b>Ethnicity &amp; Language</b>	
<b>Other Languages</b>	

<b>Race</b> (Tick one) (Please note that while we acknowledge that South Africa has officially moved beyond race classification, this still provides analytical insights in a historical context.)	<b>African</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>Other</b>

<b>Religion</b>	
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<b>Department/Campus:</b>	
<b>Qualification registered for</b>	
<b>Highest Qualification Achieved</b>	

<b>Residential or Non-residential student</b>	
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### Family Background

2. Can you tell me about yourself and your family?

(Probes: Parents, siblings, socioeconomic status, parents employment status, level of education of parents and siblings, religious/cultural background)

### **Disclosing One's Homosexuality**

*Disclosing one's sexual orientation and admitting one's homosexuality to oneself is referred to as 'outness', while disclosing this to one's family and others is referred to as 'coming out'. (Nascimento & Scorsolini-Comin, 2018)*

### **3. Tell me about your experience of outness and coming out.**

#### **Probes**

1. How did you come out? (Describe when you acknowledged your homosexuality to yourself, as well as when and how you disclosed your homosexuality to your family and others.)
2. What factors influence when you come out to others or not?
3. What is your extent of being out (not out at all, only to close friends, only to family, very out)
4. Is your family accepting of your homosexuality and are they supportive of you from your family in terms of your sexual orientation?

### **Career Choice and Access**

### **4. Tell me about your decision to go to college and your experience of gaining access to this college**

#### **Probes**

1. What informed your decision to go to college? (Motivation, preparation for post-school education, support, access to information).
2. What influenced your decision to study at this college? (How did you choose this college? Was this your 1<sup>st</sup> choice?)
3. Was the qualification you are registered for your 1st choice of study? If not, what was your first choice of study and why did you change?
4. How did you get into this college? (Probe participants' experiences of gaining access?)
5. Did you experience challenges in gaining access to this college? Explain. Did any of the challenges you experienced relate to your sexual orientation?

### **On Campus Social Experiences**

### **5. Outness also refers to one's visible comfort with one's identification. How would you describe your level of 'outness' on campus? What does being "out" on campus mean to you?**

6. How many LGBT people do you know on campus, and how many are out? Why do you think they choose to be out or not out?
7. Do feel respected as a LGBT student on campus? Explain
8. Do you know of any staff or administrators on campus who are? If so, are you out to them? Are they a source of support and/or guidance?

9. What specific factors or characteristics of your college affect how out you are on campus? Describe any on-campus factors that support you in being out. Describe any on-campus factors that prevent you from being more out.
10. How would you describe the institutional climate at this college and the overall attitude toward LGBT students? What have been your experiences on campus that lead you to feeling this way about the climate on your college campus? Have you heard of other LGBT students experiencing the college climate in the ways you describe?
11. Has your sexual orientation influenced your social relations with students at your college (in residence as well as in your classes)? Describe in what ways it has influenced the nature of your relationships with students.
12. Has it influenced your relationships with staff? Describe in what ways it has influenced the nature of your relationships with staff.
13. Are students and staff supportive of LGBT students and in what ways are they supportive?
14. How would you describe the climate in residence and your experiences of living on campus (for residential students)?
15. Describe your experiences of being a non-residential student.
16. Describe your experiences of participate in on campus non-academic activities?
17. Are you connected to the local LGBT community? (in this TVET College and at your place of residence)? How has been a part of a local LGBT community affirmed your identification as a lesbian? Describe your experiences of being part of such a community.

## **Educational Experiences**

**18. What does it mean to you to be a lesbian student at this college? How would you describe your educational experiences in this college?**

### **Probes**

1. Have you achieved success in your subjects? If, yes what are the reasons for your success?
2. Have you experienced any barriers to learning in any of your subjects? Do any barriers you experience relate to your sexual orientation? Explain. If yes, what barriers have you experienced?
3. How have you dealt with these barriers to learning you experienced?
4. Have you received the necessary academic support from lecturers? If yes, what forms of support have you received?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your lecturers? Do you feel comfortable to seek their assistance and support when you experience barriers to learning? Explain
6. Is there academic support available to students who experience barriers to learning? (Probe: Does the college have any programs to support students who experience barriers to learning.



7. Is there academic support available to students who experience barriers to learning because of their sexual orientation?
8. Have you received academic support in the college to address the barriers you have experienced? (Explain. Was it effective? Explain)
9. What are ways in which you think LGBT students who experience barriers to learning should be supported in the college?

## **Experiences of Violence**

**19. Have you experienced any incidents of discrimination, harassment or violence on the college campus? Please describe these experiences of harassment, discrimination and violence you experienced on your college campus.**

### **Probes**

1. Describe the form of harassment, discrimination or violence that you experienced. Who was the perpetrator? What were the circumstances surrounding this harassment or discrimination? Where did this happen? At the time, did anyone challenge the harassment, discrimination, violence?
2. Did you formally or informally report the incident to anyone? If so, to whom and what was the outcome of reporting the incident? (What was the person's reaction and response when you reported the incident? Were they effective in helping you to deal with the situation and were you satisfied with the outcome?)
3. Do you know anyone else who has suffered from such acts? Can you share your knowledge of their experiences?
4. Do you think it was your sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that caused these acts? Why do you think this?
5. What were the consequences of these acts for you as well as for your family and friends. In what ways were you affected by these incidents and are you still affected?
6. How have you dealt with these experiences of harassment, discrimination and violence?
7. Is there an institutional policy aimed at preventing and addressing any form of violence on the college campus? How effective do you think this policy is?

## **Appendix Two: Reflective Journal**

### **Guidelines for reflective Journal completion.**

Thank you for agreeing to keep a reflective Journal.

This two-week reflective Journal is specifically interested in your day-to-day social and educational experiences of your sexuality, race, gender, and class. Please try to fill in the reflective Journal every evening, by looking back over the day and thinking of times, places or events where you became aware of your sexuality, race, gender and class in either a positive or a negative way. This may have arisen through comments said to you by your lecturers or peers, something you hear or see, a look from someone, your reaction to a news story, a song or an image.

In completing your reflective Journal, please try to include the following:

- the date
- what happened to make you aware of your sexuality, race, gender and class?
- where you were?
- who else was involved?
- how did it make you feel?
- how did it make you feel about where you were?
- did you mention this to anyone else, who, how did they react?

If there are any other experiences that you would like to write about, but that didn't happen within the two weeks, please add these, following the outline above.

Please don't worry about grammar, spelling or handwriting.

You and your reflective Journal entries will remain anonymous

Thank you for your participation.

Please return this to me in the envelope provided.

## **Appendix Three: Pre-workshop letter to participants**

**To:** Photo Voice Workshop Participant

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in this Photo Voice workshop next week: Monday to Friday. The venue for this workshop will be Jabulani's Shisanyama at the city centre. The workshop will start at 09h00 and end at 13h00. You must be present for all the days of the workshop. I will be the facilitator for this workshop. You may use your mother language Zulu to narrate your story during the workshop and I will translate in English. I will provide transport, meat, beverages, and snack. You can also bring photos from the past that you might have in an album at home that we can scan and use. I will only use your photos and your story for research purposes with pseudonyms during an oral story circle.

You will need to bring:

- photographs of yourself or any images that you feel will illustrate your story.
- your smart phone (if you have one)
- a positive attitude and enthusiasm!

I know that you will be talking about private parts of your life and I will ensure that you are respected and supported throughout the workshop. All participants will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Looking forward to meeting and working with all of you.

Sanele Siwela (researcher)

### **Questions during photo voice workshop**

Can you please share with us photos from your album that represent for you:

- A sense of belonging as a Lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A sense of not belonging as a Lesbian student at the TVET college
- A sense of achievement and success as a black lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A sense of failure and difficulty as a black lesbian student at the TVET college.
- A symbol of your identity as a black lesbian student at the TVET college.
- Any other pictures that you want to include that represent you as a black lesbian student at the TVET college
- Emblem of TVET college institutional access.

## **Appendix Four: Focus Group Discussion Schedule**

Use the following questions as a guide:

- When did you first realise that you are lesbian?
  - To whom did you confided in and what were their reaction?
  - State both positive and negative experiences of coming out
  - What things make you aware of your sexuality?
  - What are your experiences of being Lesbian?
  - And what effect do these have on you?
1. They will share and discuss their findings.
  2. Participants will identify common themes emerging from each finding.
  3. Participants with similar themes will then team up and develop a story that will represent perspectives of the multiple participants.

## **Appendix Five: Informed consent to participate in research**

My name is Sanele Siwela, Doctoral student (Social Justice Education) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). My research thesis is A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institution in the Province of KwaZulu Natal. This proposed study focuses on how the various social identities of black lesbian students intersect to influence their post-school education and training experiences. I am interested in the factors that influence their participation and success in post-school education and training and how they negotiate these factors.

The study might contribute in addressing barriers that these students encounter and thereby meet their learning needs. I intend to develop guidelines that may support these students to be accommodated in teaching and learning. It is hoped that this may help them improve academic performance. It is also envisaged that an environment conducive to enabling the students will help in boosting their morale and thus promote their wellbeing.

As a participant of this study, you will be asked to share your experiences as a black lesbian student at a TVET College. There are no right or wrong answers, and anything you say—whether it is good or bad will help me understand my research topic better. I will ask you questions and write down what you say. I will also tape record the interviews only if you agree. The interview will take between 45 minutes to one hour. I am hoping that you will be part of this research project. Photo voice and solicited diaries will be used as part of data collection methods. They will also take between 45 minutes to one hour.

Your participation in this research is confidential and voluntary. You can also stop at any time.

For more information you can contact me, the student, Sanele Siwela on 079 432 7503 and [siwelasanele@gmail.com](mailto:siwelasanele@gmail.com). My supervisor:

Dr Saajdhya Sader on 0332606148

Please note:

- You do not have to take part in this research if you do not want to.
- You can stop at any time and leave the interview if you want to.
- Your real name will not be written down in the research report or made public.
- We will not share any of your personal information with anyone else.
- You will not be paid for participating in this research.

Please sign the declaration below if you wish to participate in this study.

**Declaration**

I ..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I agree to take part in this research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the research project at any time, should I so desire.

I am willing to have my interview session recorded using the following:

	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		
Photographic equipment		
Video equipment		
Reflective Journal		

Signature: ..... Date .....

## Appendix Six: Gatekeeper permission

February 2020

To the Principal

uMgungundlovu Technical Vocational Education and Training College

Dear Madam (Principal)

### **REQUEST FOR GATEKEEPER PERMISSION TO CONDUCT MY PHD STUDY AMONGST BLACK FEMALE LESBIAN STUDENTS AT UMGUNGUNDLOVU TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGE**

I am a Doctoral student (No 211555989) at the School of Education (social Justice) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg who has applied for ethical clearance for a PHD study entitled: A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institution in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Please note that the study will not require participants to reveal their names or the name of the College. This is to protect them from any harm or harassment

#### **Purpose of Study**

- To investigate the post-school education and training experiences of black female lesbian students in a TVET College.
- To investigate the intersection of black lesbian students' social identities and how this influences their participation and success in post-school education and training

The study might contribute in addressing barriers that these students encounter and thereby meet their learning needs. I intend to develop guidelines that may support these students to be accommodated in teaching and learning. It is hoped that this may help them improve academic performance. It is also envisaged that an environment conducive to enabling the students will help in boosting their morale and thus promote their wellbeing.

For more information and any questions regarding this study, you can contact my lecturers:

Dr Saajidha Sader on 0332606148 or

Thank you for your assistance.

Mrs S Siwela (079 4327 503) (Lecturer at Plessislaer campus)

## Appendix Seven: UZKN Ethical Clearance Certificate



30 October 2020

Mrs Sanele Siwela (211555989)  
School Of Education  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Mrs Siwela,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00001503/2020

Project title: A Feminist Analysis of Black Female Lesbian Students Academic and Social Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institution in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa  
Degree: PhD

### Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 16 September 2020 to our letter of 19 August 2020 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid for one year until 30 October 2021

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000  
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587  
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS



## Appendix Eight: DHET Permission Letter



**higher education  
& training**  
Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



12 October 2020

Dear Mrs S Siwela

**RE: REQUEST FOR USING COLLEGE AS SITE OF RESEARCH**

Your communication dated 22 September 2020 refers:

Umgungundlovu TVET College has no objection to you using our campuses as sites of research for research study titled "A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institution in the Province of KwaZulu Natal" through the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Education.

However, the following conditions for external research apply:

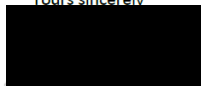
The college will have the right to approve content with regard to research instruments and research analysis.

- The relevant documents must be forwarded to the Rector and approval of usage will be given by the Rector in writing
- The name of the college or any of its sites cannot be used in any documents.
- The name/s of staff employed by the college cannot be used.
- The use of any findings that reflect negatively on the College, its partners or any related body must be approved in writing by the Rector.

Please note that failure to comply with all of the above conditions will result in the necessary legal action being taken against you. Due to Covid 19 all interviews are to be conducted via zoom.

Your cooperation in this regard will be highly appreciated

Yours sincerely



College Principal

I have read the contents of this letter and I accept the conditions

Sanele Siwela

FULL NAMES

SIGNATURE

30 November 2020

DATE

**Central office** • 44 Burger street, Private Bag X9060, Pietermaritzburg 3200 • **Tel:** 033 3412100 • **Fax:** 0333459827  
**Campuses** • **Edendale** - Garden street, Edendale • **Midlands** - Cnr Pine street and Mayors Walk, Pietermaritzburg  
• Msunduzi - 114 Pietermaritz Street, Pietermaritzburg • **Northdale** - Cnr Balhambra and Newholmes Way, Northdale  
• Plessislaer - FJ Sithole Road, Imbali

## Appendix Nine: First editor's letter

Barbara Wood  
Tel: +27 44 873 5145  
cell: 082 9022 571  
E-mail: woodlandsmedia@gmail.com  
8 Suikerbossie Street  
Bergsig  
George 6529  
South Africa

To whom it may concern

### Editing Certificate

I, Barbara Wood, hereby confirm that I am a registered professional researcher and editor and have edited the following academic document, excluding references and Appendices:

**A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social  
Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training  
Institution in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa**

by

**Sanele Siwela**

211555989

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of  
**Doctor of Philosophy (Social Justice Education)**  
in the school of Education, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
Pietermaritzburg Campus, South Africa.

Supervisor: Dr Saajdha Sader

March 2023

Signed:

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the editor.

## Appendix Ten: Second editor's letter

### **CERTIFICATE OF PROFESSIONAL EDITING**

I, Barbara L. Louton, declare that I am a professional editor with a Bachelor of Arts in Professional Writing and seventeen years of experience as an editor, researcher and writer.

I declare that I was contracted by Sanele Siwela (Student number: 211555989), a doctoral candidate under the supervision of Dr Saajidha Sader in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, to complete a professional edit of her thesis:

"A Feminist Analysis of Black Lesbian Students' Academic and Social Experiences at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institution in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa".

I declare that I have completed a two-phase professional edit of the document. The first phase addressed issues with the logic, structure, language and formatting of the thesis. Changes were tracked and comments were left with recommendations for the client to address. After the client responded to the first edit, the revised version of the dissertation was proofread to address final technical issues.

**Disclaimer:**

Responsibility for the originality and accuracy of the material presented in the edited document lies with the client. I have not verified the originality or accuracy of statements, quotations or citations and references presented in the dissertation. Where I have detected inaccuracies I have rectified them or reported them to the client. In addition, the client was free to make further changes to the edited material after the edit was complete.

I can be contacted at:

Cell: 073 766 1139

Email: bellway@gmail.com

Barbara L Louton

Name

Signed

8 July 2023

Date

## Appendix Eleven: Turnitin Certificate

7/10/23, 3:20 AM
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### Turnitin Originality Report

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ID: 3126745189  
Word Count: 61774  
Submitted: 1

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Sanele Siwela

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[Kubheka, Zamaquni Fortunate. "Implementation of health management systems in Department of Health primary health care facilities in uMkhathakude District, KwaZulu-Natal." 2022](#)

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[Nzurnalo, Lindani Goodman. "Transformational leadership as a tool to effectively implement the legislation governing disability in the workplace: the case of eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality." 2019](#)

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