



**ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONGST LEARNERS FACING HOMOPHOBIA IN
A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN PINETOWN DISTRICT**

By

XOLANI HOPEWELL METHULA

(219019542)

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Supervisor:

Dr. V. Jairam

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SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

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

Supervisor: Dr. V. Jairam

Signed: _____

PERSONAL DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

Homophobia remains a serious issue that adversely affects Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) learners both emotionally and psychologically in South African schools. This study explores the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia.

The research was conducted in a public, multiracial, secondary school in the Pinetown district of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. Guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed in the 1980s, the study aims to address three key research questions: What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? Why do they cope in the way that they do? Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insight into learners' experiences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit four participants, and data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings. Furthermore, SCT informed the analysis and was used to interpret the findings using visual data analysis and thematic analysis.

The study reveals that learners who experience homophobia tend to have high levels of anxiety and depression that negatively affect their academic performance, social interactions, and self-esteem. Learners adopt various coping mechanisms; some seek peer support and advocacy, while others resort to avoidance strategies due to fear of discrimination. The study concludes that secondary school learners facing homophobia are negatively impacted by a lack of inclusive education policies, limited teacher involvement in addressing the issue, and a hostile school culture. These findings emphasise the need for a comprehensive school-wide approach incorporating inclusive education policies, teacher training, and support systems for learners to create a safe and affirming school environment.

List of keywords: Homophobia, anxiety, depression, secondary school learners, LGBTQIA+ learners, learner's experiences.

DEDICATION

God is our refuge and strength, a present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1, NIV).

I dedicate this study to God, the Lord of the universe, who blessed and supported me throughout the completion of this work. God's grace has been my strength in every struggle and time of weakness.

May this study be a step in the right direction in addressing the goal of ensuring that schools are safer environments for every LGBTQIA+ learner, where all learners are valued, protected, and accepted.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, and Asexual
SCT	Social Cognitive Theory
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UK	United Kingdom
MST	Minority Stress Theory
US	United States of America
TMSC	Transactional Model of Stress and Coping
DBE	Department of Basic Education

DISCLAIMER

Content Warning:

This study contains potentially distressing or triggering content and illustrations that may be considered sensitive by some readers. Individuals who may be affected by such material are advised to exercise discretion when engaging with this research. If discomfort or distress is experienced, readers are encouraged to seek support from relevant resources or professionals.

CHAPTER ONE

STUDY INTRODUCTION

“Mama bye, see you in heaven. Love you.” He went on to say: “I want to kill myself because of bullying I get from my teacher...” (De Barros, 2023, n.p.).

1.1 Introduction

The excerpt above is taken from a newspaper article published in 2023. It discusses the tragic case of Sibusiso Mbatha, a 12-year-old learner from Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, who took his own life after being bullied at school due to his sexual orientation. According to a report by De Barros (2023), Mbatha, a Grade 6 learner at Khehlekele Primary School, was told by a teacher to leave his ‘gay side’ at home. After he revealed that he was gay, the teacher instructed him to stop being gay at school. Mbatha was quoted saying he had previously experienced homophobic bullying at school before this incident.

The repeated occurrence of such incidents ultimately prompted Sibusiso Mbatha to write a letter to his mother, as referenced above, before he tragically took his own life in his family home. This event has garnered significant attention and concern. A study conducted by Nappa et al. (2018) focuses on teachers’ reactions to homophobic bullying incidents. It reveals that such occurrences highlight the pervasive nature of homophobia in many South African schools. This issue is particularly concerning when teachers themselves contribute to homophobic behaviour. The tragedy of Sibusiso Mbatha should not be viewed in isolation; it demands immediate attention and action. It highlights the severe effects of homophobic bullying on young learners, which can result in significant mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression and, in extreme cases, lead to suicide (Gillians & Cooper, 2022; Li et al., 2023; Gennosa, 2024; Lépine et al., 2025).

This scenario is particularly relevant to this study, which aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia. The study reinforces well-documented statistics regarding the negative impact of homophobic bullying on learners and also examines the coping strategies and support networks available to them. It aims to present findings that support the growing argument for effective intervention measures against such tragedies (Amadori et al., 2023; Shai & Abu-Raiya, 2025). The case of Sibusiso Mbatha powerfully illustrates the consequences that arise when homophobia goes unchallenged in educational

institutions. This makes the study relevant and necessary, as it seeks to address a significant crisis facing South African schools today.

The case of Sibusiso Mbatha highlights the troubling culture that persists in South African learning institutions. This incident is not isolated; similar cases have been frequently reported, revealing a pattern of aggressive behaviour, abuse, and discrimination. Jiang et al. (2023) share similar concerns as Li et al. (2023), noting that such environments can cause vulnerable learners to suffer from anxiety and depression and, in extreme cases, may even result in suicide.

“The Legal Resources Centre (LRC) is saddened by the recent deaths of three learners from around the country, all of whom were allegedly bullied because of their sexuality”
(Deenik, 2022, n.p.).

According to Deenik (2022), an alarming number of learners committed suicide in 2022 after experiencing homophobic bullying. Deenik’s article (2022) revealed that Lukhanyo Jongqo (14) from Kubusie Combined School in Stutterheim, Eastern Cape, and Tiro Moalusi (15) from PJ Simelane Secondary School in Soweto, Gauteng, both took their own lives due to bullying from their teachers. Additionally, another learner, Mpho Falithenjwa (14), from Orange Farm, Johannesburg, also committed suicide as a result of discrimination and bullying concerning his sexuality (Deenik, 2022). A study by Sadowski (2020) argues that any safety measures currently in place in schools are insufficient and calls for improved support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) learners, emphasising that such tragic losses reflect a grim reality. Bullying due to homosexuality is a pressing issue in schools and other learning institutions throughout the country, and this has led to the untimely death of several learners (Sadowski, 2020).

The cases mentioned above align with the purpose of this study, which aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia. A study by Gillians and Cooper (2022) emphasises the need to keep school children safe and alive by adopting effective strategies to stop bullying and prevent suicide. The tragic consequences illustrate the devastation that homophobic bullying wreaks on the lives of victims. Many experience overwhelming feelings of helplessness and anxiety, leaving some to believe that suicide is the only way to escape the relentless attacks from bullies’ assaults (Gillians & Cooper, 2022). This study aimed to identify the factors that can lead to severe deterioration in mental health,

particularly to predisposing factors such as homophobia in a school environment, which can cause anxiety and depression among learners.

Understanding these cases highlights the secondary effects of homophobic bullying. The situation is not simply about an individual suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; it points to a broader structural problem that reflects and amplifies existing structural prejudices and failures (Meyer, 2003; Burtenshaw, 2023; Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024). A study by Fraser (2022) focuses on encouraging victims of bullying to heal. The findings indicate that the ongoing occurrence of these incidents shows that current efforts to prevent discrimination and uphold the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) learners are insufficient. More action is needed to provide a culturally safe learning environment for all.

Homophobic bullying is rampant, and its effect on learners' mental health is significant, highlighting the urgent need to conduct this research. In their study on the persistence of policies of protection for LGBTQ+ learners, Roberts and Marx (2018) assert that learners in the LGBTQ+ community remain vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence at school despite existing policies and legal measures designed to safeguard all learners. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct a study that addresses these challenges. Such research can provide empirical evidence on the psychological impact of homophobia, which will help inform the development of more effective protections and interventions within the educational system (Mayo, 2022; Shai & Abu-Raiya, 2025).

The findings of this research highlight concern related to policy analysis and the need to thoroughly interrogate the gap between policy and practice. Although the South African Constitution (Act 109 of 1996) recognises the rights to dignity, equality, and freedom from discrimination, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners reveal an uncomfortable reality (Sloth-Nielsen, 2020). Further research is essential to understand how these learners deal with bullying related to their sexual orientation, the support they receive, if any, and what additional measures can be taken to protect their psychological wellbeing (Roberts & Marx, 2018; Mtuse, 2021; Fraser, 2022; Pereira et al., 2024).

The tragic deaths of learners Sibusiso Mbatha, Lukhanyo Jongo, Tiro Moalusi, and Mpho Falithenjwa highlight the severe toll that homophobic bullying takes on learners in South African schools. These incidents are not random acts of violence; they reflect a broader issue of racism and prejudice that impacts the learners' wellbeing (Jiang, 2023). This study on

anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown district is both relevant and necessary. The study's purpose was to address a global issue that remains a pressing concern for many learners in South Africa. The study underscores the urgent need for the effective development of better policies and interventions, as well as proper support for learners, to ensure that schools are safe and protective environments for all learners.

This chapter outlines the study's background, the rationale for the research, and the research problem statement. It also presents the research objectives, research questions, and the study's significance. Additionally, it provides an overview of the study's structure and definitions of key terms.

1.2 Background of Study

A study's 'background' section refers to the section at the beginning of a study that explores the research topic and includes authors' reviews of the relevant areas (Hancock, 2017). The psychological issues faced by learners, particularly those who experience homophobia, such as anxiety and depression, have raised significant concerns in schools across the world (Francis & Msibi, 2011). A study by Müller (2021) revealed that learning disabilities, especially anxiety and depression, are core psychological disorders that harm learners' wellbeing, academic achievement, and quality of life.

Zhang et al. (2020) define anxiety as a state involving feelings of worry, nervousness, and fear that might be mild or severe and can be continuous. Gao et al. (2020) note that depression is characterised by low mood, anhedonia, and tiredness. External pressures, such as discrimination and bullying – particularly from those with homophobic attitudes – can exacerbate these conditions (Osborn, 2020). Mao et al. (2019) highlight that homophobia in schools often manifests through verbal assaults, exclusion, or even physical aggression toward other learners. This behaviour allows homophobic learners to induce stress and complicate the emotional lives of their targeted peers.

The study by Zhang et al. (2020) examines the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms among high school students in Shandong province during the COVID-19 epidemic. The researchers emphasise the importance of focusing on secondary school learners, as adolescence is a particularly sensitive period in a person's life. In their study on stress, depression, and anxiety in female adolescents at higher senior secondary school level, Devi et al. (2023) explain that secondary school learners are aged between thirteen and eighteen years old, a crucial period for developing identity, relationships, and the future plans. Gebremariam et al. (2023)

indicate that during this time of life, homophobia can interfere with developmental processes with psychological implications. The Pinetown district has been purposefully selected for this study as it is home to a multicultural community comprising individuals with diverse perceptions of homosexuality. This community provides an excellent opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of homophobia on the mental health of homosexuals.

The terminology used in this study, such as anxiety, depression, school learners, homophobia, secondary school, and Pinetown district, is essential for defining the research's focus. Anxiety and depression are identified as the key psychological factors being examined, as illustrated by the psychological effects under examination. Additionally, in this study, the terms 'school learners' and 'secondary school' are clearly defined to specify that the study concentrates solely on secondary school learners within the school environment where these psychological challenges arise.

Furthermore, prejudice towards homosexuals is presented as the main source of stress that is related to the psychological issues under consideration in this study. Last but not least, the geographical study area is selected as the Pinetown district which aims to give a localised perspective of the problem in the South African context. The main idea of this research is to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia in the selected school, specifically the Pinetown district. This aims to develop effective intervention strategies that may help in the reduction of these psychological issues and lead to the promotion of a supportive learning environment.

The issue of homophobic bullying remains a pressing concern in schools worldwide, including in South Africa (Wilks et al., 2022). According to a 2023 report by the Gay and Lesbian Network of South Africa, 56% of LGBTQIA+ learners have been bullied because of their sexual orientation (Maluleka & Godsell, 2023). This situation is particularly troubling given that South Africa has legal provisions that condemn discrimination based on sexual orientation. The country's constitution is recognised as one of the most progressive in the world, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) is also regarded globally as highly advanced (Kok, 2008). However, there is a notable gap between the written legislation and its actual implementation within the education system (Mason & Minerva, 2022; Marchi et al., 2023).

Msibi's (2012) research into the experiences of marginalised students in South African schools shows that they face high levels of discrimination, regardless of laws protecting the rights of gay communities. Msibi (2012) attributes these issues to either ineffective anti-bullying policies or a lack of compliance with these policies. This failure to enforce creates an environment where homophobic bullying can occur, resulting in severe psychological repercussions for the learners involved (Espelage et al., 2019; Pelay, 2022). Multiracial LGBTQIA+ learners in townships can be particularly vulnerable, as some evidence and studies highlight the impact of race, class, and sexuality on their experiences (Meyer, 2015; Green et al., 2022; Coda & Moser, 2023). These factors contribute to the prevalence of homophobic bullying, making it an important topic for study.

Alternatively, Albaladejo-Blázquez et al. (2019) claim that cisgender and heterosexual learners also experience consequences from homophobic bullying, which can negatively impact the psychological wellbeing of the LGBTQIA+ individuals, as supported in the literature. Meyer (2015) developed the Minority Stress Model, which helps explain the chronic stress experienced by the LGBTQIA+ community due to prejudice and oppression. Research by scholars such as Frost and Meyer (2023) demonstrated how this model elucidates the relationship between homophobic bullying and poor mental health among students, including issues such as anxiety and depression.

Mkhize and Bennett (2016) conducted a study on the experiences of homosexual victimisation among gay, lesbian, and bisexual male learners in South Africa. The researchers found that these learners have a high tendency to develop psychological issues. In their research into bullying among learners in KwaZulu-Natal schools, they noted that these learners often succumb to pressure and seldom report incidences of bullying out of fear of further harassment (Mkhize & Bennett, 2016). In his study of the perceptions of homosexuals regarding the role played by the South African Police Service in crimes experienced by gay and lesbian individuals in Durban, Mkhize (2018) emphasises that when such issues persist, they can have devastating psychological effects. This often leads to heightened levels of anxiety and depression, as well as an increase in self-harm and suicide rates (Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024; Shai & Abu-Raiya, 2025).

The findings from the above studies align with the international research undertaken by Russell and Fish (2016). This research demonstrates that rates of long-term mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, are higher among LGBTQIA+ youth who have been bullied.

This emphasises the importance of identifying and preventing risks early on, as well as creating a supportive school environment for children who are at high risk of encountering these issues. The way learners respond to these challenges largely depends on the coping strategies and support systems available, particularly in relation to LGBTQIA+ learners (Bruce & Horsley, 2018). McConnell et al. (2016) found that young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ can better manage the stress associated with bullying when they have supportive networks, such as LGBTQIA+ groups and caring family members. However, the authors noted that the availability and effectiveness of these support systems can be inconsistent, especially in South Africa.

In the Pinetown district, significant numbers of LGBTQIA+ learners have no access to formal support mechanisms within their schools (Mbatha, 2022). A study by Bhana (2014) indicates that learners currently depend solely on friends as their support network. While small support networks of this nature can be helpful, they do not always adequately address the psychological trauma resulting from bullying (Idsoe et al., 2021). Additionally, there is a shortage of culturally competent professionals equipped to address the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ learners. Consequently, many learners have nowhere to turn when in need of assistance dealing with such experiences (Montes, 2022).

The lack of support for LGBTQIA+ learners is significant, as illustrated by a bullying case reported by The Daily Maverick (2023) involving a learner in KwaZulu-Natal. This learner, who identified as gay, received threats of ‘corrective rape’. Despite numerous complaints submitted to the school, no action was taken to address the situation, which caused severe psychological distress for the learner. This case highlights the necessity for well-regulated and comprehensive anti-bullying policies and measures, as well as adequate support systems for learners (Amadori et al., 2023).

In their study, which focused on victims of bullying and the reporting of harassment and stalking to the police, Taylor-Dunn et al. (2021) emphasise South Africa’s strong legal standards, with particular reference to Section 9 of the Constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) proves that it is unlawful to discriminate against a person based on sexual orientation. This includes discrimination within the educational sphere (Williams, 2019). Unfortunately, little has been done to implement these provisions effectively. Taylor-Dunn et al. (2021) report that on April 27, 2013, the Protection from Harassment Act

71 of 2011 was approved, adding to the existing regulatory framework. This new Act offers protection orders to all victims of bullying.

Mkhize and Bennett (2016) indicate that currently, only a few schools in South Africa have anti-homophobic bullying policies in place. Research undertaken by the South African Human Rights Commission in 2022 revealed that most schools do not adequately protect LGBTQIA+ learners from bullying (Maluleka & Godsell, 2023). In many instances, these issues are not addressed publicly; instead, they are dismissed or even ridiculed, which encourages perpetrators to continue their harmful behaviour. This inaction is not only unjust in terms of the rights of LGBTQIA+ learners but also perpetuates ongoing discrimination and contributes to mental health difficulties (Wilks et al., 2022).

Wilks et al. (2022) contend that anti-bullying policies are seldom implemented in educational settings. This claim is supported by the findings of a study conducted by Rovira-Font and Vilanova-Soler, (2022), which highlighted the mental health challenges experienced by LGBTQIA+ learners as a result of homophobia. According to the 2022 South African National LGBTQIA+ Survey, 45% of the respondents reported feeling unsafe in educational facilities because of their sexual orientation, while 32% cited bullying as a reason for this. In South Africa, homophobic bullying affects over 3.2 million learners annually, and 160,000 high school learners skip class every day to avoid being bullied (Rovira-Font & Vilanova-Soler, 2022; McConnell & Birkett, 2021; Bacchini et al., 2021; Hurtado-Mellado et al., 2024). It is clear from this that schools need to take stronger action against homophobic bullying to ensure the safety and inclusion of every learner.

A study by Singh (2022) emphasises that homophobic violence remains a serious concern in South African schools, necessitating immediate attention. This concern is supported by McArthur (2015, p. 4) who reports incidents of homophobic violence in a Northern Cape school as follows:

“The extent of homophobia and homophobic violence in the school leaves many boys vulnerable. They feel alone and isolated, to the extent that they are frequently absent from school. When asked about their experiences of homophobia violence, I could hear anger as well as a deep sense of sadness.”

McArthur (2015) notes that a sudden sense of disillusionment and discontent is linked to the operations of an oppressive environment in schools, where violence is cultivated. Given the

above statistics, it is evident that there is an urgent need for timely and effective measures to address the situation of homophobic victims in schools.

Jagessar's (2015, p. 76) research into the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a residence of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) illustrates that homophobic bullying is not confined to secondary schools. University students also face this issue. In the study, one participant reported being harassed by some heterosexual boys on the residence's morning bus, as noted below:

“I didn’t have anywhere else to sit and one was sitting there but then ... these boys, they are heterosexual, they came into the bus and they started calling me names and harassing me in front of everyone. They said that they sit there and I must move but I didn’t want to because I also pay for the residences so they got angry and they started calling me names ‘isitabane’ and telling me that I want to be a man and that I got no dick so, I mustn’t try to be a man and they just carried on.”

Although research on homophobic bullying and its impact on mental health has begun, there is still much work that needs to be done, particularly in South Africa (Moyano & del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020). A significant research gap exists regarding the diverse experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners, especially in specific areas of concern, such as the Pinetown district. Ioverno and Russell (2021) argue that national survey results often oversimplify the experiences of learners and fail to reflect their realities in specific socio-economic and cultural conditions. Further, additional research is needed to understand the interplay of multiple identities and how this affects experiences of homophobic bullying (Mittleman, 2023; Gebremariam et al., 2023). For instance, how do race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners in South Africa? Understanding these various intersections is essential for devising effective strategies that cater to the needs of diverse learners.

The research conducted by Mkhize et al. (2024) on the prevalence and factors associated with depression and anxiety among young school-going adolescents in the Western Cape Province of South Africa highlights a significant gap in the literature: there is a lack of studies assessing the effectiveness of current support structures and programs implemented in schools. Elipe et al. (2018), in their exploration of the experiences of learners encountering homophobic bullying and cyberbullying, argue that while some earlier studies have examined coping strategies of LGBTQIA+ learners, more research is needed to identify practices that would be

effective in South African schools. This is crucial given the unique socio-cultural contexts of the country.

Mkhize et al. (2024) note that while homophobic bullying and its impact on the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners has been extensively studied, the most frequent psychological effects, including anxiety and depression, have not. A study conducted by Chukwuere (2018) on the psychosocial management of adolescent learners' depression in the Amuwo Odifin district underscores a lack of research, particularly in South African society. Currently, there is a scarcity of studies that focus on the experiences of learners, especially those from areas like the Pinetown district. Furthermore, there are few studies that address the complexities of identity and how they influence learned experiences. This study aims to fill that gap.

1.3 Rationale for the Study

Mariani et al. (2019) define the rationale of a study as a section where the researcher provides detailed reasons for conducting the research. The motivation can stem from personal, professional, or contextual dimensions (Cresswell et al., 2020; Locher et al., 2021). For this study on anxiety and depression amongst learners experiencing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district, the motivation is based on personal experiences, as well as professional and contextual imperatives that emphasise the importance of the psychological health of learners in this area. I provide a detailed account of this motivation in the following sub-sections.

1.3.1 Personal Dimension

The researcher chose this research topic out of a genuine passion and personal interest. During researcher's experience in high school, the researcher witnessed the discrimination and marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ learners. It saddened the researcher to see many learners being rude to each other, despite being at school to learn. This was particularly evident in the use of derogatory terms and phrases, such as the frequent use of the word "stabane" or "ngqingili", local slang for 'gay' men (Msibi, 2012). This harmful practice negatively impacted the victims, instilling extreme fear and leading to social exclusion.

On a more personal note, the researcher had a friend who openly and courageously lived as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. He experienced constant harassment and rejection, which caused him to develop anxiety and depression. The absence of effective and sufficient support left him with

no alternative but to withdraw from school, and the immense psychological suffering he endured ultimately led him to attempt to take his own life. His experience impacted me deeply and sparked my desire to conduct this research.

This motivation drives the researcher to learn about as well as advocate issues affecting members of the LGBTQIA+ community, mental health, and the systemic injustices prevailing in society. Through this study, the researcher committed to improving inclusivity and extending acceptance for underserved populations in the school setting. The researcher believe that education and awareness can help ensure that every learner is protected, respected, and able to realise his or her potential without worrying about his or her sexual orientation. The researcher's main goal is thus to contribute to research and initiatives that foster acceptance so that no one has to endure the hardships my friend faced in high school.

1.3.2 Professional Dimension

This study is also motivated by researcher's professional background as a qualified young educator. In 2022, the researcher completed a three-month teaching practice at a school in the Pinetown district, where the researcher gained insight into the factors that cause learners to develop anxiety and depression. The experience was informative and enabled researcher to witness the day-to-day challenges faced by learners, many of whom are victims of homophobic bullying. Such circumstances lead to severe psychological impacts, including anxiety and depression, which compromise learners' performance and psychological wellbeing.

As an educator, the researcher strongly believe that it is essential to help all learners achieve their academic potential, regardless of their sexual orientation. Therefore, it is crucial to unpack and understand the psychological concerns faced by these individuals in order to implement appropriate measures to ensure that all learners feel welcomed and valued in educational institutions.

1.3.3 Contextual Dimension

This study is also influenced by both local and international contextual factors. While the research by Kweyama et al. (2024) focuses on safety and security issues in public secondary schools in South Africa, it also offers a broader view of the various challenges relating to safety in educational environments. The study identifies several obstacles, including violence, bullying, and poor infrastructure, which compromise the wellbeing of learners and staff (McQuillan & Mayo, 2024). Additionally, research by Glazzard (2024) on homophobic,

biphobia, and transphobic bullying in schools highlights that although Kweyama et al. (2024) offers an overview of safety concerns in secondary schools, it lacks specifics on the psychological impact of these challenges, particularly on gay and lesbian learners who experience homophobia in schools.

In light of this, there is a significant gap regarding the psychological impact of homophobia. Apart from physical safety risks, homophobia can contribute to anxiety and depression, which often go unnoticed in discussions around general safety in South African secondary schools (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Fliegelman, 2023; Glazzard, 2024). The current study aims to address this gap, with a specific focus on the psychological effects of homophobia on learners in a secondary school in the Pinetown district. By analysing the presence of homophobia in these learners' lives and the strategies they employ to cope with it, this research offers valuable insights that can inform attempts to promote the psychological wellbeing of learners who experience homophobia.

Moreover, this research is inspired by Lehtonen's (2021) study titled 'Heteronormative Violence in Schools', which focuses on homophobia or transphobia in relation to the trans and non-heterosexual youths of Finland. Lehtonen's study presents extensive research on how heteronormativity serves as the norm for heterosexuality in educational institutions and how this creates an environment that discriminates against and neglects non-heterosexual and transgender youth (Ventriglio et al., 2021). A key concern raised in the study is the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia violence in learning institutions that adversely impact the health of learners (Okanlawon, 2021). In their study titled "The impact of personal values, gender stereotypes, and school climate on homophobic bullying", Bacchini et al. (2021) assert that Lehtonen's work is especially noteworthy as it goes beyond examining acts of violence; it also explores the systems and beliefs that perpetuate violence in schools. Therefore, the insights obtained from her research are extremely useful for conducting comparative studies of similar structures in different socio-cultural settings.

Lehtonen's (2021) study provides important information about the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth in Finland. In contrast, this study conducted in the Pinetown district addresses a research gap. While Finland is part of the Western world and generally maintains a liberal stance on LGBTQIA+ rights, the cultural and religious context in South Africa is significantly different, and open hostility is often displayed toward sexual minorities (Elife et al., 2018; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Elife et al., 2022). The experiences of learners in a multiracial secondary

school in the Pinetown district indicate that homophobia is influenced by race, culture, and socio-economic factors, which are not thoroughly addressed in Lehtonen's study. Therefore, this research contributes to the global literature on homophobia in schools, specifically examining how these factors impact the mental wellbeing of marginalised learners in South African schools.

1.4 Research Problem Statement

A study by Terrell (2022) on writing a dissertation proposal views the problem statement as a brief yet comprehensive description of the research issue to be solved. It should put the issue into perspective, having regard to the current knowledge support (Terrell, 2022). Williams and Reid (2023) indicate that it should specify the exact question that your research will endeavour to address.

In their paper examining the prevalence of mental health problems in sub-Saharan adolescents, Jörns-Presentati et al. (2021) emphasise that mental health disorders are on the rise globally, with anxiety and depression claiming the lives of countless adolescents worldwide. Research conducted internationally has revealed that LGBTQIA+ learners are more vulnerable to mental health problems, specifically stress, anxiety, and depression, in comparison to heterosexual youths (Śniadach et al., 2021).

Likewise, Hossain et al. (2022) note that substantial effort has been made to study the effect of homophobia on the psychological wellness of homosexual learners in Western countries. An example of this is Cruz's (2015) study, which was conducted in the United States and Europe. It undertakes a systematic review of studies measuring the impact of educational programs against homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia in secondary schools in North America. A study by Cruz (2015) found that in Western Europe and Australia, homophobic bullying resulted in increased anxiety and depression among young people in the LGBTQIA+ population, which had persistent psychological effects, including realised suicidal ideation. However, in their study on the predictors of school mental health providers' competency in working with LGBTQ youth, Smith-Millman et al. (2022) contend that the findings have contributed to the development of effective anti-bullying policies, procedures, and other mental health promotion strategies aimed at improving the school environment and fostering acceptance of all learners.

Brown and Buthelezi (2020) suggest that the situation in South Africa is not vastly different, although the country's socio-political landscape complicates matters. Their research examining

school-based support team responses to sexual diversity and homophobic bullying in a South African school reveals that, despite having one of the most globally progressive constitutions in terms of LGBTQIA+ rights, social acceptance of these rights remains inadequately addressed. Moreover, a study conducted in various areas of South Africa indicates that homophobia is a significant issue in schools, where LGBTQIA+ learners suffer from verbal harassment, social rejection, and physical attacks (Nichols & Brown, 2021). Brown and Buthelezi (2020) note that these challenges contribute to the worsening mental wellness of learners, with research showing increased rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm among them. While the studies reviewed provide a broad understanding of the issue, national studies tend to offer a general perspective, to the exclusion of regional insights. This is particularly true of the Pinetown district, where issues of race, class, and sexuality further complicate the situation.

The literature in this regard notes the prevalence of homophobia in schools but fails to provide adequate detail on its mental health implications. In their cross-sectional study titled *“You’re so gay! Do different forms of bullying matter for adolescent males?”* Swearer et al. (2021) observe that many studies conducted locally tend to generalise the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners without considering how homophobia manifests differently across various school environments and among different groups of learners. Reygan (2019) acknowledges this information gap in their research on sexual and gender diversity in schools, emphasising that there is a lack of qualitative studies focusing on the experiences of sexuality and gender-diverse learners. The absence of data also encompasses how individuals manage homophobic experiences in a school setting and address mental health issues that may develop as a result.

Ideally, comprehensive qualitative research on anxiety and depression among LGBTQIA+ learners should be thorough and context-sensitive, taking into account various regions and cultures (Thompson, 2019). This research should not only assess the levels of mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, among these learners but also investigate the impact of homophobia on their lives. It should explore the types of homophobic experiences they face, how these experiences contribute to changes in their mental health status, including anxiety and depression, and how they cope with homophobia, as well as the reasons behind their coping mechanisms. Research by Francis (2017) on homophobia and sexuality diversity in South African schools further highlighted that this type of research can inform the development and implementation of culturally appropriate interventions. These interventions would aim to

promote the wellbeing of learners, ensuring that no learner is excluded from reaching their full potential.

There is still a long way to go before meaningful progress is achieved for LGBTQIA+ learners in South Africa, particularly in smaller metropolitan areas such as the Pinetown district. The literature review presented in this study highlights existing gaps in understanding the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ learners in various regions. As a result, these learners, who are exposed to the negative impacts of homophobia on their mental health, are often unable to access policies and interventions that address their needs (Francis & Reygan, 2016).

Francis (2021) examines the intersections of race, same-sex sexuality, and education in South Africa. The author argues that research has overlooked the unique challenges faced by queer learners, particularly those in township schools. Specifically, researchers have failed to recognise that the difficulties encountered by these learners are distinct and warrant attention, particularly as mental health challenges among queer individuals continue to worsen over time.

To address these gaps, this study provided a thorough analysis of the anxiety and depression experienced by LGBTQIA+ learners who face homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district. In contrast to earlier research, this study aimed to qualitatively understand the experiences of anxiety and depression common among such learners in a selected secondary school. It focused on how these learners cope and explore the reasons motivating their choice of coping strategies. This approach encompasses the main question that the study seeks to address.

1.5 Research Objectives

The objectives of the study serve as specific aims that the study seeks to achieve (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cresswell et al., 2020). Bryman (2016) emphasises that they are essential to clarifying the direction that the overall research will follow as well as directing data gathering and analysis to ensure that the research remains aligned with its overall objectives. The objectives of this study are:

- To explore anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district.
- To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia.
- To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.

1.6 Research Questions

Research questions are specific questions that need to be answered based on the study's objectives (Cresswell et al., 2020). They are formulated to guide the research process and help determine the approach and methodology to be followed (Bryman, 2016). The research questions for this study are:

- What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- Why do they cope in the way that they do?

1.7 The Alignment of Study Objectives and Research Questions

In this study, the above objectives were developed to explore the psychological impact of homophobia on LGBTQIA+ learners, identify the strategies learners employ to cope with homophobia, and establish why learners use those strategies. The research questions provide a framework for the study, ensuring a consistent approach from the beginning of the research through to its conclusion. This study aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the mental health issues affecting LGBTQIA+ learners.

The research questions must be closely aligned with the study's objectives to ensure a focused, methodical process (Cresswell et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, the first objective is "To explore anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown district." This objective is addressed by the research question, "What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?" This question examines the experiences of learners, which helps frame the effects of homophobia on their mental health.

The second measurable and specific objective is "To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia." The research question that relates to this objective is "How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing Homophobia?" This question is important for understanding the coping strategies used by learners. Gaining this understanding is crucial for developing effective interventions that can help alleviate learners' stress. This enabled this study to go beyond merely identifying the problem; it also explored possible solutions, enhancing the practical value of the research.

The third objective, "To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do," aligns with the research question: "Why do they cope in the way that they do?" This question is crucial for

assessing the factors that shape the coping strategies of the learners, taking into account cultural influences, social support, and personal coping styles. By examining these reasons, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges related to homophobia and to explore implications that may help guide policy development and practice in an educational context.

1.8 Significance of Study

This section outlines the relevance, purpose, and value or significance of the study relative to previous knowledge, a gap, or applicability (Mertens, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It explains the importance of conducting the study and the expected outcomes (Cresswell et al., 2020).

In their research, Russell and Fish (2020) reveal that adolescent anxiety and depression are on the rise. The existing literature indicates that LGBTIQIA+ youth are at higher risk of developing these mental health issues due to experiences of homophobia and discrimination. In their research forming part of a 2020 Global Survey, Russell and Fish (2020) note that the rates of mental health challenges affecting LGBTQIA+ youth were nearly triple those of non-LGBTQIA+ youth. Anxiety and depression are some of the most prevalent conditions (Russell & Fish, 2020).

Müller (2021) emphasises that during adolescence, children spend most of their time in secondary schools. The effects of homophobic bullying and exclusion can have severe psychological consequences, leading to prolonged suffering (Calvo et al., 2021). This paper, which focused on learner anxiety and depression, highlighted the difficulties faced by LGBTQIA+ learners, particularly in settings where local cultural beliefs exacerbate their difficulties.

As mentioned, the need for this study arises from a lack of research on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ young learners in areas such as the Pinetown district and other regions in South Africa, largely due to cultural, racial, and socio-demographic factors. While there has been an increase in research into the effects of homophobia on mental health worldwide, most studies focused on Western populations (Msibi, 2012; Mertens, 2020; Brown & Renshaw, 2020). Consequently, there is a pressing need for cross-cultural research. Scholars such as Smith (2014) and Msibi (2012) argue that the cultural and religious foundation of homophobia in South African society amplifies the psychological impacts of bullying. This research addressed this gap by examining how homophobic and heteronormative sentiments within the Pinetown

district affect learners' anxiety and depression. Additionally, the study proposed recommendations that are contextualised both within the South African setting and in an international context.

This research addresses an important gap by questioning and expanding upon current dominant theories that inadequately capture the interplay of race, culture, and sexuality in relation to mental wellbeing. For example, while the Minority Stress Theory Meyer (2003) explains how societal stigma level contributes to mental health disparities among sexual minorities, it may not fully apply to the South African context, where prejudice and discrimination intersect in various ways. By integrating this theory with Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises communalism and the interconnectedness of individuals, research can enhance our understanding of the effects of homophobia on mental health in the non-Western world (Russell & Fish, 2020). This approach not only contributes to the development of this theory but also provides insights into addressing the mental health needs of marginalised LGBTQIA+ learners in diverse cultural settings (Müller, 2021).

In their research, Francis and Msibi (2011) suggest that the findings on the effects of homophobia on learners are expected to offer noteworthy insights into school policies, mental health approaches, and other educational initiatives. This study highlighted how homophobia impacts learners, which could inform the development of programmes designed to mitigate the negative effects felt on their psychological wellbeing. For instance, schools could promote anti-bullying campaigns that are sensitive to and inclusive of students' sexual orientations or form support groups for LGBTQIA+ students to share ideas (Msibi, 2012). Furthermore, the data from this study aided mental health professionals in developing strategies that are sensitive to the cultural and economic realities of LGBTQIA+ youth living in the Pinetown district.

This is supported by Gueldner et al. (2020), who emphasise that the primary benefactors of such research would be educators, policymakers, mental health practitioners, and the learners themselves. The findings of this study could help educators and policymakers create better learning environments for homosexual students, combat homophobia in schools, and promote the holistic psychological wellbeing of learners. Müller's study (2021), which focuses on understanding the challenges of LGBTQIA+ youth in South African schools, highlights that the insights gained from exploring the experiences of homophobic learners are valuable to mental health professionals. These perspectives enhance understanding of the issues faced by LGBTQIA+ youth and the kinds of support that may be beneficial. For the learners, this study

has the potential to improve their school experience and wellbeing by promoting the institutional reforms necessary to safeguard the learners' psychological health in the face of homophobia.

1.9 Overview of the Study Structure

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define the overview of the thesis structure as a section of the study that summarises the research layout, giving brief descriptions of each chapter or section to help readers easily understand the organisation of the thesis. The overview of this study is as follows:

1.9.1 Chapter One

In this chapter, the researcher provide an overview of the study, including its background, rationale, and research problem statement. The researcher also outline the research objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study. Additionally, I provide a structure for the study and define key terms.

1.9.2 Chapter Two

In this chapter, the researcher review the existing literature that provides the context and scope for this study. This review utilises recent, peer-reviewed national and international literature relevant to anxiety and depression amongst learners experiencing homophobia in secondary schools within the Pinetown district.

1.9.3 Chapter Three

In this chapter, the researcher discuss the theoretical perspective of the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) proposed by Albert Bandura in the 1980s. This theory offers insight into how learners' psychological reactions to homophobia are influenced by the observations of others, their perceived self-efficacy, and the impact of their behaviour on the school environment (and vice versa).

1.9.4 Chapter Four

This chapter outlines the research approach and design used in this study. The researcher discussed the research paradigm, target population, and the sampling method employed, along with the process for selecting participants. Additionally, this chapter details the data generation and analysis methods used in the study, as well as considerations of trustworthiness and ethical practices followed.

1.9.5 Chapter Five

In this chapter, the researcher present the findings, discussion, and conclusion of the study, which aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia in the selected school, specifically the Pinetown district.

1.9.6 Chapter Six

This final chapter of the study provides a concluding discussion of the findings and offers recommendations.

1.10 Definitions of Key Terms

In this section, the researcher defines key terms to establish a clear and consistent meaning throughout the thesis. This common understanding of specific terms is essential for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The key concepts for this thesis are outlined as follows:

1.10.1 Anxiety

According to Craske and Stein (2022), anxiety is a disorder characterised by excessive fear or worry that significantly impacts an individual's functioning. This disorder often coincides with other mental illnesses.

1.10.2 Depression

In their research, Cuijpers et al. (2021) define the term 'depression' as a mood disorder that persists for an extended period, characterised by symptoms such as sadness, inadequate interpersonal relationships or usually no relationships at all, lack of enthusiasm, and difficulty concentrating, all of which affect daily activities.

1.10.3 School Learners

Research conducted by Daniel (2022) defines 'school learners' as individuals who are enrolled in an educational institution and actively participate in the teaching and learning processes within a school.

1.10.4 Homophobia

A study by Brewster et al. (2022) focuses on understanding and addressing prejudice relating to sexual orientation and gender identity among learners in schools. Homophobia is an attitude

that manifests as prejudice, discrimination, or hatred toward individuals based on their real or perceived sexual orientation (Msibi, 2012; Brewster et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020).

1.10.5 Secondary School Learners

According to Wang et al. (2020), ‘secondary school’ learners are adolescents in the middle stage of their academic journey engaging in both curricular and co-curricular pursuits that significantly influence their future.

1.10.6 Pinetown District

The present study focuses on the Pinetown district. The above authors state that the ‘Pinetown District’ is an educational area located in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Various types of schools in this district have opportunities and face challenges in their curriculum delivery (Wang et al., 2020).

1.10.7 LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ refers to individuals having different sexual orientations or gender identities, such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, queer people, intersex individuals, and asexual individuals (McArthur, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2020; Mayeza, 2023). The ‘+’ symbol signifies the inclusion of additional identities that may not be explicitly represented in the first letters of the acronym (Mbatha, 2022).

1.10.8 Heterosexuality

Fassinger and Israel (2020) perceive heterosexuality as a sexual orientation characterised by attraction to individuals of the opposite sex in the context of romantic or sexual relationships. It is often recognised as the default sexual orientation in many societies (Fassinger & Israel, 2020).

1.10.9 Homophobic Bullying

This form of discrimination is manifested through expressions of prejudice, dislike, or humiliation of people based on their perceived sexual orientations or gender identities (McBride & Schubotz, 2020). Abuse can take many forms, including abuse such as, physical abuse, social abuse, cyber abuse, and verbal harassment (Msibi, 2012). According to Mbatha (2022), this form of bullying creates a hostile environment, resulting in severe psychological,

emotional, and academic ramifications for individuals belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.

1.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a background for the study, including the rationale for the research, and the research problem statement. It also outlined key aspects such as the research objectives and questions that investigate anxiety and depression amongst learners experiencing homophobia in a selected secondary school in the Pinetown district. Additionally, the significance of the study introduced the overall structure of the research and defined the key terms used. The next chapter reviews the existing local and international literature relevant to this study.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

It is like walking through school hallways with an invisible weight on your chest making it so hard for you to breathe. Every look feels like a judgment, and every murmur is a threat. It is a life being lived chronically where one is always waiting for the next insult, the next slur. It is tiring, and you can never be at your ease all the time. You just want to disappear. This is a harsh reality for many LGBTQIA+ learners in schools due to homophobic experiences. (Kosciw et al., 2020).

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the background of the study, provided a rationale for the research, and presented a statement of the research problem. It also addressed several key aspects, including research objectives and questions exploring anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a selected secondary school in the Pinetown district, as well as the significance of the study. Furthermore, the chapter introduced the study's structure and the definitions of the main concepts. This chapter reviews the current literature addressing the issues on both local and international levels.

As noted in Chapter One and highlighted by Kosciw et al. (2020), homophobia remains a significant challenge impacting the psychological wellbeing of many LGBTQIA+ learners. The following statement further emphasises this point:

Most of the LGBTQIA+ learners find themselves feeling lonely, ostracised, and in desperate search of assistance due to homophobic schools. These negative experiences cause learners overall increased anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, and some feel they are not heard by peers or educators within the school environment (Chan et al., 2022).

This comment highlights the emotional and psychological toll that homophobia in schools takes on LGBTQIA+ learners. Smith and Marksamer (2022) emphasise that these learners often experience feelings of isolation, misunderstanding, and desperation while navigating environments where homophobia is prevalent. They add that this can lead to escalating mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as learners struggle with both emotional distress and a perceived lack of support from peers and educators. De Jager and Moosa (2023) point out that their “*cries for help*” from these learners often go unheard, illustrating the failure of

schools to adequately address the needs of LGBTQIA+ learners. This leaves them vulnerable and without the necessary support structures. Despite some progress in societal attitudes, homophobia persists in schools, creating a toxic environment that threatens learners' mental health, academic success, and overall wellbeing (Kosciw et al., 2020; Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024).

In synthesising the literature review, the main themes discussed in this chapter have been linked to the three key research questions of this study. As highlighted in Chapter One, the main research questions for this study were presented as follows:

- What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- Why do they cope in the way that they do?

In light of this context, the existing literature discussed in this chapter focuses on the following aspects:

- What is homophobia and how has this concept evolved?
- The Nature of Homophobic Experiences in Schools.
- The Psychological Impacts of Homophobia: Anxiety and Depression.
- Coping Strategies Employed by Learners.
- The Role of Support Systems in Overcoming Psychological Distress.
- Gaps in the Literature and the Need for Localised Studies.

2.2 The Literature Review

The concept of 'literature review' can be defined in various ways. Çelik and Saydan (2024) describe it as searching and gathering information on a particular research area to establish issues that warrant discussion in the study. Husamah et al. (2023) emphasise that literature reviews are crucial in the research field. They assist the researcher to identify areas to avoid, areas needing development, and mistakes made during the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2.2.1 What is homophobia and how has this concept evolved?

In this section of the research study, the researcher define the term ‘homophobia’, which was initially discussed in Chapter One as part of the study’s background. Key terms such as anxiety, depression, school learners, secondary school, the Pinetown district, and homophobia have also been described earlier in this chapter. This section of the study focuses on homophobia related to the topic at hand. The main concept being examined is ‘homophobia’, which allowed for the identification of learners in a selected school who face discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Understanding this concept is crucial for analysing how these learner’s experiences contribute to anxiety and depression in a secondary school environment.

Sullivan (2020) notes that the term ‘homophobia’ was coined in the 1960s by psychologist George Weinberg. It describes the prejudice, aversion, or irrational discrimination against individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual (LGBTQIA+) (De Jager & Moosa, 2023). Initially, this term was used to define personal bias against homosexual people (Lyong, 2021; Pirlott & Cook, 2021). Over time, homophobia has evolved from being merely a phobic reaction into a widespread societal problem rooted in prejudice and officially sanctioned inequality experienced by gay individuals in various social institutions, such as schools (Rasmussen et al., 2019). Traditional concepts of homophobia tend to be characterised as a psychological problem for the individual. However, it is vital to also recognise it as a structural and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, it can significantly impact on the mental health status of marginalised learners (Bertolt, 2019).

Subsequently, empirical evidence has revealed the existence of several ways in which heterosexism manifests, including vocal insults, aggressive contact, threats or actual acts of physical aggression, as well as relational aggression in the form of social ostracism (Ventriglio et al., 2021; Pirlott & Cook, 2021). This issue may also be institutional; schools may have policies and procedures that are insufficient to protect queer learners from bullying and harassment (Bristow, 2024). Bristow (2024) expands that such experiences are usually a precursor to adverse mental health states including anxiety and depression among affected learners. In the South African cultural context, legal provisions recognise LGBTQIA+ rights; however, prejudice still affects individuals within this community, who are viewed as ‘cultural perversions’ (Regan, 2023). The concept of homophobia has

evolved from being an individual-based phobia to a social problem that severely impacts the lives of queer and marginalised individuals, particularly in school settings (Ventriglio et al., 2021; Lyonga, 2021; Bristow, 2024).

This study focuses on the concept of homophobia because the discrimination faced by learners can impair their psychological wellbeing (Msibi, 2012). In particular, homophobia contributes to increased levels of anxiety and depression amongst targeted learners, who often experience exclusion, bullying and emotional difficulties (Sullivan, 2020; Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024). The hostile school environment can hinder these learners' performance, potentially leading to a range of emotional and psychological problems (Ventriglio et al., 2021).

Among the related concepts in this study, 'homophobia' is the most relevant for analysing learners' experiences in a specific school. It emphasises social norms and cultures that contribute to the rejection of non-heterosexual identities and how this relates to bullying, exclusion, and discriminative culture (Lyong, 2021). This study highlights the call for the safety and protection of all learners from negative impacts on mental health at school. It is essential to explore homophobia within this research area to understand the causes of anxiety and depression in learners who experience it. Additionally, this research aimed to identify ways to prevent such discrimination and foster a supportive school climate. Homophobia has transformed from describing psychological fear of prejudice and discrimination against homosexual individuals to an umbrella term that encompasses the 'systematic and cultural oppression of queer individuals (Sullivan, 2020). In this study, homophobia refers to a key concept that helps explain mental health risks faced by learners in secondary schools in the Pinetown district. Given the significant role that homophobia plays in contributing to anxiety and depression, this study sought to advance research and knowledge toward creating effective, protective environments for learners. Therefore, focusing on 'homophobia' as a central phenomenon is crucial to achieving the goals of this study.

2.2.2 The Nature of Homophobic Experiences in Schools

According to Stewart et al. (2022), homophobic bullying in schools manifests in various forms, including verbal, physical, and even cyberbullying. Research by Mitchel et al. (2023) highlights how the visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals and relationships in healthcare settings correlates with targeted bullying behaviours toward LGBTQIA+

learners, making the school environment unsafe for learners. In the South African context, homophobia within schools also arises from cultural and religious practices that condemn same-sex preferences (Swearer et al., 2021).

Research by Orue and Calvete (2018) explores homophobic bullying in schools, focusing on the role of homophobic attitudes and experiences of aggression. Their findings illustrate how homophobic attitudes are deeply rooted in the school environment and are often supported by both teachers and learners. This creates a culture of harassment of LGBTQIA+ learners, which results in high levels of emotional distress, including anxiety and depression (Thompson, 2019).

Over the years, numerous incidents of homophobia in South African learning institutions have been reported, highlighting the severity of the issue. In a study conducted by Nkosi and Zulu (2022) which examined the impact of homophobic bullying on academic performance in Johannesburg secondary schools, it was confirmed that in 2022, a group of LGBTQIA+ learners faced harassment by peers and even senior teachers. Several of the learners dropped out of school due to the emotional trauma they experienced. Nkosi and Zulu (2022) highlighted a specific case from Cape Town in 2023 involving a transgender learner. This learner sought to have their rights recognised, but they faced severe harassment and were eventually assaulted by their peers. Such experiences illustrate a broader issue where schools fail to protect LGBTQIA+ learners from discrimination, neglecting their mental health in the process (Lehtonen, 2021; Gao et al., 2022; Molina et al., 2023; Smith, 2023).

A study by Smith (2023) on a transgender learner bullied at a school in Cape Town school focused on the issues of exclusion and harassment. It found that research on homophobic bullying in South African schools provides strong evidence for the prevalence of this phenomenon. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2020) on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners in South Africa, 56% of secondary school learners had been subject to homophobic slurs, while 35% of victims suffered severe and repeated harassment. Additionally, a study conducted by Mbatha (2022) examines the impact of homophobia on the mental health of secondary school learners in the Pinetown district. The findings revealed that LGBTQIA+ learners are four times more likely than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers to experience mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. These statistics underscore the negative impact of a hostile school environment on learners, especially

regarding their mental health and performance (Mbatha, 2022; Craske & Stein, 2022; Collis, 2024; Dawes et al., 2024).

Smith (2023) asserts that, in addition to the immediate harm experienced by learners during homophobic incidents, these experiences negatively affect the mental health of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community on a more ongoing, permanent basis. The health of learners in this community is significantly impacted by social isolation, fear, and shame derived from constant bullying and discrimination (Lavan et al., 2024). These factors contribute to a decline in mental wellbeing, particularly among individuals who struggle with anxiety and depression (Meyer, 2020). According to Mbatha (2022), learners who face homophobia frequently suffer from high levels of social anxiety; consequently, they withdraw from school-related activities, and their academic performances. These psychological effects highlight the urgent need to combat homophobic issues at school level to protect these learners. Soudien (2021) points out that the lack of effective policies to support queer learners in South African secondary schools results in a higher incidence of homophobic events. This situation is exacerbated by the inadequate training of teachers regarding gender-diverse individuals. Many LGBTQIA+ learners feel isolated and unsafe in their school environment, leading to increased anxiety and depression (Msibi, 2012; Weinberg & Cooper, 2024).

Taking into consideration the above, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 aims to enhance the human rights of learners, including those from the LGBTQIA+ community, by prohibiting all forms of discrimination against learners (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These legal frameworks notwithstanding, LGBTQIA+ learners continue to experience high levels of homophobia in educational institutions, resulting in learner isolation and mental health challenges (Chan et al., 2022). White et al. (2019) argue that this discrepancy between policy and practice stems from an apathetic, reluctant approach to policy enforcement in schools and, to an extent, a lack of awareness of policies. In their research, Karlsson et al. (2020) adopt a similar position, asserting the failure of schools to meet their legal responsibility to ensure the safety of all learners contributes to the isolation, anxiety and depression experienced by many members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Chan et al. (2022) emphasise that this emotional distress results from LGBTQIA+ learners feeling misunderstood by educators or peers; most of those who do not identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community are unwilling or unable to identify or relate to the helplessness these learners face.

Studies conducted around the globe indicate that the types of homophobic bullying mentioned above impact negatively on learners' mental health and learning ability (Kosciw et al., 2022). In their study on the prevalence and mental health implications of homophobic bullying in an Austrian secondary school, Hill et al. (2021) note that the sheer number of extreme cases in schools worldwide evidences the disturbing level of persecution directed at homosexual learners. This view is supported by Kosciw et al. (2022), who report on an incident in 2021 involving the physical assault perpetrated on a 15-year-old high school learner by his fellow learners when he revealed his homosexual orientation. Ironically, the study in question was investigating the effects of supportive school environments on LGBTQ youth. The pattern followed is that many LGBTQIA+ learners develop severe anxiety and depression owing to harassment by peers and, finding the learning environment to be unwelcoming, drop out of school (McConnell & Birkett, 2021; Stonewall, 2021; Lavan et al., 2024; Srinivasan et al., 2024).

In 2022, a similar incident occurred in the United States involving a transgender student who was harassed by other homophobic students (Kosciw et al., 2022; Brewster et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2024). Additionally, some transgender students were denied access to the appropriate restroom due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2022). This case highlights the institutional barriers that transgender students face, as well as the increased likelihood of being bullied (GLSEN, 2022). Such incidents illustrate the prevalence of bullying, which should be addressed as manifestations of homophobia, warranting the institution of legal action. This is a global crisis affecting learning institutions, where LGBTQIA+ learners have to endure bullying from their peers as well as from the institutions themselves (GLSEN, 2022).

International statistics on homophobia in schools indicate that the problem is on the rise (Stonewall, 2021). A GLSEN study conducted in the United States in 2022 revealed that 59% of homosexual learners felt unsafe at school for fear of homophobic bullying, 42% were harassed verbally, and 18% had been physically assaulted. Hill et al. (2021) found that 47% of queer-identifying Australian secondary school learners had faced homophobic bullying. A quarter of these learners suffered severe psychological damage as a result of these experiences. In their 2020 school climate survey focusing on LGBT youth in Canadian schools, Taylor and Peter (2020) discovered that 34 % of LGBTQIA+ learners dropped out of school. Homophobic bullying was found to be a significant contributing factor to the poor academic performance of these learners. Taylor and Peter (2020) assert

that these statistics highlight a pressing need for policy reform within schools, reflecting an uncompromising anti-queer bullying stance.

Hill et al. (2021) believe that homophobic bullying has long-term psychological impacts on learners. Meyer (2020) notes that relative to learners who are not subject to homophobic bullying, LGBTQIA+ learners facing bullying have a higher incidence of developing anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Stonewall (2021) found that the experiences of learners in the United Kingdom and elsewhere indicated that 45% of LGBTQIA+ learners had experienced depression stemming from bullying based on their sexual orientation. 27% had self-harmed.

Studies conducted in various countries worldwide support the proposition that homophobic bullying leads to learners' withdrawal from social roles, any form of school involvement, and poor academic performance (Kosciw et al., 2022). Research conducted by Stonewall (2021) exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ secondary school learners in the United Kingdom (UK) indicates that homophobic bullying aimed at making daily life unbearable for an individual, be it through overt action or complete inaction, is proven to have social and psychological repercussions that touch on the fundamental human rights of LGBTQIA+ learners across the globe.

Meyer (2020) views prejudice based on sexual orientation as a systemic problem with dire implications for LGBTQIA+ learners. Schools around the globe have tried to incorporate policies and structures into the school system to effectively address the issue, including anti-bullying policies, single-sex facilities, and LGBTQIA+ support groups (Hill et al., 2021). The issue of bullying related to sexual orientation in schools highlights that there is still much more to be done to ensure a safe learning environment for youth worldwide, where they are accepted for who they are (Kosciw et al., 2022). In light of this, Stonewall (2021) emphasises that the global challenge of homophobia in schools requires ongoing attention. Educators and policymakers must strive to ensure that all students feel welcome at school.

2.2.3 The Psychological Impacts of Homophobia: Anxiety and Depression

South African and international scholars have made significant progress in examining the issue of homophobia in schools in a South African context and globally. The current research indicates that homophobia is just one of the contributing factors mental health issues in educational settings. The section below critically compares and analyses the

findings of recent scholars, such as Moodley and Nduna (2022) and Green and Lambert (2021), in relation to this topic, taking into account both local and global perspectives as presented below:

Statement 1: South African Context

The topic of homophobia in South African schools is one of compelling concern given that varied and contingent homophobic negativity exacerbates other mental variables and trends that affect the growth and wellbeing of identified LGBTQIA+ learners in school, leading to raised levels of anxiety and depression. In absent psychosocial support and cultural stigmatisation are already deeply rooted, learners are disproportionately unable to manage the pressures of such hostile environments (Moodley & Nduna, 2022).

The moral of the above assertion is anchored on which cultural factors, lack of proper school policies, and lack of access to psychological support result in these learners suffering serious emotional pain most, at times without amenable opportunity to assistance (Kesler et al., 2023).

Statement 2: International Context

While international schools claim to have adopted policies combatting sexism and homophobia, psychological consequences of homophobic bullying in Western schools are rampant and include stress, anxiety, and depression, to rate but a few. However, the presence of anti-discrimination policies does not itself entail lived experience of physical or psychological safety for LGBTQIA+ learners in schools (Green & Lambert, 2021).

The moral of the assertion above is rooted in the idea that cultural factors, the absence of effective school policies, and limited access to psychological support contribute to these learners experiencing significant emotional pain, often without the opportunity for adequate assistance (Kesler et al., 2023).

Statement 2: International Context

While international schools claim to have adopted policies combatting sexism and homophobia, psychological consequences of homophobic bullying in Western schools are rampant and include stress, anxiety, and depression, to rate but a few. However, the

presence of anti-discrimination policies does not itself entail lived experience of physical or psychological safety for LGBTQIA+ learners in schools (Green & Lambert, 2021).

This statement suggests that although some schools internationally have sought to adopt inclusive policies, this has not translated into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners. Homophobia is rife in Western schools and continues to cause major psychological harm, with the school community being inconsistent in its enforcement of policies (Bos et al., 2021; Kesler et al., 2023).

The above authors concur that schools often perpetuate homophobia, leading to anxiety and depression amongst LGBTQIA+ learners in various contexts. However, scholarship is divided on the underlying causes and dynamics that sustain these psychological consequences. Moodley and Nduna (2022) state that in South Africa, homophobia is psychologically harmful in cultural and societal norms, which increases the psychological burden on learners.

Elipe et al. (2022) notes that there is a lack of institutional support, which leaves learners with very few coping mechanisms in the face of this alarming issue. While attempting to address this problem, it is also important to bring to light broader issues regarding the operational structures of South African schools. Despite having liberal legal frameworks designed to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ learners, these protections are often trumped by cultural stigma, particularly from within educational institutions themselves (Iuso et al., 2022). This point is further supported by Amadori et al. (2023) who argue that the ongoing departure of resources, including tertiary school counsellors, is exacerbating the mental health crisis among learners.

By contrast, Green and Lambert (2021) suggest that schools in Western countries generally face a different issue. While there are policies in place protecting LGBTQ+ learners, their implementation and enforcement are often inconsistent (Green & Lambert, 2021). This means that although policies may be progressive, they should be analysed through the lens of the gap between what is done and what might be done to lessen the emotional and psychological toll on learners (Bacchini et al., 2021). Elipe et al. (2022) observed that systemic homophobia is not just a pressing issue in conservative circles; it also exists in progressive environments, causing discomfort to learners. Mitton et al. (2021) conclude that these findings align with previous research, indicating that the existence of policies

alone are insufficient to create an emotionally safe school. An emotionally safe environment requires a positive culture and peer relationships; without these, policies will not be effective (Verly, 2024).

Oppression rooted in homophobia significantly impacts the mental health of individuals, leading to increased anxiety and depression, as seen in South Africa and globally (Msibi, 2012; Barragán-Medero & Pérez-Jorge, 2020; Yolaç & Meriç, 2021). Heterosexual prejudice contributes to mental health issues in LGBTQIA+ members through discrimination and bullying (Wang et al., 2018). A study on school adolescents revealed that LGBTQIA+ learners in South Africa experience more psychological distress compared to their heterosexual peers, facing barriers to support and a lack of anti-bullying policies (Camodeca et al., 2019).

Bacchini et al. (2021) conducted a study examining how personal values, gender stereotypes, and school climate contribute to homophobic bullying. Their findings revealed that homophobic bullying disrupts a peaceful learning environment in schools and instils fear in LGBTQIA+ learners. Similarly, a study by Burk et al. (2018) explored media-based school interventions aimed at reducing sexual orientation prejudice. This research highlighted the connection between discrimination, bullying, and the mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents in Western Canada, suggesting that homophobia exacerbates anxiety and depression levels in sexual minorities. Overall, this literature emphasises the prevalence of homophobia across cultures and its harmful psychosocial effects on the lives of sexual minority individuals.

Reflecting on the context of South Africa, where the Constitution guarantees equal rights for all, there is a stark contrast with the lived experience of many LGBTQIA+ people in schools and other social institutions (Daniels et al., 2019). Homophobia in schools is often heightened by deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs that are hostile towards LGBTQIA+ individuals, which intensifies mental health struggles for those affected (Francis, 2021). A study by Mkhize and Maharaj (2021) reveals that many teachers and peers actively reject and discriminate against LGBTQIA+ learners, which can lead to increased feelings of depression. The minority stress model emphasises that the long-term mental health effects experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals are strongly driven by exposure to stigma and prejudice in society (Meyer, 2003; Frost & Meyer, 2023). This model has been applied in various contexts to explain the primary reasons for the higher

rates of mental health conditions amongst these populations (Meyer, 2003; Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024).

Brown and Buthelezi (2020) highlight that a learner's psychological fallout is moderated by access to supportive environments, particularly when addressing anxiety and depression related to homophobia. Inclusive policies and safe school environments are essential in combating homophobia and mitigating its psychological effects (Respress et al., 2018). Consistent research has shown that LGBTQIA+ support networks and mental health resources are available in several countries and are effective in decreasing anxiety (Francis, 2021). However, the implementation of these support systems to reduce instances of homophobia is lacking in many parts of the world, including South Africa, where the detrimental psychological effects of homophobia continue to be a challenge (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021). To address the mental health disparities faced by the LGBTQIA+ community both in South Africa and globally, it is crucial to prioritise inclusive mental health support (Francis, 2021).

Moyano and del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes (2020) affirm that the psychological effects of homophobia on learners can be severe, with anxiety and depression being among the primary consequences. In contrast, Frost and Meyer (2023) demonstrated that MST helps explain how stress rooted in stigmatisation and discrimination negatively impacts individuals' mental health. Based on this theory, stressors specific to sexual and gender minorities are responsible for psychological harm, which accumulates over time (Meyer, 2003; Lefevor et al., 2019). Rivas-Koehl et al. (2023) expand on this idea, noting that, according to MST, these chronic stressors increase the rates of mental health disorders among minorities.

A study by Parent et al. (2020) focused on homophobic bullying and suicidal behaviour among heterosexual youth in the US. The findings indicate that LGBTQIA+ learners who experienced bullying were significantly more likely to suffer from anxiety and depressive disorders. Similarly, research by Mittleman et al. (2023) in the South African context examined homophobic bullying as a form of gender policing. This systematic review, which utilises “population-based evidence”, confirmed that homophobic experiences negatively impact the mental health of targeted LGBTQIA learners (Marchi et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2024; Lépine et al., 2025).

Seabra et al. (2022) suggest that existing literature indicates a link between homophobic bullying and mental health problems. However, research examining these dynamics specifically in South African schools is limited. This view is supported by Amadori et al. (2023), who argue that while there is a growing body of literature on the psychological impacts of homophobia in schools, many studies take a more general approach. These studies often analyse violence and discrimination against gay and lesbian individuals without adequately explaining the psychosocial ramifications of homophobia as supported by Shai and Abu-Raiya (2025). Therefore, this literature review aimed to fill this gap by analysing how homophobia contributes to anxiety and depression among secondary school learners in the Pinetown district.

2.2.4 Coping Strategies Employed by Learners

Homophobia in South African schools is detrimental to learners learning as it fosters a culture that does not respect the rights of learners as is required in the promotion of equal education as encouraged under White Paper 6. Consequently, learners have to adopt some survival strategies that would enable them to cope within the school setting (Allen, 2020).

White Paper 6, titled “Special Needs Education”, was introduced by the South African Department of Education in 2001 (Mullis, 2019; Jacobs & Govender, 2020; Rajatheva et al., 2020). According to Francisco et al. (2020), the central objective is to develop an inclusive training system that accommodates all learners, particularly those who face barriers to learning, such as disabilities, social marginalisation, and emotional or psychological distress.

Although White Paper 6 does not explicitly address homophobia, it emphasises the need for a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for all learners (Mullis, 2019; Mizhquiri, 2019; Rajatheva et al., 2020). This is particularly crucial for individuals who experience discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Maryanti et al., 2021). The document advocates for the removal of barriers to learning, which includes combating discrimination, bullying, and emotional harm — common hurdles that LGBTQIA+ learners face in schools (Kart & Kart, 2021).

The statement by Allen (2020) highlights a significant issue in South African schools: the pervasive homophobia which negatively affects the ability to learn for the learners in school. This environment not only undermines the wellbeing of learners but also

contradicts the principles of inclusive education advocated by White Paper 6 (Allen, 2020). As a result, learners have to develop coping strategies to navigate the challenges of their school environment.

Allen's observation resonates with the vision of White Paper 6, which aims to promote inclusivity in educational settings (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Homophobia directly contradicts the ideals outlined in White Paper 6, promoting exclusion and discrimination (Bos et al., 2021). Elipe et al. (2022) emphasise that homophobia has psychological impacts leading to behaviour such as exclusion and the inability to relate, in addition to anxiety and depression. These effects discourage the creation of a healthy school climate and negatively influence a person's engagement in the learning process. Green and Lambert (2021) suggest that when a learner experiences homophobic bullying, they feel isolated, which causes emotional distress and adversely affects academic performance and psychological wellbeing. If schools fail to meet the standards set out in White Paper 6 and do not take adequate measures to eradicate homophobia, they cannot offer a supportive and inclusive environment (Bos et al., 2021).

Learners need to develop coping strategies to respond to homophobia, which demonstrates the inadequacy of inclusive education in schools (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Learners who experience homophobia in a school environment that lacks protection or support structures, create their own coping strategies to mitigate emotional and psychological distress, making it difficult for them to survive in such settings (Bos et al., 2021). Research by Kosciw et al. (2020) suggests that learners resort to maladaptive strategies such as social exclusion, self-silencing, or aggression as a means of self-preservation. While these strategies may help learners survive in hostile environments, they come at significant cost to their emotional and psychological wellbeing. As stated by Brown and Buthelezi (2020) the absence of school support systems exacerbates the struggle for learners, leading to increased mental health challenges.

Leung et al. (2022) highlight how Allen's (2020) observations pinpoint a critical issue: homophobia fundamentally contradicts the intentions of White Paper 6, which creates safe and inclusive educational spaces, prioritising the wellbeing of every learner. When schools either permit or, even worse, overlook homophobic bullying, reinforce an environment that counters the policy directive of eliminating barriers to learning (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). Allen (2020) aptly notes that lacking a safe, supportive school environment severely

restricts the ability to learn, compelling them to develop coping strategies just to navigate the challenges of homophobia. This perspective is strongly supported by Kosciw et al. (2020), who argue that these adverse circumstances shift the focus from education to survival; the inclusivity of the school environment suffers, diminishing learners' potential to succeed both academically and emotionally.

Mitton et al. (2021) indicate that the interventions proposed in White Paper 6 to mitigate the negative effects of discrimination and bullying on young people include teacher training, peer support programs, and the provision of mental health services. When schools fail to act, they leave LGBTQIA+ learners to navigate these challenges alone (Nappa et al., 2018; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Allen, 2019; Allen, 2020). As Amadori et al. (2023) note, the homophobia encountered by learners confronts them with psychological and emotional hurdles that can be overwhelming.

Amadori et al. (2023) add that in environments where support is provided, the changes are often forced, temporary or poorly implemented, so learners struggle to maintain effective strategies for managing their mental health. The interventions suggested here, including establishing LGBTQIA+ support groups and safe spaces, reduce learners' reliance on harmful coping mechanisms by providing formalised emotional support (Kosciw et al., 2020; Barragán-Medero & Pérez-Jorge, 2020; Mitton et al., 2021). Kosciw et al. (2020) conclude that these interventions would help to align schools more closely with the objectives outlined in White Paper 6.

Research examining the diverse coping responses of learners globally, including in South Africa, shows that these strategies are influenced by cultural, psychological, and environmental factors (Vural-Batik, 2020). Learners across various cultures use problem-focused coping styles, such as seeking support from peers, teachers, or family, as well as participating in both academic and leisure activities to manage stress (Allen, 2020). Many school-based mental health programmes in the Western world are designed to empower learners by teaching them valuable coping skills like mindfulness and encouraging positive interactions with their peers (Oginni et al., 2020). The absence of strong support systems can lead to some learners developing unhealthy coping behaviours, such as avoidance, aggression, or substance abuse (Okanlawon, 2021). Okanlawon (2021) notes that these strategies can even increase feelings of loneliness and anxiety. This highlights how vital it

is to foster a supportive school environment, which can play a key role in helping learners develop healthy coping mechanisms.

Research notes that in South Africa, coping strategies are significantly influenced by socioeconomic status and culture (Besner & Spungin, 2023). For instance, learners attending under-resourced schools often find themselves without access to psychological support (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). In South Africa, learner's coping strategies draw on their religious and cultural traditions, which can provide comfort during difficult times (Hanimoglu, 2019). While these practices can offer temporary respite, they may not necessarily resolve the underlying challenges causing their distress, leaving them vulnerable to future struggles (Allen, 2020).

Brown and Buthelezi (2020) emphasise that, according to existing literature, coping strategies are heavily predicated on support mechanisms in schools. Both local and global research emphasises the importance of a positive approach in promoting anti-discrimination policies and mental health services (Besner & Spungin, 2023). Without these essential structures in place, vulnerable learners develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, which can lead to long-term psychological maladjustment (Besner & Spungin, 2023). Vural-Batik (2020) urges schools to shift from traditional policy paradigms to more inclusive, well-resourced environments that foster resilience and effective stress management (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020).

Tully et al. (2021) agree that coping strategies are crucial for LGBTQIA+ learners to manage stress arising from homophobic bullying. This literature also outlines various coping mechanisms, from avoidance to isolation, seeking support, and engaging in activism (Ullman, 2023). Lim et al. (2023) propose a framework referred to as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) which categorises coping styles into two distinct approaches. The first is problem-solving coping, where individuals actively seek to change the conditions that give rise to stress (Lim et al., 2023). The second is emotional regulation, which helps individuals manage their emotions during stressful times (Nkosi & Zulu, 2022; Lim et al., 2023).

Research highlights that many minority learners who identify as LGBTQIA+ often practice emotion-focused coping styles. Blondé et al. (2024) note that some of these learners repress their experiences or avoid exposure to stigma. While these strategies may appear beneficial in the short term, they can inadvertently lead to loneliness, anxiety and depression

(Srinivasan, 2024). Healthy alternatives, such as engaging in mentoring or connecting with supportive friends, family or other groups, can help diminish the psychological impact of homophobic bullying (Watson et al., 2019; Town et al., 2022; Drew et al., 2024; Vik, 2024; Weinberg & Cooper, 2024).

As widely documented, homophobic behaviour in South African schools is a concerning issue, and it is clear that more research is required, particularly regarding the coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ learners (Fliegelman, 2023). Research by Dennehy et al. (2020) highlights that these learners often struggle in seeking support due to fear of further abuse or simply not knowing where to turn for support. This opens up an avenue for research which has not been thoroughly explored. By delving deeper into how South African learners manage homophobic environments, more can be learnt about the efficacy of the coping strategies used (Tan et al., 2021; Swearer et al., 2021; McDiarmid et al., 2022). This research aimed to fill this gap.

2.2.5 The Role of Support Systems in Overcoming Psychological Distress

Support systems play a crucial role in empowering learners to navigate adversity, such as discrimination or bullying, as well as the psychological distress of anxiety and depression (Msibi, 2012, Romano et al., 2021; Lépine et al., 2025). Research highlights the positive impact that support from parents, teachers, and peers can have, leading to reduced psychological distress in learners (Ungar et al., 2019). According to Shalaby and Agyapong (2020), strong social support from family and friends can act as a powerful safeguard against depression-related problems. Research by Nappa et al. (2018) shows that learners who are victims of homophobic bullying can significantly strengthen their resilience through a sense of strong support, which helps them manage emotional turmoil. The support systems created by these supportive relationships foster a feeling of belonging and validation, alleviating the isolation that goes hand in hand with anxiety and depression (Besner & Spungin, 2023).

Jaspal and Breakwell (2022) propose that teachers should periodically collaborate to create supportive school environments that reduce learners' psychological distress. The study by Watson et al. (2019) suggests that educators who can address student's emotional needs significantly reduce anxiety and depression levels in learners. School counsellors, peer support groups, and emotional health programmes play a vital role in making institutional support for psychological wellbeing more visible (Watson et al., 2019). According to Chan

et al. (2022), findings indicate that when learners are aware of these support systems, they are better able to cope with stressful circumstances that may arise from discriminating practices. This includes schools that promote inclusive practices to protect LGBTQIA+ learners from bullying and safeguard their psychological and emotional health (Chan et al., 2022; Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024).

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of support structures is significantly influenced by the availability of services to learners and their active participation in seeking care (Garro et al., 2022). Research by Ioverno et al. (2022) suggests that learners who proactively reach out to their social support experience more positive mental health outcomes than those who does not. However, Ioverno et al. (2022) also highlight that stigma, fear of judgment, and discrimination – including homophobia – often prevent many learners from seeking support. Aguirre et al. (2021) support this perspective, arguing that even if there are existing support systems to counteract anxiety and depression, the effectiveness depends on prevailing cultural norms. Normalising the act of seeking help for these issues is important for the success of these support systems.

Moreover, Striebel (2024) argues that supportive environments that are extraverted can help manage the effects of heterosexism. A linear model analysis conducted by Lin (2022) on data from gay and bisexual men demonstrates that the quality of relationships with peers, family, or instructors can substantially reduce the impact of childhood homophobic bullying on symptoms of borderline personality disorder in early adulthood. Additionally, research by Negota (2021) on the importance of psychological services for public secondary school learners in Luvuvhu Circuit, Thulamela Municipality, found that schools that promote equal rights for all learners and include Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), have been shown to have fewer incidents of homophobic bullying and higher levels of wellbeing for LGBTQIA+ learners.

The protection of LGBTQIA+ groups within South African schools remains a significant problem, with some institutions actively supporting LGBTQIA+ learners, while others are unable or unwilling to provide the same levels of support (Fordenbacher, 2022; Lavan et al., 2024). In his research, Striebel (2024) examined interventions aimed at addressing the impact of bullying on LGBTQIA+ youth. He found that the effectiveness of interventions often depends on the attitude of school leaders and the community. This implies that while support systems can reduce the psychological impact of homophobia, they are only

effective when implemented within a supporting school and societal environment (Srinivasan, 2024).

Support systems are crucial for helping learners manage and counteract psychological distress, such as anxiety or depression, in environments where discrimination or exclusion exists (Hasan & Bao 2020). Research demonstrates that social support – particularly emotional support from peers, teachers, and family members – enhances resilience and fosters more effective positive coping strategies amongst learners (Karaman et al., 2021). A study by Kosciw et al. (2020) shows that learners with affirming relationships and supportive adults at school, like teachers trained in mental health awareness and LGBTQIA+ issues, experience lower levels of anxiety and depression. In other words, a powerful, inclusive support system significantly minimises the psychological consequences of discrimination, enhances emotional wellness, and creates a feeling of belonging – essential elements for achieving academic success (Hasan & Bao, 2020; Verly, 2024; Srinivasan et al., 2024).

In addition to the structured support structures available in schools, such as counselling, peer support groups, and safe spaces, these resources equip learners with the necessary tools to navigate emotional challenges (Romano et al., 2021). Meyer (2020) reports remarkable reductions in anxiety and depression levels in schools that provide mental health resources, such as trained counsellors to address cases of homophobic bullying. Kosciw et al. (2020) suggest that in addition to enabling learners to tackle the immediate effects of psychological distress, these support systems also equip learners with long-term strategies to overcome the roadblocks that hinder their learning. With these support systems in place, learners are less prone to internalise difficulties, reducing the risk of mental health issues that could lead to school absences and disrupt their learning experience (Kosciw et al., 2020; Karaman et al., 2021).

The reviewed literature discusses the importance of community support for LGBTQIA+ youth. Learners with limited access to school-based resources, community groups, and online networks can significantly benefit from these sources of support and connections within the LGBTQIA+ community (Iacono et al., 2024). However, there is a lack of research investigating the existence and effectiveness of such support programs in South Africa, especially in districts having diverse populations, like Pinetown. To fill this research gap, this study aimed to explore how secondary school learners in the Pinetown district can

be assisted in coping with homophobia through school-based and community-based support.

2.2.6 Gaps in Literature and the Need for Localised Studies

Finlay-Jones et al. (2021) note that although there is a growing body of research on the consequences of homophobia among LGBTQIA+ youth, this work is primarily focused on Western contexts. In contrast, Daniels et al. (2019) examine the experiences of gay and transgender youth in rural South Africa and identify a lack of cross-cultural perspectives in existing literature. They note that cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors play a crucial role in shaping how individuals in South Africa perceive and cope with homophobia (Meyer, 2020).

A local study conducted by Base (2022) focuses on the attitudes of heterosexual students towards their gay and lesbian peers at the Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Similarly, Fernando and Cabardo (2024) explore themes of rejection, acceptance, and support in their study on understanding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ college learners in a Catholic School. These studies provide valuable insight into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in South African higher education institutions. However, there is a need for more focused research in specific areas, such as the psychological effects of homophobia in South African secondary schools and how learners manage them.

Additionally, Sibanyoni et al. (2023) underscore the limited studies on the interplay between race, gender, and sexual orientation in relation to experiences of homophobia and its effects on mental health in township schools. Their findings reveal a significant gap that this study aimed to address.

Existing literature on homophobia and homophobic violence has primarily focused on psychological impact, particularly in international contexts, but lacks localised insights from South African schools (Sibanyoni et al., 2023). Research by Seabra et al. (2022) highlights that studies on shame-based experiences of homophobic bullying and mental health in LGBTQIA+ youth are largely based in Western countries, leaving a gap in context-specific data for South Africa. Moyano and del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes (2020) assert that experiences in South African schools vary widely due to socio-economic backgrounds and the legacy of Apartheid, along with the stigma surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities in certain communities. As a result, there is a need for studies regarding the intersection of

homophobia, mental health, and the local school environment (Moyano & del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020).

Addressing the gaps in access to both theoretical and practical interventions is essential, particularly through localised studies. For instance, this study examines anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district. This research enabled an in-depth examination of individual coping strategies employed by learners in multiracial secondary schools in that district. These unique contexts offer insights that can inform the effective implementation of education policies like White Paper 6 to combat homophobia and promote learners' wellbeing (Base, 2022). Understanding the specific psychological challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ learners emphasises the need for local research to develop culturally and contextually relevant interventions (Sibanyoni et al., 2023).

This study reviewed the literature on homophobic bullying in schools, highlighting its prevalence and significant impact on victims' psychological wellbeing, particularly regarding anxiety and depression. While there is ample evidence of the effects of homophobic bullying, more localised research is necessary to understand experiences within the South African context. This study aimed to fill that gap by exploring secondary school learners' perspectives in the Pinetown district, examining the psychological ramifications of homophobia, coping strategies, and potential support interventions. The goal is to enhance knowledge of the issues that affect LGBTQIA+ learners in the learning process and to propose effective support strategies.

2.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the existing literature, both locally and internationally, related to the study of anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district. The following chapter discusses the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the literature, both locally and internationally, specifically relevant to this study. This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework known as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura in the 1980s, which serves as the foundation for this research.

The discussion of the theoretical framework encompasses the following themes:

- Theory Explanation: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT).
- Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression.
- Relevance of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to the Study: Anxiety and Depression amongst Learners facing Homophobia in a Secondary school in the Pinetown District.

3.2 The Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

The concept of a theoretical framework is broad. It consists of a set of ideas that clarify how a specific research theme will be investigated (Davey et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022). This study is grounded in Albert Bandura's SCT, developed in the 1980s. In this section, the researcher will briefly provide an overview of SCT, describe its application, and illustrate how each component of SCT has been applied in addressing two psychological challenges: anxiety and depression. Additionally, the researcher will highlight the relevance of SCT in understanding anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district.

3.2.1 Theory Explanation: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

SCT is an effective framework for analysing behaviour based on personal, behavioural, and environmental factors (Brown et al., 2022). This theory postulates that human learning occurs within a social context, where much of what individuals learn is acquired through emulation (Bandura, 1986). He expands that unlike behaviourist approaches that focus primarily on reinforcement, SCT emphasises the importance of observational learning and

modelling, while also recognising the role of cognitive processes in shaping behaviour. Bandura (1986) points out that people are not merely ‘reactive organisms’; they actively engage in environmental stimuli, process information, and take action — they ‘code,’ ‘think,’ and ‘act.’ Consequently, Dunkley et al. (2021) suggest that SCT provides a more personalised and comprehensive model for examining behaviour. In the contexts of education and psychology, SCT helps to clarify an individual’s beliefs, stimuli, and responses, leading to optimal results (Bandura, 1986).

A central principle of SCT is that of personal agency, which views each individual as self-organised and capable of changing their environment and behaviour (Brown et al., 2022). Personal agency includes dispositions such as self-efficacy, which refers to a person’s beliefs in their capability to perform the actions necessary to achieve their goals (Bandura, 2018). This belief influences how individuals address various issues, including psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Maddux & Kleiman, 2018). In the learning context, a learner’s self-efficacy is related to motivation, emotions, and the way they cope with stressors, such as homophobic bullying (Dunkley et al., 2021). Another important concept is reciprocal determinism, which describes relationships between individuals, their behaviour, and their environments (Bandura, 1986). For instance, a learner who experiences homophobia may experience stress, leading to depression (an environmental factor), which can result in poor academic performance (a behavioural factor) and low self-esteem (a personal factor) (Brown et al., 2022).

Pajares (2020) views SCT as particularly relevant for examining psychological aspects such as anxiety and depression. He elaborates that, according to SCT, human experiences shape an individual’s self-efficacy, which affects their ability to cope with stressors. In the context of homophobia, learners with lower self-efficacy may be more susceptible to anxiety and depression because they feel unable to change a distressing situation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Miller et al., 2022). Additionally, the observational learning component of SCT plays a significant role in shaping these individuals’ perceptions of coping strategies. They may emulate peers or authority figures who either confront or ignore the challenges they face (Pajares, 2020). Understanding these factors is essential for educators and mental health professionals who aim to create environments that prevent the development of negative coping strategies, which can lead to devastating psychological consequences of homophobia (Dunkley et al., 2021).

Integrating SCT into the experiences of learners affected by homophobia in schools — where anxiety and depression are common — highlights the need to enhance pro-social interactions and provide appropriate role models for learners (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2021). Strengthening learners' self-efficacy can empower them to withstand the effects of discrimination (Bandura, 2018). Furthermore, incorporating diversity into the school environment encourages peers and friends to respect differences, which can establish positive social norms and mitigate the impact of homophobia (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SCT also offers a framework for understanding and alleviating the psychological distress of learners facing anxiety or depression (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2018). This can be achieved by teaching them how to develop positive self-concepts, utilise adaptive coping mechanisms, and engage in supportive environments — especially within school (Miller et al., 2022).

3.2.2 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression

In this section, the researcher will highlight the importance of SCT and how it relates to psychological challenges, such as anxiety and depression. This discussion will involve examining the components of the framework. However, before delving into that, it is important to provide a detailed explanation of the context and impact of the terms that will be frequently referenced: anxiety and depression.

➤ Understanding Anxiety and Depression in Context

Anxiety and depression are considered among the most common mental health issues affecting millions of people worldwide, including learners in educational settings (Vural-Batik, 2020). A study by Mayeza (2023) investigates homophobic violence in African primary schools, highlighting how these psychological conditions manifest with distinct symptoms and consequences that are critical to understanding mental health within schools. The terms 'anxiety' and 'depression' are not just abstract concepts in this study; they are essential for understanding the mental health struggles faced by learners, especially those grappling with the challenges of homophobic bullying and exclusion. First, it is important to define and differentiate these terms and then explore their relevance and impact. Following this, the researcher will consider the broader psychological, educational, and social implications.

➤ **Anxiety: Definition and Impact**

The APA (2020) defines anxiety as an emotion characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes such as increased blood pressure. While anxiety is a normal response to stressful situations, it can escalate from an occasional feeling to a chronic condition affecting how a person functions in daily life (APA, 2020). This transition can create a cycle of fear and restlessness, leading to difficulties concentrating (Garry, 2023). Anxiety amongst learners can result in poorer academic performance, increased school avoidance, and social exclusion (Oginni et al., 2020). Additionally, experiences of homophobia can intensify anxiety, leaving learners feeling unsafe and threatened (Bacchini et al., 2021). This compounded anxiety can significantly diminish their mental and emotional health (Bose, 2019).

➤ **Depression: Definition and Impact**

Unlike general mood disorders, depression involves persistent feelings of sadness, a loss of interest in once-enjoyable activities, and a range of physical and cognitive symptoms like fatigue, poor sleep, and poor concentration (APA, 2020). Okanlawon (2021) supports this stance, arguing that depression is closely associated with thoughts of death. It is not merely an emotional state; depression is a debilitating condition that can diminish one's ability to engage with the world (Francis, 2021). For learners, particularly those who experience homophobic bullying or exclusion, depression can lead to feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and even suicidal ideation (APA, 2020). Research reveals that LGBTQIA+ learners are at greater risk for depression due to discrimination and ostracism in schools, perpetuating a cycle of declining mental health (Berdahl, 2020; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Base, 2022).

➤ **Anxiety and Depression: Psychological and Social Consequences**

Anxiety and depression often combine to create a deeply depressing experience that can feel overwhelming and induce headaches (Bacchini et al., 2021). Each condition can exacerbate the other, fuelling a vicious cycle of fear and sadness (Bacchini et al., 2021). Yolaç and Meriç (2021) support this idea by emphasising that this cycle is especially pronounced in non-inclusive schools. LGBTQIA+ learners, in particular, face emotional turmoil during their education, which can trigger both anxiety and depression, often as a result of homophobic bullying (Msibi, 2012; Hill et al., 2021). The cumulative effects of anxiety and depression for learners who experience exclusion based on their sexual

orientation can be devastating, culminating in dropping out of school, substance abuse, and in extreme cases, self-harm or suicide (Ventriglio et al., 2021; Besner & Spungin, 2023; Blondé et al., 2024).

➤ **Educational Impact of Anxiety and Depression**

A study by Sullivan (2020) exploring the impact on youth found that anxiety and depression not only affect their mental health but also their academic performance. Sullivan (2020) expands that learners struggling with these conditions have difficulty concentrating, completing assignments, or participating in class discussions. This observation is supported by Striebel (2024), who highlights that anxious or fearful learners may become hypervigilant during social interactions or when facing perceived threats, leading them to avoid certain behaviour. Additionally, Srinivasan et al. (2024) found that depression diminishes motivation amongst learners, negatively impacting academic pursuits and often leading to poor results (Bobba et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated that high levels of anxiety and depression are associated with academic failure (Calvo et al., 2021). This disengagement from the educational process can cause a cycle of ongoing failure (Smith & Burch, 2023). For LGBTQIA+ learners, who are already marginalised within the school system, these mental health challenges can intensify feelings of isolation and hopelessness (Msibi, 2012; Striebel, 2024).

➤ **The Role of Homophobia in Triggering Anxiety and Depression**

Homophobia significantly contributes to the anxiety and depression of learners, especially in schools (Mittleman, 2023). The bullying and verbal abuse create a hostile atmosphere, leaving LGBTQIA+ learners fearing for their safety (Miller et al., 2022). This stress can lead to chronic anxiety from hiding one's identity and the fear of being targeted (Lyonga, 2021). Over time, the internalisation of rejection and discrimination can result in depression (Chan et al., 2022). South African schools, in particular, are noted for their persistent homophobic attitudes, causing distress amongst LGBTQIA+ learners (Moodley & Nduna, 2022). They expand that these learners often lack the necessary support systems to cope with the emotional impact of their experiences.

➤ **The Need to Address Mental Health in Schools**

Anxiety and depression significantly impact learners' psychological and academic wellbeing, hindering their ability to engage in social situations (Lin et al., 2022).

Homophobia further exacerbates these issues, increasing the risk of mental health challenges for LGBTQIA+ learners (Lim et al., 2023). To address these problems, schools must create supportive environments that offer mental health resources and protect vulnerable learners (Iacono et al., 2024). Fliegelman (2023) emphasises that educators must recognise the connection between homophobia, anxiety, and depression to foster a nurturing space for all learners.

Reciprocal determinism suggests that psychological challenges can stem from environmental issues such as school homophobia (Poteat & Espelage, 2019). Liddle and McDaid (2021) note that all measures of behaviour, cognitive and personal factors are reciprocal determinants. Exposure to homophobia (an environmental factor) can lead to negative self-worth (a cognitive factor), which may, in turn, cause a learner to withdraw from social and academic activities (Liddle & McDaid, 2021). A study by Poteat and Espelage (2019) supports the idea that once withdrawal begins, it can heighten a learner's sense of isolation and anxiety, creating a vicious cycle that increases depression. Islam et al. (2023) propose that altering any of these factors may change the direction and course of this cycle; therefore, interventions at various levels are required for the mental wellbeing of learners.

Another important component of SCT is 'observational learning' (Bandura, 1986). This involves acquiring behaviours and attitudes by watching others (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999). For instance, in a secondary school environment, learners may witness their peers or teachers responding to cases of homophobia (Jorm, 2022). If discriminatory behaviour towards minority groups is unchallenged or condoned, learners may internalise harmful beliefs and experience learned helplessness (Bandura, 2018). This can heighten anxiety and depression in learners, who feel trapped in a place where they are continuously devalued (Smith & Burch, 2023). Conversely, observing positive role models who resist homophobia can empower learners to challenge discrimination and reduce psychological harm done (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021).

Craig and McInroy (2021) highlight another important component of SCT, namely self-efficacy. This refers to individuals' belief in their capacity to influence events in their lives (Bandura, 1986). Research indicates that anxiety and depression are powerfully linked to low self-efficacy (Meyer, 2020). Individuals who do not believe they can manage their problems are more likely to feel depressed when faced with adversity (Poteat & Espelage,

2019). Scholars such as Liddle and McDaid (2021) argue that learners with low self-efficacy may perceive themselves as incapable of dealing with the discrimination they face at school. They further highlight that this sense of hopelessness can lead to feelings of depression. In contrast, Haigh et al. (2019) reports that learners with high self-efficacy are better equipped to confront homophobia, seek support, and use coping strategies that will promote their mental wellness.

3.2.3 Relevance of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to the Study: Anxiety and Depression amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in the Pinetown District

The relevance of SCT to this study, which examines the impact of homophobic bullying on learners' mental health in a secondary school situated in the Pinetown district, is significant. SCT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the interactions between individual beliefs, behaviours, and environmental influences in real-world situations (Bandura, 1999). In the Pinetown district, there may be varying levels of knowledge and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ issues. Zamboni and Crawford (2019) assert that the attitudes presented in this study can significantly affect the experiences of learners who are or are perceived to be LGBTQIA+ in a school environment. This provides insight into how these learners develop their psychological responses to homophobia based on their observations of others, their self-perceptions of efficacy, and the interactions between their behaviour and the school environment (Mkhize & Bennett, 2016; Mkhize, 2018; Brown & Renshaw, 2020).

Observational learning shows that school climate is influenced by the behaviours modelled by teachers and peers (Markley, 2023). When educators challenge homophobia and promote inclusivity, they instill those values in their learners (Peele, 2023). This fosters a sense of belonging and resilience in learners facing homophobia, helping to protect them from anxiety and depression (Kılıç et al., 2024). On the other side of the coin, schools that fail to address homophobia may lead learners to adopt discriminatory attitudes or feel their struggles are in vain (Reece-Miller, 2022). This contributes to learners feeling trapped in a cruel environment (Ruben & Fullerton, 2018).

Additionally, the emphasis on self-efficacy within SCT is particularly pertinent to how learners in the Pinetown district cope with homophobia from teachers and peers. A learner with high self-efficacy may actively seek support from LGBTQIA+ clubs or counselling

services, which can mitigate the negative effects on their mental health (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017; Kılıç et al., 2024). In contrast, a low-efficacy learner may feel helpless and unable to effect change (Berdahl, 2020). This leads to increased anxiety and depression (Sherman, 2023).

SCT provides a rich interpretative lens to make sense of the multiple connections between learners' environments, cognitive processes, and behaviours in response to homophobic experiences (Boyland et al., 2019). This research further explored how homophobia induces anxiety and depression in learners, focusing on a secondary school in the Pinetown district. Additionally, SCT provides a foundation for creating interventions to improve learners' self-efficacy, promoting positive behavioural learning, and reducing the negative consequences of homophobia (Braun et al., 2020). Furthermore, this theoretical approach offered practical strategies for transforming the hostility associated with homophobia into improved mental health and wellbeing for learners facing anxiety and depression caused by such experiences. Cumming-Potvin and Martino (2018) emphasise that this promotes a deeper understanding of the primary phenomenon being studied.

3.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed Bandura's SCT as the theoretical framework underpinning this study. It also outlined the rationale for this choice of framework by highlighting its key components.

The next chapter details the research approach and design, focusing on the case study methodology. It also addresses the research paradigm, target population, sampling methods employed, participant selection, data generation and analysis methods used in this study. Lastly, the chapter explains measures for ensuring trustworthiness, as well as ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The last chapter discussed the theoretical framework utilised for this study, namely SCT. It further outlined the rationale and relevance of this framework by analysing its main components.

This chapter details the research approach and design utilised in this study. It discusses the research paradigm, target population, and sampling methods employed. Additionally, the chapter outlines the process of participant selection, the data generation and analysis methods used in this study, and considerations of trustworthiness and ethics being followed throughout the study.

4.2 Research Approach

The research approach refers to a logical plan and procedure for carrying out research, encompassing steps that lead to data generation and analysis (Saito et al., 2021). For this study, the chosen research approach is qualitative. According to Kostere et al. (2021), the qualitative approach generates non-numerical rather than numerical data. Furthermore, this approach focuses on answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions instead of ‘how many’ or ‘how much’ questions (Kostere et al., 2021). They expand that it generates data based on participants’ experiences, social realities, dispositions, motivations, and experiments, presenting the findings as themes.

Having regard to this, a qualitative approach was selected for this study on anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district. This choice reflects a commitment to the research objectives, which include exploring learners’ experiences, coping mechanisms, and motivations related to anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia. The specific aims are: “To explore anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown district”, “To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia”, and “To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.” Qualitative research effectively addresses these objectives, as noted by scholars such as Denzin et al. (2023), capturing the complexities of the participants’ personal, and emotional lives.

The qualitative approach aligns seamlessly with the study's goals, as the research questions demand depth and nuance. These questions are “What are learners’ experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? Why do they cope in the way that they do?” Qualitative research methods are flexible enough to explore learners’ personal narratives and emotional responses in ways that quantitative methods cannot (Cresswell et al., 2020). Similar to numerical analysis, a qualitative approach does not aim to quantify emotions; rather, it seeks to understand subjective experiences and learn how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their social environment (Yin, 2018).

In this study, a qualitative approach facilitates the exploration of issues such as anxiety, depression, and homophobia with a level of sensitivity and empathy that is found in more detached methods. Research on mental health often requires participants to share deeply personal and potentially painful experiences, making it crucial to approach these topics with care (Holtrop et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Aspers & Corte, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2018) further emphasise the importance of researchers actively engaging with participants to create a safe place for open expression. In the context of homophobia, sensitivity is vital, as societal attitudes can significantly contribute to an individual’s psychological distress (Cresswell et al., 2020).

The qualitative approach used in this study is conducive to a thorough analysis of the complex social and personal factors influencing participants’ psychological wellbeing. It is essential to consider that anxiety and depression do not occur in isolation; they are heavily influenced by social environments, personal experiences, and coping mechanisms (Yin, 2018; Marchi et al., 2023; Shai & Abu-Raiya, 2025). By adopting a qualitative approach, I was able to examine these contextual influences and understand how participants interact with peers, extended family, society, and other elements that contribute to their mental health and coping strategies. This aligns with the SCT framework, which posits that social influences play a crucial role in behaviour and mental health (Bandura, 1986). Utilising a qualitative approach allowed me to explore how learners cope with homophobia and the social reinforcements associated with these coping strategies.

Furthermore, this study has substantial advantages due to its qualitative approach. Firstly, this approach provided depth and flexibility, allowing me to adjust questions and pursue emerging themes during the process of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Secondly,

it facilitated the building of trust and rapport with the selected participants, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as anxiety, depression, and homophobia. This environment enabled participants to express their stories in their own words, giving them the opportunity to share experiences that might otherwise remain unheard. The qualitative approach ultimately provides rich and comprehensive study findings that illustrate how participants navigate the impact of homophobia on their mental wellbeing (Gehman et al., 2018; Holtrop et al., 2018; Lester & O'Reilly, 2021).

In conclusion, a study by Hancock (2021) highlights a significant drawback of using a qualitative approach: the potential for interpretation problems due to researcher's bias. To overcome this issue, the researcher have employed strategies to enhance objectivity and credibility, including reflexivity, peer debriefing, and member checking throughout the research process.

4.3 Research Design

Research design entails the plan that the researcher chooses to address specific research questions or objectives (Creswell et al., 2020). It outlines the study's structure and approach, including the methods of generating and analysing data (Yin, 2018). This study adopted a case study design as an appropriate design approach. According to Schoch (2020), a case study is an in-depth, qualitative research method that examines a case within its real-life context. Hancock (2021) notes the advantages of this method, particularly that it recognises the boundaries of the phenomenon under investigation and its contextual factors that are often unclear, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of its complexity. This is especially relevant in the social sciences, where the case study approach is frequently employed to investigate contemporary phenomena over which the researcher has limited control (Schoch, 2020). Moreover, case studies provide rich, detailed data that cannot be obtained through experiments or surveys (Yin, 2018).

The case study design was suitable for this research on homophobia in schools, a complex issue influenced by various social, cultural, and psychological factors (Lin, 2022). Focusing on a secondary school in the Pinetown district, this study explored the interaction of these factors, participants' experiences with homophobia, the impact it has on their psychological wellbeing, and the coping techniques they use. Research involving one school only allows for a better understanding of specific dynamics at work and enables identify necessary interventions for similar educational settings (Yin, 2018).

This research design positions the study of anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in secondary school within the Pinetown district, focusing on the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners in educational settings. Homophobia often manifests in sensitive and stigmatised ways that significantly impact the mental health of learners (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell et al., 2020). Utilising a case study approach allowed the researcher to establish trust and rapport with the participants, encouraging them to openly share their experiences with homophobia. This comprehensive understanding was essential for creating effective support and interventions for victims of homophobic bullying. The findings from this case study will serve as a reference for schools confronting similar challenges. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the broader conversation around education inclusivity and mental health.

Adopting a case study in a qualitative study has both advantages and disadvantages (Alase, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2022). A key advantage mentioned above is the depth it offers, focusing on a specific context to thoroughly understand the diverse factors of incremental homophobic bullying and its psychological effects on learners (Kivunja, 2018). This detailed approach captures individual experiences, coping mechanisms, and the overall school atmosphere – insights that broader studies may miss (Alam, 2021; Collis, 2024). The flexibility of case study research is also beneficial, allowing for various data collection methods, like semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings. As such, case studies can yield a multi-faceted and holistic understanding of the mental health experiences of the learners (Lin, 2022).

The case study design facilitates a thorough exploration of issues like homophobia and mental health within personal and social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on one secondary school in the Pinetown district, the study investigated how homophobia manifests in that specific school environment. Although some findings may be generalised, results from this school may not apply to others with different populations and cultures (Alase, 2017). To address this, the researcher employed triangulation, using various data generation methods (semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings) and perspectives.

4.4 Research Paradigm

According to Silverman (2020), the term ‘research paradigm’ refers to the underlying philosophical or theoretical framework that guides research strategy. It encompasses the

researcher's ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Sławecki, 2018; Cresswell et al., 2020; Muzari et al., 2022). In this study, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted. To effectively present this approach, I will begin with an overview of the interpretivist paradigm, discussing its appropriateness and significance. The researcher will also outline the main advantages and disadvantages of applying it to this study. Following this, the researcher will discuss the assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, and axiology and how these assumptions apply to this research.

According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), the interpretivist paradigm involves qualitative research that aims to understand the meanings and experiences of individuals within their social contexts. Junjie and Yingxin (2022) argue that the interpretivist paradigm is socially constructed, emphasising that researchers must immerse themselves in the participants' environments to gain a nuanced understanding of their perspectives on the issues being studied. Interpretivism is the antithesis of positivist approaches, which prioritise objectivity and scalability; instead, it focuses on providing in-depth information that is specific to a given context (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivist paradigm is valuable for studying phenomena that are deeply rooted in the social and cultural contexts of individuals experiencing discrimination or marginalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sławecki, 2018; Muzari et al., 2022).

In the context of this study, the interpretivist paradigm was particularly appropriate because it effectively captured the rich and subjective experiences related to the homophobia faced by the participant learners. Supporting this view, Seabra et al. (2022) argue that a school environment characterised by harassment and bullying creates conditions where homophobia is not just a personal issue, but one that can profoundly damage the mental health of any learner. Using an interpretivist approach enabled the researcher to explore how these learners perceive and understand their experiences with homophobia, the impact of these experiences on their psychological wellbeing, and how they navigate their social environments. As noted by Poth et al. (2024) in their research, this paradigm enhances our understanding of the emotional and psychological complexities involved.

Expanding on these points, utilising an interpretivist paradigm in my study enabled me to gain a deep understanding of the complex emotional and social experiences associated with homophobia. The interpretivist approach to uncovering individuals' perspectives and their coping mechanisms in response to perceived discrimination results in rich and nuanced insights

that are often overlooked in quantitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Denzin et al. (2023) assert that the interpretivist paradigm is particularly useful in building rapport and creating a safe environment for learners to share their personal experiences with homophobia. However, as mentioned before, the interpretivist paradigm has a key disadvantage: researcher bias, which can influence findings (Cresswell et al., 2020). To address this, the researcher practiced reflexivity, by documenting my biases and using triangulation through diverse data generation methods and peer reviews to strengthen credibility. These strategies improve the trustworthiness of interpretative research and promote a more balanced, accurate understanding of participants' experiences (Patton, 2015).

4.4.1 Overview of Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Patton (2015) describes ontology, epistemology, and axiology as foundational concepts in research philosophy concepts that influence how research is designed, conducted, and interpreted. Mertens (2015) defines ontology as relating to what exists and the nature of reality. According to Denzin et al. (2023), the ontological perspective in research indicates whether the researcher views reality as objective and external or subjective and shaped by human experiences. On the other hand, epistemology focuses on the nature of knowledge and how it is obtained (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Cresswell and Poth (2018) argue that epistemology addresses questions relating to valid knowledge and the researcher-participant relationship. Rosida et al. (2023) define axiology as encompassing the role of values in research, particularly the ethical aspect and the impact of the researcher's values on the study. Together, these concepts guide the research process influencing the choice of methodology, methods, and interpretation of data (Klakegg & Tvedt, 2024).

4.4.2 Ontology Assumptions

In this study, ontology played a crucial role in capturing researcher's understanding of homophobia and its effects on learner's psychological wellbeing. An ontological perspective that views homophobia as a socially constructed experience creates space for examining how learners perceive and internalise such experiences (Rosida et al., 2023). Conversely, Napitu et al. (2021) acknowledge that while homophobia contributes to mental health outcomes, these outcomes are also influenced by the learner's cognitive and social environments in which these experiences occur. On an epistemological level, this study aligns with an interpretivist approach, exploring learners' experiences based on their fundamental understanding and how

they construct knowledge about the impact of homophobia on their mental health, as supported by Cresswell and Poth (2018).

4.4.3 Epistemology Assumptions

This study conducts an exploration of the experience of learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district, examined through the lens of epistemology. The aim is to understand how knowledge about these learners is constructed and interpreted. Adopting an interpretivist approach, the study emphasised that mental health challenges experienced by learners subjected to homophobia cannot be fully understood through objective, rationalistic, or scientific approaches. Instead, it focuses on the subjective lived experiences of these individuals. From this perspective, knowledge regarding learners' anxiety and depression cannot be adequately using only objective measures (Rosida et al., 2023). Patton (2015) expands on this, highlighting that knowledge can be measured through narratives that reflect personal images, emotions, and coping strategies arising from experiences of homophobia (Patton, 2015). This insight led to the adoption of qualitative data generation methods, such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations and drawings. These approaches offer a rich, contextualised perspective on how homophobia impacts the psychological wellbeing of learners, providing a deeper understanding of the unique challenges they face as well as their resilience (McConnell & Birkett, 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2024; Verly, 2024).

4.4.4 Axiology Assumptions

Axiology is particularly relevant in this study because it involves the ethical considerations of conducting research on sensitive topics such as homophobia, anxiety, and depression (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). According to Mertens (2015), a researcher's values influence every aspect of the study, from the choice of research topic to the interpretation of data. Smyrnova et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of researchers approaching their studies with axiological awareness, which includes qualities such as empathy, respect, and commitment to minimising harm to participants. In this study, the researcher was mindful of the ethical implications of exploring deeply personal and potentially distressing experiences, and participants were supported throughout the research process. Ultimately, the study aimed to enhance the literature on interventions that promote inclusivity and ensure effective learning within educational settings. It also emphasises advocacy for the mental wellbeing and rights of LGBTQIA+ learners in schools.

4.5 Target Population

In qualitative research, the target population refers to a group of individuals whose characteristics, experiences, or views are particularly relevant to the study (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that this population provides the contexts and insights necessary for addressing the research questions, enabling a deeper understanding of research phenomena.

The South African educational sector is diverse, encompassing a total of 24,000 schools, which include primary, secondary, and special needs institutions (DBE, 2024). School learners are not only engaged in academic learning but also in the social dynamics of their schools (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). The interactions, coping strategies, and experiences of acceptance or exclusion that learners face can significantly affect their academic success and personal development, especially in environments where issues such as homophobia are prevalent (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020).

This study focuses on a specific group of secondary school learners in the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These learners were selected due to their unique challenges related to identity and acceptance as they struggle to form positive self-identities. Additionally, these challenges are exacerbated by the nature of homophobia in the school environment (Lavan et al., 2024). Research has shown that homophobic bullying in schools is closely related to increased anxiety and depression in LGBTQIA+ learners where support systems may be limited or non-inclusive (Bos et al., 2021).

This study aimed to understand how the local social and educational context shapes learners' mental health, particularly in a multiracial and socio-economically diverse school setting. It sought to explore not only the psychological impacts of homophobia but also how learners cope with these experiences and which intervention strategies could be adopted to foster more inclusive and supportive school environments.

The target population for this study consists of secondary school learners in the Pinetown district, rather than primary school learners or teachers. This focus is due to the fact that adolescence is characterised by developmental and social complexities, and the effects of homophobia have a more pronounced impact on the mental health of adolescents (Ibbad et al., 2022). During the secondary school years, forming independent identities and seeking acceptance from peers are central to their experience. Consequently, experiences with

homophobia can amplify the levels of anxiety, depression, and various forms of psychological distress amongst learners (Makover et al., 2019).

In contrast, primary school learners typically do not face the same pressures to develop their identities and conform to peer norms (Gao et al., 2022). Secondary school learners often experience greater social pressures and bullying relating to sexual orientation, which can negatively affect their mental health due to homophobic discrimination (Kumar & Akoijam, 2017; Lehtonen, 2021; Pirlott & Cook, 2021). Furthermore, while teachers can identify aspects of the school climate, they may not fully recognise the direct impact of homophobia on learners. This curtails their ability to accurately report on the mental health challenges that learners face (Karki et al., 2022). By focusing on secondary learners, this study captured the nuanced emotional and psychological challenges of adolescents grappling with homophobia, aiming to develop evidence-based interventions that effectively address their needs within the school environment.

4.6 Sampling

In their qualitative study, Guest et al. (2013) explain that sampling involves selecting a subset of respondents from a larger population. Poth et al. (2024) support this notion, emphasising that obtaining a representative sample is crucial for generalising the study's findings to a broader population. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) add that a researcher must decide "what, where, or whom" to observe or interview to gain insights into the phenomenon being studied.

4.6.1 Sampling Techniques

Creswell et al. (2020) state that sampling methods can be either random or purposive, allowing researchers to select individuals who can provide insight into the phenomenon being studied. In this research, purposive sampling was employed to gather in-depth information specifically from selected school learners at a secondary school in the Pinetown district. This rich information was instrumental in addressing this study's three main research questions. Singh (2022) argues that purposive sampling involves the researcher intentionally choosing participants based on the qualities they possess.

4.6.2 Sampling Size

In a qualitative study, the sample size refers to the number of respondents selected to provide more detailed information about the study's focus, rather than aiming for broad generalisability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research typically employs smaller groups of participants

to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences, beliefs, and perceptions within a particular context (Boddy, 2016).

This study purposefully selected four secondary school learners from one school in the Pinetown district. By focusing on these four learners, the researcher aimed to conduct an in-depth exploration of their experiences with homophobia-related anxiety and depression, particularly within the school environment. Although the sample size of four may seem small, with over 13 million learners in South African schools (DBE, 2024), it was selected to provide detailed insights into individual experiences and coping strategies within the secondary school in question. This approach aligns with the qualitative goal of uncovering complex and nuanced experiences rather than simply meeting statistical targets (Patton, 2015; Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Table 4.6.2.1: Sampling Size

Province	Sampled Grades	Number of Participants
KwaZulu-Natal (KZN)	10	1
KwaZulu-Natal (KZN)	11	1
KwaZulu-Natal (KZN)	12	2
Total	3	4

Secondary school learners were selected without particular emphasis on age, gender, or race, provided they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The sampling criteria required that four secondary school learners had experienced homophobic discrimination and were willing to share their experiences and insights that led to feelings of anxiety and depression. Specifically, the first participant was to be in Grade 10, the second in Grade 11, and the last two in Grade 12. Participants needed to have the “ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner” (Etikan et al., 2016, p.2). This approach allows participants to express their personal, hidden experiences and viewpoints on the phenomenon being studied (Sim et al., 2018; Ames et al., 2019; Young & Casey, 2019; Gill, 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

4.7 Process of Selecting Participants

The selection of participants involves identifying and selecting individuals who meet the study’s inclusion criteria (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Saunders & Townsend, 2018). In this research, relevant data were generated from a purposive sample of four participants in Grades

10 to 12. As indicated above, one participant was selected from Grade 10, one from Grade 11, and two from Grade 12. This sample size was deemed sufficient for this qualitative study, which aimed to explore the homophobic experiences and perspectives of secondary school learners in this region.

With the school's assistance, the researcher selected participants who openly identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community or had experienced homophobic bullying, as documented in the school database. This ensured that the sample was relevant to the research questions and allowed for accurate data generation (Cresswell et al., 2020; Alam, 2021). Participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds due to the multicultural setting of the school. Morse (2020) emphasises that diversity is essential for understanding how the phenomenon being studied affects different social contexts. By including participants from varying backgrounds, this study gained a broader perspective on how intersecting factors – such as race, cultural influences, and homophobia – contribute to anxiety and depression, as well as their consequences for mental health.

The study intentionally selected learners from Grades 10 to 12 who were more mature and better able to understand their experiences. This approach provided valuable data on the psychological impacts of homophobia, which would be less likely to emerge if a random sampling method was used. Sibanyoni et al. (2023) emphasise the need for caution when observing anxiety and depression amongst learners, particularly in a diverse area such as the Pinetown district. The participants were intentionally chosen to investigate these mental health issues relating to incidents of homophobia, providing insights into how different learners manage these challenges. This method of study focuses on the underlying phenomena and improves the reliability and validity of the results generated (Poth, 2023). Consequently, the research generated data that are both balanced and inclusive of the broader issues at play. This approach offers insights into the mental health concerns faced by vulnerable learners in the LGBTQIA+ group (Allen, 2020).

4.8 Data Generation Methods

Data generation methods are defined as the techniques used to generate participant data (Patton, 2015). In this study, multiple qualitative data generation methods were employed to explore anxiety and depression amongst secondary school learners experiencing homophobia. The methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings. Each of these methods was carefully selected to provide a

comprehensive understanding of how the learners experience and cope with homophobia, as well as the effects it has on their mental health.

4.8.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

As defined by Angrosino (2019), semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data generation method in which the interviewer follows a flexible interview guide and conducts free conversation with the targeted participants. Alam (2021) explains that for each open-ended question in the guide, there is an opportunity for participants to provide in-depth responses on the research topic. This format allowed me to explore new areas of discussion that arise in the conversation. In this qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were utilised as a data generation method.

➤ Suitability and Relevance

This study was particularly suited for semi-structured interviews because this interview style provides a platform for learners to share their personal experiences with homophobia and its impact on their mental wellbeing. In these interviews, the researcher explore the deeper aspects of anxiety and depression, capturing the emotions, thoughts, and reactions of the participants. The flexibility of this method allowed me to examine variations in individual experiences and the coping strategies these learners employed. This approach offered rich and detailed data necessary to understand the complex psychological challenges these learners face due to homophobic experiences.

➤ Observing Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to observe behavioural signs of anxiety and depression, such as hesitation, nervousness, and emotional distress, when learners discuss their experiences with homophobia. This observation aligns with the findings of Gill et al. (2015) who point out that the in-depth nature of such interviews allows the interviewer to notice non- verbal cues and the emotional tone of the conversation. These cues can provide insight into the psychological experiences of the participants (Jepkorir et al., 2024). The researcher also fosters rapport and builds trust, creating a healthy environment that encourages learners to express their feelings of anxiety and depression related to homophobia (Ngonyani, 2018; Al Aqad et al., 2021). This approach offers important insights into the impact that homophobia has on their lives (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

4.8.2 Focus Group Discussions

There is currently no consensus among scholars regarding the definition of a focus group discussion. In this qualitative study, focus group discussions were used as one of the methods for data generation. According to Guillemin (2016), a focus group discussion involves discussions with a small group of participants, typically comprising between 4 and 10 people, guided under the direction of a facilitator. This method encourages interaction amongst participants, allowing them to share their experiences and views in response to each other's comments (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Often, focus groups reveal insights that are more difficult to obtain through individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Guillemin, 2016).

➤ Suitability and Relevance:

The focus group discussions were appropriate and relevant to this study because they provided a platform for learners to share their experiences of homophobia in a supportive group setting. This method allowed the researcher to gather the group's collective understanding of the effects of homophobia on mental health. Additionally, the researcher was able to identify common themes as well as differences in participants' experiences. This aligns with the views of Krueger and Casey (2015), who argue that social dynamics and peer influence can be observed during participants' interactions, and these factors can either facilitate or mitigate the psychological impact of homophobia.

➤ Observing Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression

During the focus group discussions, the researcher observed how group dynamics function and how participants reacted to discussions on homophobia. When sensitive topics were introduced, signs of anxiety or discomfort often emerged, and the ways that participants interacted with one another provided clues about their coping mechanisms (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Pirlott & Cook, 2021). According to Morgan (2019), participants who exhibit higher degrees of reservation and reluctance to speak may be prone to higher levels of anxiety or depression. Therefore, it was crucial for the researcher to create a safe and supportive environment that encouraged open dialogue while remaining attentive to the emotional wellbeing of the participants.

4.8.3 Non-Participant Observations

Non-participant observation entails conducting research by observing participants in their natural environment without actively engaging with them (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Lester & O'Reilly, 2021). Depending on the level of involvement of the researcher in the observed environment, observations could be either participant or non-participant in nature (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this study, the researcher utilised non-participant observations as a key data generation method.

➤ Suitability and Relevance

The researcher chose non-participant observations because they allowed me to witness real-time behaviours and interactions that might not be fully articulated in interviews or focus group discussions (Spradley, 2017). Through these observations, the researcher observed how homophobia manifests in learners' daily experiences. The researcher observed how learners navigate situations involving homophobia, what it signifies to them, and whether it contributes to feelings of anxiety and depression. Non-participant observations are invaluable for identifying non-verbal behaviours and social cues that indicate psychological distress, which may not be easily communicated verbally (Angrosino, 2019).

➤ Observing Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression

Through careful and subtle non-participant observations, the researcher identified signs of anxiety and depression in learners. For instance, the researcher observed several learners withdrawing from social interaction, exhibiting changes in behaviour, and showing signs of distress in response to homophobic comments or actions. These observations were conducted during the teaching and learning process, as well as during break times and in playgrounds, to generate accurate and useful data. To gain a better understanding of the psychological challenges associated with coping with homophobia in real-time settings, non-participant observations offer a unique opportunity to see how learners react to homophobia as happens (Elipse et al., 2022). The observational data generated can be triangulated with the findings from the interviews and focus groups to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the effect of homophobia on mental health (Spradley, 2017).

4.8.4 Drawings

Gill et al. (2015) regard drawings as a method of visual data generation where participants are encouraged to create art to express their ideas, feelings, and experiences. This approach is

particularly valuable when addressing sensitive topics, as it allows individuals to convey complex emotional experiences that they may find difficult to articulate (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Ngonyani, 2018; Jepkorir et al., 2024). In this study, I used drawings as the final data generation method.

➤ **Suitability and Relevance**

This research was particularly well-suited to using drawings as an innovative and relevant method, especially since the researcher was working with school learners who found it difficult to articulate their experiences of homophobia and its effect on their mental health. Homophobia, which leads to anxiety and depression, affects learners differently than it does other groups, such as teenagers and adults (Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024; Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024). Encouraging participants to express themselves through art creates an opportunity to further explore their emotional and psychological experiences (Garro et al., 2022). From a research perspective, drawings can provide a rich source of unspoken data that complements verbal accounts (Guillemin, 2015).

➤ **Observing Psychological Challenges: Anxiety and Depression**

The content and themes of the drawings can be analysed within a learning context, helping researchers to better understand the learners' experiences of anxiety and depression. Dark colours, chaotic lines, and imagery depicting isolation or fear indicate psychological distress (Allen, 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Daniel, 2022). The drawings themselves may reveal insights into the emotional state of the participants, as signs of hesitation, frustration, or reluctance to engage in the task might indicate underlying anxiety or depressive conditions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

4.9. Data Analysis Methods

Saldaña (2016) notes that data analysis methods involve organising, cleaning, and analysing the data generated. This study utilised a combination of thematic and narrative methods for data analysis.

4.9.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was originally developed as a means of coding qualitative data and is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Silverman, 2020). In this study, thematic analysis was applied to

data generated from semi-structured; interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings. It was particularly relevant to my investigation of anxiety and depression among learners experiencing homophobia, as it allowed me to identify, analyse and report themes or patterns present in the qualitative data. This aligns closely with the study's core questions regarding learners' experiences, coping strategies, and the mental impact of homophobia on them.

4.9.1.1 Steps in Thematic Analysis

➤ Familiarisation with Data

In the process of familiarising themselves with the data, a researcher begins by reading and re-reading the transcripts or notes (Ryan & Bernard, 2019). In this study, I began by transcribing the semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, non-observations, and drawings. This initial step of any project involves repeatedly reviewing the transcripts to immerse oneself in the data generated (Alam, 2021). The data for the drawings include accounts provided by participants, together with the researcher's observational notes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). At this stage, a researcher can gain deep insights into the content and identify initial patterns and ideas (Nowell et al., 2019).

➤ Generating Initial Codes

Patton (2020) discusses the generation of initial codes as a stage in which researchers systematically analyse data, identifying segments within the texts and assigning them tags or codes that accurately describe their data content. After becoming familiar with the data, the researcher began my analysis by closely examining the generated information and coding it. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that coding involves identifying and highlighting the core elements of the text (or other symbols) and organising them into codes that represent their essence. Examples of these codes might include "feeling isolated", "peer rejection", or "resilience" (Neuendorf, 2018; Gormley et al., 2019; Patton, 2020). This coding process was applied to all interviews, including data forms, non-participant observations, focus group discussions, and drawings.

➤ Searching for Themes

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), after coding the data, the researcher begins to group these codes into potential themes. A theme is a broader category that has significant aspects of the data relevant to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). In line with this, I then

categorised the codes into possible themes. Research questions identify broader patterns that reveal important insights within the generated data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). For example, the theme might be “Coping Mechanisms” with sub-themes like “Seeking Support from Friends” or “Avoidance Strategies” (Alam, 2021). A study by Gale et al. (2019) highlights that this step of thematic analysis involves combining multiple codes to create overarching themes.

➤ **Reviewing Themes**

Once the data is analysed, the researcher refines the themes to correspond as closely as possible to the data (Hennink et al., 2020). This process may involve merging similar themes, discarding unnecessary elements, and breaking down larger themes into smaller, more specific themes (Trancey, 2020; Miles et al., 2019). At this stage, the researcher worked on refining the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. By reviewing the themes, the researcher ensures that they are coherent and distinct, which aids in structuring the data (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Humble & Mozelius, 2022).

➤ **Defining and Naming Themes**

In this stage, Miles et al. (2019) states that the researcher must clearly define each theme and assign a name that encapsulates it. This involves writing detailed descriptions of each theme and discussing how they relate to one another (Guest et al., 2020). In this study, the researcher have defined each theme and provided in-depth descriptions. The researcher also examined how these themes connect to one another and how they address the broader research questions. As emphasised by Guest et al. (2020), succinctly naming the themes is essential, as it sets the stage for how the findings will be communicated.

➤ **Writing Up**

According to Tracy (2020), this final stage entails weaving the theme into a narrative that addresses the research questions. In this study, this was accomplished by unpacking quotes and examples from the generated data, explaining how the themes emerged, and discussing their implications in relation to the existing literature on homophobia, anxiety, and depression in South African schools.

4.9.2 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a qualitative method that focuses on how people construct and tell their stories (Clarke & Braun, 2021). In this study, narrative analysis was applied to the drawings

and accompanying descriptions provided by the participants. The analysis focused on how the stories were told, allowing for a deeper understanding of how participants conveyed their experiences of homophobia. The drawings served as visual narratives and were interpreted by considering the stories they depicted along with the verbal explanations provided by the participants.

4.9.2.1 Steps in Narrative Analysis

➤ Chronological Mapping

Gale et al. (2019) explain chronological mapping as a research process where events are presented in the order they occur over time. The researcher organises the sequence of events to illustrate the story better (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Humble & Mozelius, 2022). In this stage, the researcher organised the narratives — drawings and descriptions — in sequential order to identify how the learners' experiences unfolded. This step assisted in uncovering the ordered sequence of feelings, incidents, and strategies chosen to cope with anxiety, depression, and homophobia.

➤ Identifying Core Narratives

According to Saldaña (2021), this step involves the identification of common storylines or themes that exist across different narratives. Nowell et al. (2019) note that core narratives are the central stories that arise from the data, representing shared experiences or patterns. The researcher examines the plots or narratives that emerge in many of the drawings and descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). During this stage, one may become aware of recurring themes, such as “a journey of acceptance” or “overcoming adversity,” occurring in one or more descriptions and drawings (Tracy, 2020).

➤ Analytical Structure and Content

The participants shared various stories about their experiences with homophobia, which contributed to anxiety and depression. At this stage, the researcher carefully examined both the structure of the narratives (how the story was told) and the content (what the story was about). This dual focus allows the researcher to understand not only what learners experience but also how they make sense of those experiences (Patton, 2020).

4.9.3 Relevance and Suitability of Data Analysis Methods

4.9.3.1 Thematic Analysis

In this study, the thematic analysis was particularly suitable. Nowell et al. (2019) argue that it provides flexibility and facilitates a comprehensive analysis of various types of qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and drawings. The data generation methods employed in this study aimed to generate accurate data. Thematic analysis was used to explore the complicated phenomena being studied and facilitated the examination of psychological consequences by identifying both clear evidence and subtle themes.

4.9.3.2 Narrative Analysis

This data analysis approach was well-suited to this study. By using narrative analysis for drawings and accompanying narratives, the researcher aimed to effectively capture the emotional and personal dimensions of learners' experiences of homophobia, which contributed to their anxiety and depression. This method emphasises the importance of understanding how individuals who experience homophobia interpret their experiences (Gormley et al., 2019; Patton, 2020). This insight was critical to understanding the psychological impact of homophobia on learners.

4.9.4 Data Generation Procedure

4.9.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

In semi-structured interviews, a systematic approach to questioning was used. This method often includes open-ended questions, allowing greater flexibility for the interviewer to follow up on interesting answers or to introduce new topics that may emerge during the conversation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach is particularly useful for exploring participants' feelings, beliefs, and experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied (Spradley, 2017). By doing so, it generates detailed and nuanced data that is both accurate and relevant to the study's research questions (Yin, 2018).

In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with learners who were willing and available to share their experiences with homophobia. During the interviews, guided the conversation with open-ended questions.

4.9.4.2 Focus Group Discussions

In a focus group discussion, a small group of participants discuss a specific issue while guided by a researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). In this study, the group setting encouraged interaction between participants, allowing them to share and compare their unique experiences. The use of focus group discussions proved to be an effective method for exploring the participants' collective views and social dynamics. This is supported by Morgan (2019), who asserts that focus group discussions offer valuable insights into how participants perceive and discuss a topic in a group context, highlighting shared beliefs and ideologies.

In this instance, the researcher arranged a group discussion with the four participants to explore their shared and differing experiences related to homophobia. This method effectively revealed social dynamics and collective coping strategies.

4.9.4.3 Non-Participant Observations

As discussed, non-participant observation refers to observing participants in their natural environment without interacting with them (Mitchell, 2018; Marietto, 2018; Lo et al., 2023; Handley et al., 2023). This method requires exceptionally detailed notes on what the researcher observes, including behaviours, interactions, and the context in which they occur (Silverman, 2020). This method allowed the researcher to gather context-specific data on how learners react and behave during the teaching and learning process, during break times, and on playgrounds. This approach was also useful for understanding the social environment and dynamics that are not easily accessible through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, or drawings. This was beneficial in gathering contextual data on how homophobia discrimination occurs, its impact on learners' behaviour, and how it contributes to their experiences of anxiety and depression.

4.9.4.4 Drawings

This method involves participants creating drawings to express their experiences, feelings, or thoughts on a particular topic (Ryan & Bernard, 2019). Afterward, the participants discuss their drawings with the researcher to explore the meanings behind them (Patton, 2020). Verbal communication of feelings and experiences can sometimes be challenging, but drawings can help access participants' emotions and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). Ryan and Bernard (2019) argue that drawing can be especially beneficial in studies involving children or

vulnerable populations due to the creative and nonverbal nature of drawings. The researcher asked participants to create drawings that represented their experiences with homophobia. The researcher then sought to understand the meanings behind the drawings by asking the participants to explain their work. This method allows participants to voice feelings that may be difficult to articulate using conventional language (Nowell et al., 2019).

4.9.5 Trustworthiness

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the strong value of evidence and confidence in the data, interpretations, and strategies used to ensure the study's quality. Conversely, Nowell et al. (2019) state that for a study to be deemed trustworthy, it must include the following elements: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. In this study, I ensured trustworthiness by addressing each of these aspects.

4.9.5.1 Credibility

➤ Definition and Importance

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the data and the interpretations made by the researcher (Connelly, 2019). This ensures that the findings accurately represent the participant's lived experiences and that the researcher's interpretations are plausible (Cresswell et al., 2020). Credibility is often considered the most important component of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Application to the Study: To ensure the credibility of this study, several strategies were employed, as follows:

➤ Triangulation

Multiple data generation methods were utilised to gather accurate information from the participants, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings. Triangulation allows for the corroboration of findings across various sources and methods, contributing to the overall credibility of the data collected (Gunawan, 2019).

➤ Member Checking

After the semi-structured interviews and group discussions, the participants were given an opportunity to review my interpretations of their responses. This step, referred to as member checking, was crucial to ensuring the trustworthiness of this study. Member checking is a

method used to verify that participants' views and responses are correctly recorded and represented, thereby reducing the risk of misrepresentation (Motulsky, 2021; McKim, 2023; Soysal, 2024).

➤ **Prolonged Engagement**

During the data generation process, the researcher spent considerable time as an active observer, interacting with learners in the school environment. This experience was highly beneficial as it allowed me to build trust and establish a bond with the participants, leading to a deeper understanding of their experiences with homophobia and their coping mechanisms. Researchers such as Hadi and Closs (2019) acknowledge that prolonged engagement enables researchers to establish trust with participants and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context necessary to capture their experiences accurately.

➤ **Relevance to the Study**

Credibility is essential in this study as it addresses sensitive issues like homophobia, anxiety, and depression (Nowell et al., 2019; Shufutinsky, 2020). This focus on credibility was particularly relevant to my aim of exploring the homophobic experiences of secondary school learners and understanding how these experiences contribute to anxiety and depression. Additionally, credibility plays a significant role in ensuring that the participants feel heard and that their experiences are accurately represented (Bang, 2024). This maintained the ethical integrity and validity of the study.

4.9.5.2 Dependability

➤ **Definition and Importance**

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of research findings over time (Hadi & Closs, 2019). Birt et al. (2019) add that dependability ensures that the research process is logical, traceable, and well-documented, allowing others to replicate the study if necessary. In qualitative research, dependability is akin to reliability in quantitative research (Birt et al., 2019).

Application to the Study: This study followed specific steps to ensure dependability:

➤ **Audit Trail**

I maintained a detailed audit trail throughout the research process, from data generation to data analysis. This included keeping records of raw data, documenting coding decisions and theme

development, and noting any changes made to the research plan. This trail can be examined by an external auditor or a peer reviewer to ensure that the proper research process is consistently applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

➤ **Reflexive Journal**

As part of the research process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal which documented participants' thoughts, decisions, and reflections throughout the study. This practice helps to enhance self-awareness and prevents personal biases from improperly influencing the findings (Alam, 2021). Furthermore, keeping a reflexive journal not only fosters greater empathy and sensitivity towards participants' experiences but also promotes continuous, methodologically reflective research practices, leading to more adaptive and ethically sound research (Mackenzie et al., 2018).

➤ **Relevance to the Study**

Credibility is vital in this study, which examines the complex issues of homophobia, anxiety, and depression (Nowell et al., 2019). The research investigated how homophobia contributes to anxiety and depression. To produce reliable conclusions that endure over time, it is crucial to carefully assess procedural credibility (Elo et al., 2019). In addition, reflexive journaling is an important qualitative method that allows both the researcher and the participants to document and process their experiences relating to the phenomenon being studied (Houston & Lumsden, 2020).

4.9.5.3 Transferability

➤ **Definition and Importance**

In essence, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied to other contexts or settings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Unlike generalisability in quantitative research, transferability does not aim for broader application but rather seeks to provide sufficient detail for others to assess whether the findings are relevant to their context (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

Application to the Study: To enhance transferability, this study employed the following methods:

➤ **Thick Description:**

In this study, the researcher provided a comprehensive description of the research contexts, participants, their experiences, coping strategies, and how these factors contribute to anxiety and depression. The researcher also included a thorough overview of the school environment, the demographics of the learners, and the social dynamics involved. A study by Carter et al. (2020) confirms that such detailed contextualisation is essential, as it allows other researchers or practitioners to consider the applicability of the findings to their settings.

➤ **Purposive Sampling:**

As mentioned in the section dealing with data generation methods, purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who were willing and available to provide rich and relevant data for this study. In this study, the researcher purposively selected a diverse group of participants from the LGBTQIA+ community at the school, specifically those who had experienced homophobic bullying or discrimination. The goal was to gather the findings that could apply to similar settings with comparable characteristics.

➤ **Relevance to the Study**

Experiences of homophobia, anxiety, and depression can vary widely across different schools and communities, making transferability essential (Devi et al., 2023; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024). This approach provided detailed contextual information to help others assess the applicability of the findings in their own settings, enhancing the research's overall usefulness.

4.9.5.4 Confirmability

➤ **Definition and Importance**

Confirmability means that outcomes of a study are influenced primarily by the participants and the data they provide, rather than by the researcher's views, biases, or motivations (Shenton, 2020). In qualitative research, maintaining objectivity is crucial, though achieving complete neutrality is often challenging (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Cresswell et al., 2020). However, transparency is key for ensuring ethical integrity and validity of the research (Leung, 2019; Lester & O'Reilly, 2021).

Application to the Study: In this study, the researcher implemented several strategies to ensure confirmability:

➤ **Triangulation**

This study employs multiple data methods and sources to cross-check findings and ensure that the results are based on the data rather than the researcher's assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell et al., 2020). To achieve this, the researcher utilised semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings to generate accurate data.

➤ **External Audit**

An external audit, conducted by a peer or expert in qualitative research, provides an objective review of processes and findings to ensure confirmability (Noble & Smith, 2019). In this study, the external audit was carried out by a peer who has considerable expertise in qualitative research. This external review enhances confirmability by ensuring that the conclusions are based on the data (Tobin & Begley, 2019).

➤ **Relevance to the Study**

Confirmability was crucial to this study, as it focuses on homophobia — the primary issue being examined — and aimed to understand how it contributes to anxiety and depression in secondary school learners. The ethical integrity and validity of the research are upheld by ensuring that the findings are grounded in the participants' voices rather than the researcher's interpretations (Cope, 2019).

4.9.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are guidelines that researchers should follow while conducting research (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Cypress (2020) asserts that these principles encompass several key elements: respondents should not be subjected to harm; researchers must show respect; full consent must be obtained; privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity must be ensured, the use of exaggeration and misleading information must be adhered to; and honesty and transparency, free from bias, must be maintained throughout the research process.

Ethical clearance for this study was rigorously secured through several steps. Before conducting the research, the researcher applied for and obtained full consent from the Department of Education (DoE), received approval from the UKZN ethics committee, and acquired a letter of

approval from the school where the research took place. Additionally, the researcher ensured that every participant provided explicit consent after fully understanding the purpose of the study and their rights within it. The researcher prioritised the safety and wellbeing of all participants, respecting their perspectives and avoiding any assumptions. Each participant was required to sign a consent form guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. Additionally, participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without facing consequences.

It is important to note that some of the selected participants were under 18 years old. For minors, participation should only be allowed with the prior approval of their parents or guardians (Resnik, 2018; Pietilä et al., 2019; Hasan et al., 2021). In line with this, I collaborated with the parents of underage participants, obtaining their consent on behalf of their children. The parents received comprehensive information regarding the study and signed letters permitting their children's participation. As stated by Chivanga and Monyai (2021), providing false information in or regarding a study affects the trustworthiness of the study. Accordingly, the researcher ensured that they did not engage in any form of deception or dissemination of false information at any point in the research process. This was critical to maintaining the ethical integrity and validity of the study.

4.9.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research approach and design, including the research paradigm, target population, and sampling methods. It described participant selection, data generation and analysis methods, and addressed trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The next chapter will present the findings and analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The Lord always hears and rescues the righteous out of all their troubles whenever they cry to Him. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:17-18, ESV).

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the study's research methodology, including the research paradigm, target population, and sampling techniques, along with participant selection, data generation and analysis, and ethical considerations.

This chapter focuses on the presentation and analysis of the data, as well as discussing the findings. The data generated from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, drawings, and non-participant observations were transcribed and coded to identify relevant themes.

As mentioned, the three research questions of the study are:

- What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- Why do they cope in the way that they do?

Based on these questions and the findings that emerged during the data generation process, the researcher developed the three key themes, set out in the table below.

Table 5.1.1: Themes

Themes:
1. Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological.
2. Coping Strategies.
3. Factors Influencing Coping Decisions.

5.2 Pseudonym

To ensure the confidentiality of participants and safeguard their identities, each individual was assigned a pseudonym. According to Lahman et al. (2015), a pseudonym is a fictitious name

used to disguise the identities of participants. They emphasise that this ethical practice helps to prevent the disclosure of participants' identities, particularly when sensitive information is being shared.

Table 5.2.1: Pseudonym

Participants	Pseudonym	Sexual Identity (Self-described)	Preferred Pronoun (Self-described)	Grade	Age
Participant 1	Rohan	Gay	He	10	16
Participant 2	Nomfundo	Lesbian	She	11	17
Participant 3	Sibusiso	Gay	He	12	18
Participant 4	Emily	Lesbian	She	12	20

5.3.1 Theme One: Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological

Stevenson (2023) asserts that homophobic individuals harbour prejudice against the members of the LGBTQIA+ community on social norms, religion, and personal experiences, particularly stemming from a limited understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The author expands on this by noting that such reactions can range from simple insults to social rejection, which perpetuates deeply rooted heteronormative beliefs that continue to foster prejudice and discrimination.

The study indicated a high prevalence of homophobia in school environments, with participants reporting anxiety and depression resulting from discrimination. It found significant homophobic tendencies amongst both learners and teachers, leading to behaviours such as making 'gay' jokes and deliberately isolating LGBTQIA+ learners. This may persist due to a lack of change within the school, which fails to embrace equal opportunity in accordance with the principles of Ubuntu (Kosciw et al., 2020). The present study emphasised the need for specialised measures to combat homophobia and the destructive psychological implications it can have in educational contexts.

Additionally, the findings indicated that some teachers and learners demonstrate homophobic behaviour at school. Participants reported experiencing various forms of homophobia including

verbal abuse, physical violence, and oppression. The most common kind of homophobic harassment reported was the use of derogatory labels. All participants shared that they often faced offensive name-calling from both learners and teachers. The slurs most frequently used were the Zulu terms *'isitabane/stabane'* and *'ungqingili'*, which are derogatory expressions aimed at denigrating the LGBTQIA+ community (Msibi, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2020). These words are equivalent to the slang terms *'faggot'* in English or *'moffie'* in Afrikaans (Regan, 2023). Participants reported that these terms were used daily to oppress LGBTQIA+ learners. During the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, they emphasised how pervasive and normalised those slurs were within their school, highlighting how deeply embedded verbal abuse had become in their environment. The participants' reflections are presented below:

5.3.1.1 Semi-Structured Interview Findings

Rohan:

"Yes ... [sorrowful] most of the learners call me names frequently, but I ignore them because ... [despondent] they're like that to many LGBTQIA+ learners. I remember this other day in class when we were doing group work, and I tried to participate in the group by answering a certain question. Unfortunately, these other two heterosexual boys just said I must keep quiet and called me stabane."

"Eish ... [teary-eyed] I kept quiet and acted fine although I was hurt, and this always stresses me. Sometimes, I feel like ... [a deep breath] it's better to be alone because no one likes me or cares about my feelings."

"Yeah ... I can say that experiencing homophobia affected my mental well-being in many ways. Uhm ... I've been experiencing nausea and trouble sleeping at night. And ... sometimes, I ... I feel ... hopeless and helpless. So, ... yeah ... I think I'm experiencing anxiety and depression."

Rohan's story indicates that homophobia has severe and lasting effects on the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners, manifesting through consistent name-calling and social exclusion. He recounted being called *'sitabane'* by his peers during group work. This public ridicule not only excluded Rohan but also devalued him within the classroom, despite the expectation of a constructivist learning environment that promotes social participation (Gillians & Cooper, 2022). This is clear from this comment, *"Yes ... [sorrowful] most of the learners*

call me names frequently, but I ignore them because ... [despondent] they're like that to many LGBTQIA+ learners ...” The normalised use of abusive language amongst learners indicates the prevailing inequality faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in educational settings (Ingoglia et al., 2020). Rawlings and Espelage (2020) assert that such bullying leads to feelings of isolation and shame, undermining one’s self-worth and contributing to increased levels of anxiety and depression. Similarly, while Rohan endured insults, he managed to mask his hurt, saying, *“I kept quiet and acted fine although I was hurt...”*. This demonstrates a lack of personal resilience; instead, he displays imposed resistance due to the lack of acceptance of his identity.

Rohan’s account of his decline into a deteriorating psychological state highlights the impact of consequential homophobia. He expressed, *“I have been experiencing nausea and trouble sleeping at night”* and *“... sometimes, I ... I feel ... hopeless and helpless.”* These statements reflect anxiety and depression, respectively (Reisner et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2021). It appears that others perceive him as a worthless being, and this perception, combined with the discrimination he faces, leads to a worsening of his mental health challenges, leaving him feeling vulnerable.

Lyonga (2022) notes that discrimination contributes to sexual minorities developing mental health disorders due to minority stress. Rohan’s remark, *“Sometimes, I feel like ... [a deep in and out breath] it’s better to be alone because no one likes me or cares about my feelings”* underscores how homophobia strips individuals of opportunities for social support. This lack of support can significantly increase the risk of mental illnesses (Roberts & Marx, 2018; Respress et al., 2018; Reygan, 2019)

These insights highlight the urgent need for schools to eliminate pro-homophobic policies, prevalent in many educational settings and to foster Ubuntu environments which promote the development of empathy, care, and respect amongst students (Roberts & Marx, 2018; Wang et al., 2021).

Nomfundo:

“My class teacher always calls me names like ‘stabane’ or ‘ngqingili’ in class. One day, [wheezing] he said I should stop acting like a boy because I’m not a boy. Whenever I’m with boys during breaks he fights me and beats me. He says I’m a girl ... so I must always be with other girls, not boys.”

“Someday in class, he teased me by the way I walk and speak. He says I want to be a boy and this irritates him. At that time, the whole class just laughed at me. This breaks my heart into pieces, ...[melancholic] because even if I try to explain my situation, they don’t just want to listen to me.”

“You know ... [weeping] they don’t care anymore about how I feel. That moment turns to be a nightmare to me. I feel like I can run away and never look back. This always makes me cry because they judge me.”

“Oh yeah ... I believe that experiencing homophobia contributed negatively to my mental health. I’m experiencing anxiety and depression because I find it hard to concentrate in class and I have heart palpitations. Another thing, I ... I ... have noticed that I have low self-esteem and continuous low mood.”

Nomfundo’s experiences illustrate that pervasive homophobia, particularly when endorsed by authority figures such as teachers, exacerbates symptoms of anxiety and depression. She recounted instances of name-calling, such as ‘*stabane*’ and ‘*ngqingili*’ from her teacher highlighting how power being misused to discriminate. Her teacher’s actions – abandoning her and subsequently humiliating her publicly for talking to boys, along with instances of physical abuse – represent some of the most severe violations of trust and safety that one can encounter in a school setting. Nomfundo reflected, *“This breaks my heart into pieces, ...[melancholic] because even if I try to explain my situation, they don’t just want to listen to me.”* Her experiences align with the findings of Wang et al. (2021), who opine that queer learners in South African schools are particularly vulnerable and continue to face discrimination from both peers and teachers. This compounds the already severe social exclusion and psychological distress that these learners endure (Lin & Liu, 2023).

Nomfundo describes herself as being prone to low mood, experiencing heart palpitations, and having difficulty concentrating in class due to the impact of homophobia on her mental wellbeing. These symptoms align with the criteria for anxiety and depression outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Stevenson, 2023). Her statement, *“I feel like I can run away and never look back”*, reflects the desperation and hopelessness she feels in a hostile environment. LGBTQIA+ individuals facing systemic discrimination are more susceptible to mental illness, as social rejection and stigmatisation significantly affect their emotional and psychological wellbeing (Valido et al., 2022; Rovira-Font & Vilanova-Soler, 2022; Rubey, 2024). Furthermore, Nomfundo’s experiences of having

“... *low self-esteem and continuous low mood*” reveal the impact of external hostility and internalised stigma.

Sibusiso:

“Yes, I was called names not only by learners at school but also by my father and some of my neighbours. Look, ... [laughs] I don’t care who says what about my sexual orientation. Some of my classmates call me ‘stabane’ and I don’t mind them.”

“I just told myself not to worry about how other homophobic people react towards me. Sometimes ... I feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Being not supported by your parent hits deeper. My father always calls me ‘stabane’ or ‘ngqingili’ at home ... [shedding tears] and he says I must stop my gay tendency and be a man.”

“Uhm ... even some of my neighbours call me ‘stabane’. They say this thing of being a gay is nonsense. They say that I was born as a boy, and I have a dick so, I must act like a man. They don’t even greet me or respond when I greet them. Eish ... [silence] It feels like the whole world rejects me.”

“Yes, I do ... believe that experiencing homophobia affected my mental well-being in some ways. Lately, I don’t want to spend time with people... I want to be alone in a dark room even during the day and cry. That makes me feel better. Sometimes, I can’t sleep and I sweat or shake a lot at night. Eish ... [teary-eyed] I always feel tearful in class and when I walk past other learners at school. So, ... I think these ways prove that I’m experiencing anxiety and depression.”

Understanding Sibusiso’s experience with homophobia provides valuable insight into the psychological health of LGBTQIA+ learners. His outward bravado, exemplified by the statement, *“I don’t care who says what about my sexual orientation”*, reveals the impact of discrimination on his wellbeing. Despite his attempts to appear tough and nonchalant, he continues to face harassment as a *‘sitabane’*, not only from his classmates at school, but also from his father and neighbours. This highlights the reality that homophobia is prevalent not just in educational settings but throughout society.

Furthermore, Sibusiso expresses deep hurt from his father’s rejection, commenting that, *“Being not supported by your parent hits deeper.”* This illustrates the social isolation that arises from family and societal rejection, which can lead to increased feelings of hopelessness and anxiety, as noted by Hatzenbuehler (2017). Additionally, Sibusiso’s experiences with neighbours who

choose to ignore him further depict the social exclusion faced by LGBTQIA+ people, deepening their feelings of rejection (Msibi, 2012; Ingoglia et al., 2020). These experiences align with the findings of Rawlings and Espelage (2020), which argue that queer people in South African communities endure multiple layers of marginalisation, stripping them of any feeling of belonging.

The impact of homophobia on Sibusiso is evident from the symptoms he describes, such as “*sleeplessness, sweating, and hopelessness*”, which are indicative of anxiety and depression (Boyd et al., 2024). He expresses, “*I want to be alone in a dark room even during the day and cry,*” stating, “*That makes me feel better.*” This reveals a tendency to isolate himself from a hostile world that continually sees him as inferior. His behaviour aligns with MST, which suggests that the constant experience of stigma and rejection leads to increasing and contributes to poor mental health (Hatzenbuehler, 2017). Sibusiso admitted that he not only cried in class but also when passing other learners. This emotional distress seems to impact all spheres of his life, particularly since education is a priority for learners and generally a dominant and influential aspect of their lives (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of promoting multilevel interventions that tackle homophobic and related issues at both the systemic and interpersonal levels, promoting environments that protect the human rights and mental health of LGBTQIA+ learners (Roberts & Marx, 2018; Russell & Fish, 2020; Mann & Jones, 2022).

Emily:

“I’ve experienced name-calling. Er ... [hacking] I don’t know where to start, because I’ve been through a lot.”

“Recently, there is this other boy who always approaches me and asks for love. He started early last year, and I still reject him. This frustrates him and starts calling me ‘stabane’. Uhm ... [sorrowful] late last year, he ganged up with her two friends and ... and ... [teary-eyed] they raped me after school when I was on my way home. Before that incident, they once beat me because I rejected their friend and chose another girl over him. You know ... [despondent] this is not life, but I’ll be strong ... [shedding tears].”

“Yes, I strongly believe that facing homophobia affected my state of mind. Firstly, ... [weeping] I don’t feel safe and sense of belonging at school. Even ... even ... at home, I lock myself in my room and cry every day. I think it’s better to die than to live such a

hell life. I have lost interest in things that I enjoyed. I ... I ... [sobbing] I always have suicidal thoughts, ... [silence] the only thing that can bring me peace is death. So, eish ... I think I'm experiencing anxiety and depression ..."

Emily's experience illustrates that homophobia can be extreme and negatively affect an individual's wellbeing in a multitude of ways. In this instance, Emily's experiences include assaults of a physical and sexual nature, as evidenced in her words, *'They raped me after school when I was on my way home.'* It is clear that the homophobia she has encountered on a daily basis has had a severe impact on her psychological state, as well as her bodily integrity and sense of self-determination. Her right to physical security has been violated, aggravating her psychological suffering and causing her to feel desperate and tearful. Emily's feeling of isolation is heightened by the fact that such violence has, to an extent, been normalised in society, with perpetrators displaying a troubling combination of toxic masculinity and homophobia. As Msibi (2012) points out, queer people in South Africa face extremely harsh physical abuse due to a social culture that discriminates against them and devalues their lives. Emily's assertion, *"You know ... [despondent] this is not life, but I'll be strong ... (shedding tears)"* reveals her ability to endure and resist oppressive circumstances. While this excerpt illustrates the systematic effects of relentless oppression on individuals, it is crucial to recognise how emotionally draining the process is.

The psychological impact on Emily is evident when she discusses thoughts of suicide and feelings of hopelessness. Emily's statement, *"... the only thing that can bring me peace is death."*, illustrates the severe impact of anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder that can result from homophobia. According to Hatzenbuehler (2017), MST posits that cumulative discrimination, stigma, and violence contribute to chronic stress, adversely affecting the mental health of the LGBTQIA+ community. When Emily expresses, *"I lock myself in my room and cry every day"*, it highlights how homophobia alienates her from sources of social support. Additionally, her inability to derive pleasure from activities she once enjoyed aligns with the DSM 5 diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder (Meyer, 2003). These findings underscore the urgent need to address the lack of safe sex information, the non-acceptance of same-sex relations, and the societal persecution of homosexuality. Solutions and interventions should include reporting homophobic hate crimes, enhancing protections for sexual and gender minorities, and implementing outreach support programmes focused on mental health.

In addition to these experiences, participants in the focus group reported experiencing name-calling and witnessing verbal abuse directed at other LGBTQIA+ learners. This homophobic violence served to humiliate those with non-normative sexual identities, revealing a disregard for the feelings and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners by both peers and teachers. All interviewees reported hearing derogatory terms directed at LGBTQIA+ individuals, and some learners and teachers used these terms to further discriminate against those associated with them. Participants shared their perspectives regarding name-calling in school, as detailed below.

5.3.1.2 Focus Group Discussion Findings

Rohan:

“You know ... [clearing throat] these guys are homophobic. I have seen other learners who are gays and lesbians being called names by homophobic boys. They reported to their class teachers, but no one took action.”

Rohan’s observation highlights that the school environment fosters a culture of homophobia, where derogatory terms and name-calling directed at LGBTQIA+ learners have become normalised and often overlooked by authority figures. This systemic neglect of homophobic bullying is evident in his comment, *“I have seen other learners who are gays and lesbians called names by homophobic boys.”* The lack of support from teachers is further illustrated by his remark, *“They reported to their class teachers but no one took action.”* This institutional apathy is compounded by the psychological harm experienced by LGBTQIA+ learners. Findings from the study by Gao et al. (2022) indicate that unaddressed homophobic behaviour not only perpetuates a hostile environment but also intensifies feelings of alienation and vulnerability amongst affected learners. Valido et al. (2022) theorise that the lack of support systems, combined with external stressors, can lead to anxiety and depression in LGBTQIA+ learners. The failure of educators to take accountability not only normalises discrimination but also exacerbates the psychological damage to learners and urgently calls for proactive policy changes and inclusion in schools (Town et al., 2022).

Nomfundo, Sibusiso, and Emily shared their experiences of witnessing other learners being called derogatory names by teachers and their peers, with no action taken to address or prevent these incidents. Their expressions during the focus group interview reveal the seriousness of this inaction, as illustrated below:

Nomfundo:

“I have also heard another homophobic teacher calling names to another group of gay learners. Er ... [choking] I remember that day, I was ... sitting alone near the toilets. There was a group of four gays walking past. They greeted me, and then I responded. That homophobic teacher was standing there [pointing outside through the window] ... a bit distance away ... looking at them and then he shouted at them. He said these stabanes want to rule this school. Yoh! ... I was disappointed, ... because that was unnecessary.”

Nomfundo highlights how authority figures, particularly in school settings, recklessly continue to fuel homophobia and other forms of discrimination that disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalised LGBTQIA+ learners. Her account of an instance where a homophobic teacher disparaged a group of gap learners by calling them names, *“I have heard another homophobic teacher calling names to another group of gay learners”*, illustrates how those charged with encouraging tolerance and respect for all learners may be doing the opposite. The teacher’s comment, *“These stabanes want to rule this school”*, reflects a homophobic attitude and fosters a negative perception towards LGBTQIA+ learners as unnatural. Francis and Reygan (2016) note that such attitudes amongst teachers promote the exclusion of these learners and validate discrimination by peers. This incident also shows a failure to uphold the culture of Ubuntu culture of support and respect (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Instead of fostering a welcoming environment victims face psychological abuse. Lăzărescu et al. (2023) highlight that discrimination is often supported by institutions, increasing isolation and anxiety amongst LGBTQIA+ learners. Elipe et al. (2022) emphasise that unchecked homophobia leads to exclusion and mental health issues for these students.

Sibusiso:

“My boyfriend was called ‘stabane’ by some homophobic boys. They said to him, don’t sit with us. They carried on saying, you are a ‘stabane’, so ... [silence] go and sit with other ‘stabanes’ like you. They also mentioned that don’t even look at us. He ... [chocking] he ... didn’t mind them, but just walked away.”

Sibusiso’s comments highlight the prevalence of homophobic bullying. The insults directed at his boyfriend, such as calling him a ‘stabane’, and *“...go and sit with other ‘stabanes’ like you,”* demonstrate a deliberate effort to create exclusion rooted in shame. This situation reflects a culture of intolerance rooted in a lack of accountability and intervention (Msibi, 2012; Russell

& Fish, 2016; Besner & Spungin, 2023). Despite his boyfriend's choice to "... *just (walk) away ...*", such experiences can accumulate, leading to heightened anxiety and social isolation, as noted by Okanlawon (2021). Furthermore, Mayeza (2023) argues homophobic language disempowers the entire spectrum of sexual minorities, stripping away their humanity and fostering socially accepted discrimination against LGBTQIA+ learners. Mayeza (2023) also emphasises that this sets up an environment where LGBTQIA+ learners feel alienated and vulnerable. These findings underscore the urgent need for the implementation of school policies designed to combat homophobia, ensuring all learners have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Emily:

"My old friend who's a lesbian was called 'ngqingili' by other non-LGBTQIA+ boys. They were saying ... she wants to be a man because she dresses like a boy. Argh! ... but my friend just ignored them, because they are stupid sometimes."

In Emily's experience, gender expression can lead to homophobic discrimination, revealing how societal and cultural views on acceptable behaviour punish queer individuals (Msibi, 2012). The comment about her friend, "*She wants to be a man because she dresses like a boy*", highlights the strict enforcement of gender norms that ostracise those who do not conform. Labelling her friend as "*ngqingili*" perpetuates discrimination and isolation within the LGBTQIA+ community. Although Emily notes that her friend "*... just ignored them ...*", these repeated incidents create a hostile environment, leading to psychological issues like anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Francis, 2021). Francis and Reygan (2016) opine that remarks against gender nonconformity reflect prejudice and warrant transformation in the educational system to foster inclusiveness.

This study highlighted the ongoing verbal abuse of LGBTQIA+ learners, which creates stigma and causes emotional distress (Meyer, 2003). Lin and Liu (2023) show that in South African schools, frequently manifests through verbal abuse, including derogatory labels, reinforcing heteronormative dominance. Valido et al. (2022) note that slurs like '*stabane*' and '*ngqingili*' dehumanise LGBTQIA+ individuals, increasing feelings of alienation and mental health issues. Callahan and Loscocco (2023) point out that homophobic name-calling reflects a wider societal culture that marginalises non-normative sexual identities, making unsafe school environments. These findings underscore the need for inclusive policies to protect LGBTQIA+ learners from harm (Blondé et al., 2024).

5.3.2 Theme Two: Coping Strategies

Individuals who experience chronic social rejection or discrimination, and abnormality develop coping strategies that paralleled their self-efficacy beliefs and the degree of available support (Bandura, 1986).

Utilising effective coping mechanisms and support systems is vital for managing the anxiety and depression caused by homophobia (Striebel, 2024). Strategies like connecting with supportive friends, family, or understanding teachers can significantly mitigate the negative impact of homophobia on mental health (Ibbad et al., 2022). The approaches help to create safe spaces where individuals feel valued and accepted. Research indicates that support from peers can reduce stress and provide emotional affirmation, making it easier to cope with challenging environments (Bristow, 2024). While these coping mechanisms offer quick relief, they cannot replace professional mental health care (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). Participants in this study, describe various strategies and support systems they rely on to cope with anxiety and depression linked to homophobia. However, they also recognise the limitations of informal systems of support, which often fail to address the deeper psychological impact of prolonged discrimination, including chronic anxiety and depression (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Ventriglio et al., 2021; Molina et al., 2023). Their interview responses and focus group discussions are discussed below.

5.3.2.1 Semi-structured Interview Findings

Rohan:

“Truly speaking, I’ve tried so many coping strategies to manage anxiety and depression caused by the experiences of homophobia. But uhm... most of the time, I use to ... to ... engage myself in deep breathing exercises and ... mindfulness and meditation. Ah! ... you know ... sometimes I feel like these coping mechanisms are not helping me as much as I want. Yes ... they make me feel better and help me manage negative thoughts and emotions for a while.”

“Whenever I feel overwhelmed ... I used to go to my class teacher and share what I’m going through then. Trust me, she is so sympathetic and understanding. After talking to her, I always feel better. Someday, she recommended that ... I should go and see a psychologist. I don’t have money. That’s my problem at the moment. I wish free professional help is offered at school. Because ... I do need to get professional help

since this thing [experiences of anxiety and depression related to homophobia] also affects my school work.”

Rohan’s comments reveal different dimensions to handling the anxiety and depression he faces due to homophobia as well as the shortcomings in available support structures. He uses mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing as self-regulatory strategies, which reflect the literature on their benefits for managing distress (Craske & Stein, 2022). However, Rohan admits that these strategies provide only temporary relief: “*Yes ... they make me feel better and help me manage negative thoughts and emotions for a while.*” This indicates that while helpful, they do not address the root causes of his distress. Research supports this, noting that more comprehensive therapeutic approaches, like therapy, are necessary for deeper healing (Besner & Spungin, 2023).

Rohan’s reliance on his class teacher as a coping mechanism to manage aggression from other learners highlights the importance of empathetic and supportive educators in creating safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ learners. He recalls, “*I used to go to my class teacher and share what I’m going through ...*”, illustrating how a positive interpersonal relationship can alleviate significant emotional pressures. This aligns with the findings of other scholars, such as Kosciw et al. (2020), who note that empathetic teachers who promote open discussions can help mitigate the negative effects of discrimination. However, Rohan’s experience also raises critical questions about organisational structures within the school system. Rohan’s lack of access to professional psychological highlights the unfairness faced by vulnerable learners who are denied adequate mental support due to financial constraints (Kosciw et al., 2020; Pirlott & Cook, 2021; Lyonga, 2021). As Rohan himself states, “*I don’t have money. That’s my problem at the moment.*” A paper by Jaspal and Breakwell (2022) supports the need for free psycho-social services in schools, particularly in developing nations, so learners like Rohan can access the professional services they require.

Nomfundo:

“To deal with this thing [anxiety and depression due to experiencing homophobia], I normally engage myself in regular physical activities such as Yoga and playing basketball. This makes me feel good, and forget about my problems. Sometimes, I spend time with my supportive friends who are lesbians and ... [clearing throat] share my feelings with them about what’s bothering me. We love and understand each other ... and this makes me feel better.”

“Eya [yes] ... mara [but] if I feel like talking to my friends doesn't make me feel better, I ... I just talk to my mom. She's the most supportive and understanding woman, and I'm blessed to have her as my right hand.”

“Although these strategies make me feel better, I feel like I need to get professional help. I mean ... I'm mentally and emotionally drained. My mom doesn't have money; I'd have visited a therapist.”

Nomfundo uses various coping strategies — active, emotional, and social – to manage anxiety and depression related to homophobia. Her regular involvement in yoga and basketball as a form of exercise is supported by Yolaç and Meriç (2021), who note that exercise releases endorphins, improving mood. She also spends time with supportive lesbian friends, highlighting the importance of social support for resilience and overall mental health amongst marginalised individuals (Zhang et al., 2020). Self-talk about emotions amongst friends who share similar experiences aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory, which highlights the role of social support in reducing psychological stress (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Seabra et al., 2022).

Nomfundo's reference to her mother as her “... *right hand* ...”, reflects the theme of familial dependence common in African contexts, acknowledging emotional strength grounded in the Ubuntu philosophy of community and oneness (Glazzard, 2024). However, the need for professional help illustrates the barriers to accessing mental health services in South Africa, influenced by economic status and systemic challenges (Jorm, 2022). Although Nomfundo's solutions offer temporary relief, her admission to feeling “... *mentally and emotionally drained*” emphasises the necessity for long-term, systematic change. There is a need for interventions to address the financial and structural barriers that hinder access to mental health care for marginalised learners.

Sibusiso:

“Uhm ... like I said earlier on, my father and some of my neighbours are homophobic towards me. But I don't give a damn. Look, what I used to do is to socialise with my friends who are also butch gays. I also play netball because that's what I enjoy the most.”

“And ..., I've my journal book where I write down major incidents that happened during the day. I also use a journal book to draw my dream life with my husband and

children in the future. That's the only family that would love and accept me. This makes me feel much better, [smiling] because it reduces the high negative thoughts in my mind."

"Sometimes I get bored when I'm with people, especially my family. I prefer to be alone in my room because my father always judges my every move. This thing started after the death of my mom in 2020 due to COVID-19 [Coronavirus Infectious Disease 2019]. Eish ... [silence] R.I.P [Rest in Peace] Mom. So, I don't consider my family as one of my supporting systems in helping me cope with the feelings of anxiety and depression. But I'd like to get professional help, like seeing a counsellor, but I don't have money. That's the thing."

Sibusiso uses social engagement, personal reflection, and avoidance to cope with homophobia while also dealing with the loss of his mother. Sibusiso enjoys socialising "... with my friends who are also butch gays" and participating in leisure activities, which is important for him in managing anxiety and depression. Research indicates that connecting with others who have similar experiences can significantly improve the wellbeing of marginalised individuals (Drew et al., 2024). Additionally, playing netball serves as an effective outlet for Sibusiso in coping with traumatic events, highlighting the mental benefits of physical activity in alleviating anxiety and depression (Msibi, 2012; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Verly, 2024; Lavan et al., 2024). Sibusiso's remark, "*That's what I like the most ...*" emphasises how personal interests can boost emotional wellbeing, especially when faced with challenging external circumstances. Sibusiso's father's hostility, along with that of their neighbours, illustrates how homophobia within both family and community settings intensifies feelings of rejection. This underscores the need for interventions at both community and societal levels to deal with discrimination (Drew et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Sibusiso states, "*I also use a journal book to draw my dream life with my husband and children in the future.*" This illustrates how journalling serves as an intentional tool for him to channel his emotions and envision a better future. By documenting "... major incidents that happened during the day", Sibusiso is able to externalise his experiences – a practice that research has shown to reduce stress and enhance emotional regulation, as noted by Brown and Renshaw (2020). Additionally, Sibusiso's vision of a future "... family that would love and accept me ..." represents a form of hope-based coping, enabling him to counterbalance the exclusion he faces in his present environment.

Sibusiso's preference for solitude, driven by his father's constant judgment — *"I prefer to be alone in my room because my father always judges my every move"*— demonstrates his avoidant coping strategy. While this may provide short-term relief, it leads to long-term feelings of isolation and distress (Kosciw et al., 2020). Moreover, his desire for mental health care is limited by financial constraints, as reflected in his statement, *"I don't have money."* This situation highlights the systemic barriers to mental health services in South Africa for children in low-income families. Research by Daniel (2022) calls for urgently needed affordable mental health support for individuals like Sibusiso facing homophobia and socioeconomic disparities.

Emily:

"I don't have specific ways of dealing with the feelings of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia. As I highlighted earlier on, when I'm not well I lock myself in my room and cry. I don't have friends now. Sometimes, I get bored when someone visits me. You know ... I don't even watch TV [Television]."

"But at night, I normally take a walk around 00:00 to 01:00. This makes me feel good, because ... I ... I get a chance to talk to myself. Listening to the sounds of the inserts at night, feeling the fresh air in peace makes me feel better and think positively about life."

"I'm a quiet and shy person. So, I hardly talk even if something is bothering me. This makes my family feel bad, but ... they've learned to accept and live with that. That's why it's hard for them to notice when I'm not okay. Yeah ... I think this is not helping me in dealing with this problem [homophobia] because they can't support me. After all, I don't share much about me."

Emily's coping strategies are primarily solitary ways, as she attempts to manage her anxiety and depression, which she attributes to homophobia. Her coping mechanisms indicate that emotional suppression, likely influenced by a broader understanding of gendered emotional labour, has resulted in a lack of meaningful social support. Emily's comment, *"I lock myself in my room and cry"* implies a need for a deeper outlet for her emotions, suggesting that her crying goes beyond simply releasing emotional stress (Dunkley et al., 2021; Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024). Additionally, her nighttime walks, where she talks to herself and breathes *"... fresh air in peace ..."*, serve as a form of self-soothing and mindfulness. Research indicates that such practices can help ease stress, anxiety, and depression while fostering introspection (Ioverno & Russell, 2021; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Fliegelman, 2023; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024).

However, Emily's coping mechanism of taking a solitary walk around midnight exposes her to danger. This indicates the vulnerability of her coping strategy. Her statements, "*I don't have friends now*" and "*I get bored when someone visits me*", reveal social withdrawal often linked to loneliness and anxiety (Fernando & Cabardo, 2024). Moreover, Emily acknowledges that her inability to communicate her problems to her family "*is not helping me in dealing with this problem [homophobia]*." This highlights the need for interventions that encourage open family communication and create safe environments, offering validation and support for individuals like Emily facing homophobia.

This study found that teachers and parents have varying reactions to LGBTQIA+ learners, which can either support or harm their mental health. Rohan's experience underscores the importance of positive teacher-learner relationships in mitigating anxiety and depression resulting from homophobia. Supportive teachers foster safe and inclusive learning ecosystems for LGBTQIA+ learners (Kosciw et al., 2020). Conversely, Nomfundo's experience demonstrates that homophobic behaviour from educators leads to exclusion and alienation (Msibi, 2012; Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024). Overall, homophobic attitudes from teachers, combined with a hostile school climate, heighten the mental health vulnerabilities of LGBTQIA+ learners (Smith, 2023).

Sibusiso's case highlights the severe effects of familial rejection on LGBTQIA+ learners. Those already struggling psychologically due to their environment face further isolation when lacking familial support, as noted by Craig and McInroy (2021). This was evident in the verbal Sibusiso received from his father regarding his emotional wellbeing after his mother's death. Research indicates that higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation amongst LGBTQIA+ individuals are strongly linked with parental rejection (Msibi, 2012; Daniels et al., 2019; Lépine et al., 2025). Supportive families can improve the resilience and emotional stability of these individuals (Karki et al., 2022). Without such support, as seen in Sibusiso's case, it is crucial to educate parents on the harmful effects of homophobia behaviour on their children's mental health.

Participants raised concerns regarding the limited access to professional services like psychologists and counsellors, which hinders coping with the long-term effects of homophobia (Chan et al., 2022). Research by Fordenbacher (2022) indicates that LGBTQIA+ individuals continually exposed to stigma experience severe mental health outcomes, emphasising the need for affordable, affirmative mental health services.

Brown and Renshaw (2020) assert that professional support, including cognitive behavioral therapy and resilience training, can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and improve wellbeing. The lack of these services not only hampers coping skills but also leads to negative emotions (Bos et al., 2021). Based on this study's findings, integrating culturally responsive and inclusive mental health services into educational and community structures is essential for those affected by homophobia.

5.3.2.2 Focus Group Discussion Findings

During a focus group discussion, participants reflected on the ineffective coping strategies they had adopted and explained why these had not proved useful:

Rohan:

"I grew up with boys at home. So, they used to play soccer most of the time when they were bored. I wasn't interested that much in it. However, they introduced me to it, but ... I found it very challenging to play soccer. They kept coaching me on how to play it, and then I think I got it right [laughs]."

"The tricky part was when I had to play an official match with the opponents. I was nervous, [laughs] and I was like ... no bros [brothers], I can't do this anymore. They said, 'No, you can do it.' I said 'OKAY, let's play', since I was anxious and depressed. We played and won that game, but I had to be substituted in 15 minutes because the opponents didn't treat me like other players."

"Eish ... [sobbing], they played me roughly like kicking me and even laughed at me. They said I was a mama's boy and played like a girl. Even though I had already developed some love for soccer, I just felt like I was in the wrong place. It pained me to hear such words."

"You know ... [silence], they said they don't play with stabanes, so I must go home and cook. After this incident, I never played soccer, and I hate it even on TV [television]. So, yeah ... this coping strategy didn't work for me because I didn't get the peace of mind I needed to cope with anxiety and depression caused by experiencing homophobia."

Rohan's experience illustrates that his soccer-focused efforts to manage the depression and anxiety caused by homophobia were ultimately unproductive. This is because these approaches

did not address key behavioural elements outlined in SCT. As discussed, Bandura's (1986) theory posits that personal socio-cultural and behavioural elements, along with environmental conditions, work together to shape human actions, which are fundamentally driven by that self-efficacy. Rohan began playing soccer because his brothers encouraged him to. As he puts it, – “*They introduced me to it.*” This behaviour represents how observation-based learning techniques can lead to positive adaptive responses (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999; Ran & Xie, 2021; Lin & Wu, 2024).

The match experience forced Rohan to confront a hostile background that undermined his self-belief. The combination of physical abuse with insults such as “*mama’s boy*” and “*stabane*” from opponents, became powerful factors that deepened his anxiety and depression instead of alleviating his struggles, as supported by Brown and Renshaw (2020). Bandura (1999) further explains that negative environmental feedback can severely damage fundamental self-confidence, increasing emotional trauma.

Despite initially holding strong and playing for as long as he could, Rohan’s coping strategy proved ineffective in a non-affirming and non-supportive environment. The failure of this approach to address his emotional needs or at least lighten the depressive weight of homophobia is highlighted by his eventual decision to withdraw from soccer and its accompanying triggers. This aligns with the findings of Meyer (2015) and Brown and Renshaw (2020), which describe how minority stressors, including homophobic discrimination, negatively impact on mental health in the absence of supportive and affirming social contexts.

Nomfundo:

“OMG! [Oh my God], I don’t know how I feel after Rohan has shared her (sic) experiences. It clearly shows that those boys were just homophobic. Anyways, my experience is different a bit.”

“I used to cry and cut myself whenever I felt anxious and depressed. Maybe, I’d cut my body with a razor and feel better when I’m bleeding. It was painful, but it made me feel much better for a while. That’s how I used to deal with anxiety and depression caused by homophobia.”

“I did that because I thought it was a good coping strategy, but later I realised that I was just hurting myself and stopped. Look [pointing arm], I still have some scars, and I regret my doing.”

Nomfundo reflects on her experiences with homophobia, revealing a troubling yet important narrative about its impact on mental health and how individuals cope with such distress. Drawing on the SCT, which emphasises the interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioural factors, her actions highlight how maladaptive coping mechanisms can develop when people are deprived of effective environmental and social support (Bandura, 1986). Nomfundo's statement *"I'd cut my body ..."* refers to self-harming behaviour, which serves as an attempt to manage overwhelming emotional pain due to homophobia. Bandura (1999) explains that individuals learn to behave by following the behaviour they observe, or by mirroring the actions of one another.

Nomfundo describes her self-injury as providing only transient relief, saying, *"It was painful, but it made me feel much better for a while."* This aligns with evidence that self-injury can release endorphins, offering short-term relief and control (Meyer, 2020; McConnell & Birkett, 2021; Molina et al., 2023). However, she subsequently acknowledges that the strategy proved ineffective and ultimately harmful, saying, *"I thought it was a good coping strategy, but later I realised that I was just hurting myself and stopped."* This self-control reflects the SCT, which suggests that individuals modify their behaviour based on self-assessment and expected outcomes (Bandura, 1986).

Ultimately, it is crucial to provide LGBTQIA+ learners with positive reinforcement and peer modelling as well as effective coping strategies for anxiety and depression, as Nomfundo's experience illustrates. In the absence of such interventions, as outlined in the MSM (Meyer, 2003), learners have a higher risk of developing maladaptive behaviours and perpetuating cycles of self-harming and psychological distress. This underlines the urgent need for systemic, affirmative support in schools to combat how negatively homophobia impacts learners' wellbeing.

Sibusiso:

"Mm, it's very touching to hear about such horrible experiences. Eish ... what I used to do is to drink alcohol a lot. I didn't want to, but I had no choice because I thought that was what could make me feel better. Yes, it did make me feel better when I was drunk, but when I became sober, I still found myself anxious and depressed. So, I was like ... this is not helping me anymore."

"I talked to myself and decided to stop drinking alcohol because I realised that it was not helping me anymore. Yeah, it was a very bad way of dealing with this thing [anxiety

and depression caused by homophobia], because I was even skipping classes, and I failed that year.”

Sibusiso recognised the ineffectiveness of his maladaptive approaches to cope with anxiety and depression. According to the SCT, behaviour is influenced by personal traits, environmental factors and learned behaviours (Bandura, 1986). Sibusiso's stated, *“What I used to do is to drink alcohol a lot”*, believing it would relieve his emotional distress. However, after becoming sober, he realised, *“... when I became sober, I still found myself anxious and depressed.”* This shows that his reliance on alcohol as a method of self-medication only prolonged his distress (Santos et al., 2020; Bacchini et al., 2021).

Sibusiso notes that *“... it was not helping me anymore ...”* and realised that alcohol no longer benefited him, prompting his decision to stop drinking after gaining insight into self-efficacy. His reliance on alcohol underscores a lack of healthy coping resources in his environment (Fordenbacher, 2022). Bandura (1999) asserts that painful experiences can lead to the development of harmful coping patterns when support systems are insufficient. Schools must create supportive environments to help learners develop positive coping strategies against the harmful effects of homophobia, backed by affirming social connections (Msibi, 2012; Fraser, 2022).

Emily:

“My experience is a bit similar to the one of Sibusiso in terms of addiction because I was also smoking too much. Yoh, it was worse, and I'm glad that I managed to stop it by myself. This thing [smoking] made me overthink and create unnecessary scenarios in my head, hurting my feelings. This wasn't helping me anymore but made things worse because all the homophobic experiences played like a movie in my mind, which led me to be more anxious and depressed. I lost concentration in class and also failed that term just like Sibusiso.”

The negative impact of smoking on Emily's mental state illustrates its ineffectiveness in alleviating depression and anxiety relief during homophobic experiences. According to Bandura (1986), actions stem from core beliefs, emotional responses, and external factors, which either worsen or relieve distress. Emily's smoking habit resulted from flawed reactions to discrimination, ultimately worsening her emotional condition. She states, *“This thing [smoking] made me overthink and create unnecessary scenarios in my head, hurting my*

feelings.” This aligns with the research of Hill et al. (2021), which found that smoking leads to excessive worry and distorted thinking.

Emily’s frequent negative thoughts increased her anxiety and deepened her depression, highlighting the cycle of maladaptive coping strategies described in SCT (Bandura, 1999). Her remark – “... *the homophobic experiences played like a movie in my mind ...*” illustrates how witnessing homophobic incidents replayed in her mind, intensifying her emotional reactions (Bandura, 1986; Meyer, 2003; Ventriglio et al., 2021; Lehtonen, 2021; Kılıç et al., 2024). This contributed to her poor school performance and distractibility in lessons, pointing to the need for adaptive behavioural strategies to break the cycle of negative reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Meyer, 2003).

5.3.3 Theme Three: Factors Influencing Coping Decisions

A wide range of individual, social, and cultural factors influence how learners cope with anxiety and depression related to homophobia (Bertolt, 2019). In this study, participants identified several key factors, including personal resilience, familial support, peer relationships, and societal attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Research highlights that having supportive social networks and appropriate environments is crucial for mitigating the negative psychological effects of homophobia (Base, 2022). Conversely, learners who lack such support often resort to maladaptive coping strategies, such as withdrawal or self-isolation, that can exacerbate their mental health (Brown & Renshaw, 2020). During semi-structured interview and focus group discussions, participants reported various factors that influenced their coping strategies, including fear of being rejected, the stigma associated with their sexual orientation, the role of the school environment, and policies aimed at promoting inclusivity. These expressions possess deep emotional and experiential qualities that enhance our understanding of the complex factors influencing their decisions about adopted coping strategies.

5.3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interview Findings

Rohan:

“Well, like I said ... I used to engage myself in deep breathing exercises and mindfulness and meditation to cope with anxiety and depression when experiencing homophobia. I prefer these forms of coping strategies, because ... they make me feel better and never judge me or my sexual orientation like any other human being. But ... I also prefer to

talk to my class teacher when I feel overwhelmed because she is so sympathetic and understanding unlike some of my family members and ... even some of the community members.”

Rohan’s experiences emphasise the vital role of personal agency and supportive relationships in coping with anxiety and depression. Rohan’s reliance on deep breathing exercises illustrates the importance of self-regulation strategies for reducing stress by promoting inner peace (Kumar & Akoijam, 2017). These techniques resonate with him because they are non-judgemental and foster emotional processing in safe spaces (Meyer, 2020; Pirlott & Cook, 2021; Chan et al., 2022).

Rohan’s choice decision to seek support from his “*sympathetic and understanding*” class teacher – contrasting with some of relatives’ and community members judgement — shows the impact of relational factors on coping. This aligns with research by Ferfolja and Ullman (2021) who found that affirmative relationships can mitigate psychological harm from stigmatisation.

Rohan’s narrative underscores the adverse repercussions of familial and community rejection of same-sex relationships, reinforcing research by Li et al. (2023), which highlights that unsupportive environments worsen mental health for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Rohan’s behaviour patterns and coping strategies embody an intense inner struggle for affirmation and acceptance as well as reflecting a broader need for inclusive and empathetic spaces within schools and communities.

Nomfundo:

“Yes, like I highlighted before ... if you can recall, I mentioned that I play (sic) yoga and basketball. Sometimes, I prefer to spend time with my supportive friends who are lesbians and share with them what’s hurting me. My O’s [friends] are loving and caring. But also sometimes... I decide to talk to my Mom. She’s also the most supportive and understanding Mom.”

So, yeah ... I can say I prefer these kinds of coping decisions because they make me feel much better. Whenever I cry on their shoulders, they always wipe my tears. Even if people in the community say bad things about me like saying lesbians are not accepted in Zulu culture, so I should be like a normal girl, they [friends and Mom] always stand by my side.”

Nomfundo's decision-making reflects the SCT, which emphasises the influence of self-efficacy, social support, and culture on behaviour (Bandura, 1986). As highlighted in Chapter Three, SCT theory posits that behaviour is shaped by personal, behavioural, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Nomfundo's involvement in yoga and basketball demonstrates her active efforts to combat anxiety and depression, along with her strong belief in her ability to influence her mental health (self-efficacy). She values her friendships with other lesbians, stating, *"Sometimes, I prefer to spend time with my supportive friends who are lesbians."* She also emphasises her close relationship with her mother, saying, *"I decide to talk to my Mom"*. This underscores the importance of social modelling and reinforcement in shaping coping behaviours, as supported by Ingoglia et al. (2020). These familiar individuals, whom she easily approach, serve as protective shields against rejection societal rejection. She notes, *"Whenever I cry on their shoulder, they always wipe my tears,"* which illustrates the social support she receives through vicarious and direct means.

Nomfundo's coping strategies challenge the belief that LGBTQIA+ individuals are rejected in traditional Zulu culture, as this perception (of cultural rejection) is one of the environmental factors that play a part in shaping the lives of LGBTQIA+ people (Yolaç & Meriç, 2021; Calvo et al., 2021; Bridge et al., 2022; Town et al., 2022). A study by Boyd et al. (2024) confirms that social networks improve the coping and mental health for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Nomfundo's coping strategies exemplifies the SCT's tridimensional model, showing how personal characteristics, friends' behaviour, and cultural environment interact, as supported by Dawes et al. (2024).

Sibusiso:

"As I said, I prefer to socialise with my friends who are also butch gays and play netball. I also use a journal book to record major incidents during the day. So, I prefer these [coping decisions] because ... they don't discriminate against me for being who I am."

"Being alone feels good for me ... because my dad [father] and some neighbours always call me names. I can't talk to my dad as my father who's supposed to support and love me as his child. He [his father] is a strict Zulu man who doesn't support LGBTQIA+ individuals. I also ... can't ask for help within the community, because I'm such a curse to them. They [the community] say I'll influence their children to become part of LGBTQIA+ group."

Sibusiso's coping strategies reflect SCT, which speaks to the interaction of personal, behavioural and environmental influences on behaviour (Bandura, 1986). His choice to socialise with “... friends who are also butch gays and play netball,” illustrates the value of peer support and shared identity in fostering a non-judgemental environment. This exemplifies Bandura’s (1986) concept of vicarious reinforcement, where interactions with supportive peers enhance coping strategies.

Sibusiso’s use of a daily journal to “... record major incidents during the day” demonstrates self-regulation, a key element of SCT that helps individuals manage external stressors and develop skills for moderating their emotional states (Bandura, 1986). However, Sibusiso’s statement, “*Being alone feels good for me ... because my dad and some neighbours always call me names,*” reveals the detrimental effect of his family and community on his wellbeing. This aligns with the MST, which suggests that such negative influence can hinder access to external resources (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Meyer, 2020; Boyd et al., 2024). He expresses a sense of hopelessness, saying he cannot “*ask for help within the community, because I’m such a curse to them.*” This shows the oppressive influence of cultural norms, which restrict Sibusiso’s coping options to personal strategies and interactions with peers. These expressions highlight environmental rejection as a factor that drives Sibusiso back to self-regulation and seeking support from friends. This aligns with SCT, which suggests that people’s behaviours change in response to the interplay between personal resilience and environmental reactions, as proposed by Bandura (1986).

Emily:

“Locking myself in my room and crying helps me for a while, and ... I ... I ... know that it doesn’t reduce the high level of anxiety and depression. But I don’t have a choice, because ... I don’t have friends to talk to now. I don’t like watching TV [television] and like I said before ... I easily get bored when I’m with people. So, ... taking night walks is also part of what makes me feel better. But ... I think ... being a quiet and shy person is one of the main reasons that ... influenced my coping decisions, coz [because] ... I can’t even be open to my family about what’s bothering me, I prefer to deal with it secretly.”

Emily’s coping decisions illustrate how personal, behavioural, and environmental factors influence actions, as explained by SCT Bandura (1986). Her tendency to lock herself in her room and cry reflects avoidant coping, seeking short-term relief without addressing the

underlying issues. She acknowledges, “*Locking myself in my room and crying helps me for a while, and ... I ... I ... know that it doesn’t reduce the high level of anxiety and depression*”. This relates to Bandura’s (1986) idea of self-reflective capability in evaluating coping strategies. Emily’s remark, “*I don’t have friends to talk to now*”, reveals her lack of social support, a significant factor leading to loneliness as a coping strategy. SCT emphasises social modelling and observation learning in behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Emily’s lack of social support reflects that she is unable to develop effective coping strategies because this aspect of observing or modelling behaviour is not available to her (due to her choosing isolation sometimes).

Furthermore, Emily’s isolation illustrates a lack of positive role models and supportive interactions that could help her learn healthy coping mechanisms. According to Bandura (1986), environmental barriers are often compounded by personal factors. In Emily’s case, her reluctance to seek help is intensified by her admission of being “*a quiet and shy person*”. Moreover, her statement, “*I can’t even be open to my family about what’s bothering me,*” underscores the unsupportive nature of her familial relationship. Bandura (1986) points out that such relationships hinder an individual’s self-efficacy in managing stressful situations. It is clear that Emily’s struggles reflect a cycle of loneliness and unfulfilled emotional needs. Thus, recovery should focus on enhancing her capacity to create a stronger social support platform and improving her self-efficacy to foster better ways of coping (Calvo et al., 2021; Taylor-Christie, 2025).

Participants' coping decisions when facing anxiety and depression due to homophobia are influenced by their personal, relational, and cultural backgrounds. Rohan and Nomfundo’s accounts underscore the value of supportive relationships and structured activities. Rohan believes that mindfulness practices and receiving guidance from a non-judgmental teacher play a critical role, which aligns with research indicating that supportive adult figures enhance mental resilience (Camodeca et al., 2019). Similarly, Nomfundo’s reliance on her mother and close friends for emotional support illustrates a protective buffer of positive relationships that help to protect her from minority stress (Negota, 2021).

In contrast, Sibusiso and Emily experience unsupportive environments that lead to feelings of isolation. Sibusiso copes by journaling and talking to friends who share similar experiences, while Emily’s solitary activities of crying and walking at night reflect her desperation for social connection. Studying the differences between both cases shows that stigma and cultural

rejection often push LGBTQIA+ individuals toward solitary coping mechanisms that can hinder emotional recovery (Frost & Meyer, 2023). For Sibusiso and Nomfundo, their experiences illustrate how cultural expectations intertwine with homophobia and how Zulu traditions complicate their search for community support. Ultimately, these expressions highlight that social support and acceptance of sexual diversity significantly influence learners' coping decisions, and an inclusive environment is vital for the mental wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022).

During the focus group discussion, participants emphasised the significant impact of the school environment and policies on their coping choices. Their responses were documented as follows:

5.3.3.2 Focus Group Discussion Findings

Rohan:

“The school environment and school policies have influenced my coping decisions in many ways. Sometimes, I don't feel a sense of belonging within the school premises because of the high rate of cases of homophobia. For me, being part of an LGBTQIA+ group does affect me even if I witness it [cases of homophobia] happening to someone. That makes me feel unsafe and not belonging in such an environment. I feel like I'm gonna [will] be the next if it's not me at that time. Here [at school], you're being judged without a reason. For the fact that you're part or walk with the LGBTQIA+ group, you get teased.”

“In terms of the school policies, I don't think they're protective when it comes to LGBTQIA+ learners. Yes, [they] are there, but if maybe one of the LGBTQIA+ learners is being harassed somehow, they are not taking such cases seriously as expected. I feel like as an LGBTQIA+ group, our cries are not heard enough by teachers and even other non-LGBTQIA+ groups. It's very frustrating and heartbreaking to live in such an unwelcoming setting.”

Rohan's behaviours, shaped by trauma, demonstrate how the characteristics of his public-school environment contribute to his stress-management strategies in dealing with depression and anxiety caused by homophobia. According to the SCT, the negative influences of his surroundings can obstruct the development of effective coping responses that involve both environmental and personal factors as well as behavioural elements (Bandura, 1986). Rohan's

feeling of being “... *unsafe and not belonging in such an environment*” highlights how both direct and vicarious threats impact his psychological wellbeing, in line with Bandura’s concept of observational learning (Bandura, 1999). Witnessing homophobic treatment directed at others increases Rohan’s psychological vulnerability, which heightens his anxiety. He expresses this when he states, “*For the fact that you’re part or walk with the LGBTQIA+ group, you get teased.*” This reveals how social norms and peer interactions create barriers that hinder LGBTQIA+ individuals from developing adaptive coping mechanisms, as supported by Lehtonen (2021).

These challenges are exacerbated by inadequate school policies. Rohan criticises them, saying, “*I feel like as an LGBTQIA+ group our cries are not heard enough by teachers and even another non-LGBTQIA+ group*”. This indicates a disconnect between the policies and their implementation, failing to support LGBTQIA+ learners. According to Bandura (1986), individuals need self-efficacy to confront challenges, but Rohan’s environment diminishes his confidence in addressing homophobia. Schools urgently need to create and put into effect supportive policies that protect marginalised learners and enhance emotional safety (Breedon, 2019; Taylor-Christie, 2025).

Nomfundo:

“Yeah, I can agree with Rohan. I think the school environment is not healthy enough for LGBTQIA+ students. I feel like we’re not considered human beings like other non-LGBTQIA+ learners. We have feelings, we get hurt, and we cry when it hurts like any other human being. Why are we supposed to be treated like this? You always waiting to be judged, and I have accepted that. Sometimes, you get beaten for looking at someone. When you ask what’s wrong did, I do? That person would be like, why do you look at me?”

“The school policies ... [laughs] are there for formality. That’s what I can say. They are not protecting us [LGBTQIA+ learners] enough. Instead, they oppress us somehow. You are being told that you can’t wear a trouser if you’re a girl. Why? If these policies are fair, what’s that then?”

Nomfundo's experiences highlight a significant disconnect between the structural aspects of the educational environment and the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners. This disconnect offers insight into how institutional policies affect learners' responses when faced with depression and anxiety caused by homophobia (Carbajal, 2021). Through Bandura's (1986)

SCT, Nomfundo illustrates how negative school circumstances can have devastating effects on learners. She poignantly describes the emotional toll of being dehumanized, saying, *“I feel like we’re not considered human beings like other non-LGBTQIA+ learners. We have feelings; we get hurt, and we cry when it hurts like any other human being.”* This statement underscores how emotional distress arises from a hostile environment, resulting in an alienating experience (Karlsson et al., 2020).

Nomfundo critiques school policies, remarking, *“The school policies ... [laughs] are there for formality. That’s what I can say. They are not protecting us [LGBTQIA+ learners] enough. Instead, they oppress us somehow.”* When educational regulations enforce traditional gender norms by barring girls from wearing trousers, they reinforce widespread prejudice, denying LGBTQIA+ learners the proper ability to express themselves and make their own choices (Msibi, 2012; Kumar & Akoijam, 2017; Carbajal, 2021; Mata, 2024). These dynamics align with the theory that explains how discriminatory rules and inadequate protective systems interact with personal perceptions to influence coping strategies (Zamboni & Crawford, 2019). Nomfundo’s acceptance of judgment, *“I have accepted that”*, reflects learned helplessness developed through constant exposure to these negative influences. Singh (2022) calls for an urgent improvement of inclusive educational policies to promote the mental wellbeing of all learners.

Sibusiso:

“Rohan and Nomfundo raised very important points. That’s true; I think there’s a lot that needs to be done about the issues of unfriendly school environment and school policies. Here [at school], you can’t find peace. Sometimes, I feel like everyone who looks at me will judge me. This makes me even don’t want to go out for breaks and prefer to spend it in class. This is not the kind of environment I wish for the future LGBTQIA+ group.”

“No, the school policies are not practised as expected. Are just there for formality just like Nomfundo said [laughs]? What I can say is that yes ... certain school policies protect LGBTQIA+ learners on paper, but practically it’s a different story. Those policies are ignored sometimes. Even in class, if you’re a girl you are expected to sweep the floor, while boys clean windows. If I’m not comfortable with cleaning windows but prefer sweeping the floor I’d be reminded that I’m a boy, so I must do what’s done by boys. Is that right?”

Sibusiso's assertions highlight how an unwelcoming school environment and poor policy implementation affect his ability to cope with anxiety and depression stemming from homophobia. His comment, *"Here [at school] you can't find peace"*, underscores a hostile environment where LGBTQIA+ learners feel ostracised, causing them to isolate themselves during breaktimes. This reflects the SCT, which suggests that the school climate impacts individuals' perceptions of their self-efficacy and social support (Bandura, 1986). Sibusiso's lack of faith in the school's capability to support him stems from his feelings of exclusion, forcing him to internalise his struggles. He also points out the disconnect between the theoretical protections offered by policies – seen as mere formalities — and the reality learners face, illustrating the gap between policy principles and their actual implementation (James, 2021; Tomas, 2024).

This failure reinforces the perception that the school does not promote inclusivity, which limits Sibusiso's ability to seek support. His comment, *"If I'm not comfortable with cleaning windows but prefer sweeping the floor I'd be reminded that I'm a boy,"* illustrates how discriminatory measures can diminish his sense of self and heighten his feelings of loneliness. According to Bandura (1986), people do not simply react to environmental stimuli; they selectively process their surroundings. When the environment is unfriendly, Sibusiso tends to avoid confronting challenges. However, effective school policies and a welcoming environment can enhance the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners and help to develop positive coping mechanisms (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Stonewall, 2021; Maluleka & Godsell, 2023; Richhariya, 2024; Verly, 2024; Taylor-Christie, 2025).

Emily:

"Yes, you're right guys. I wanna [want to] add to what Sibusiso has said. A similar incident happened to me. My former class teacher used to say, I shouldn't clean the chalkboard because that task is strictly for boys only. There are many incidents that I can quote. So, yeah ... the school environment is not positive for LGBTQIA+ learners. Sometimes, we're being discriminated against or excluded by the teachers who are supposed to lead us by example."

"Maybe if I can make an example, here [at school], you're not allowed to wear tracksuits or trousers if you're a girl, even during winter. That's the school policy, and we must follow it. If I can speak for myself, I don't feel comfortable in skirts, so I prefer

tracksuits, but I can't wear them. If you can wear them, you'd be beaten or even be academically suspended."

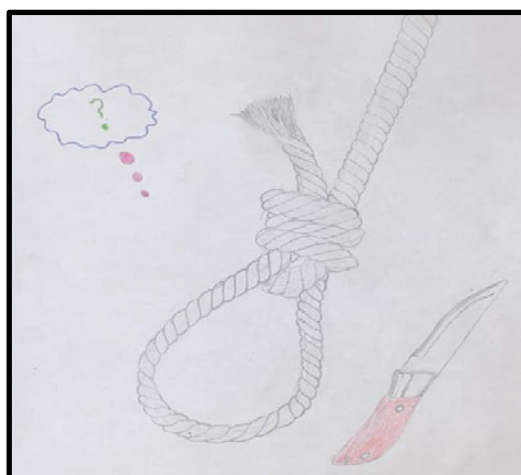
Emily's account reveals how the school environment and policies negatively affected her coping mechanisms in the face of homophobia, leading to anxiety and depression as it reinforced exclusion and perpetuated gendered stereotypes. According to Bandura (1986), individuals learn behaviours and coping observation and interaction within their environment, observing and interacting with their environment, especially from the attitudes and actions of authority figures (Bandura, 1986). In this situation, Emily's teachers should have modelled inclusivity and support; instead, they continued to discriminate. Emily emphasises, "*We're being discriminated against or excluded by the teachers who are supposed to lead us by example.*" This statement highlights the absence of positive role models in the school, which ultimately hampers the learner's ability to develop healthy coping mechanisms, as supported by Devi et al. (2023).

Restrictive school policies made Emily's experience even more challenging. She expressed, "*If I speak for myself, I don't feel comfortable in skirts, so I prefer tracksuits, but I can't wear them.*" This policy not only stripped her of her right to express her identity but also created an environment where deviation from rigid norms could result in punishment. She described the consequences: "*If you can wear them [tracksuits], you'd be beaten or even be academically suspended.*" These experiences illustrate how Emily's coping strategies were shaped by the school's structure and culture, leading her to internalise anxiety and conform to harsh standards. Unfortunately, avenues for self-expression and support were severely lacking (Bandura, 1999; Roberts & Marx, 2018; Lehtonen, 2021).

5.4 Drawings Findings

I have included the participants' drawings as they were created, noting that they may contain sensitive content. Visual methods, such as drawings, allow participants to express personal and often painful experiences, making it essential for researchers to represent these narratives ethically and without alteration (Pink et al., 2020; Rose, 2022; Fazeli et al., 2023; Martinez & Evans, 2023). The drawings illustrate how homophobia affects the participants, resulting in feelings of anxiety and depression. They also reflect the study's main themes: "*persistent homophobia — emotional and psychological effects, coping strategies, and factors influencing coping decisions.*" The participants' emotions are depicted in their drawings, which are explained as follows:

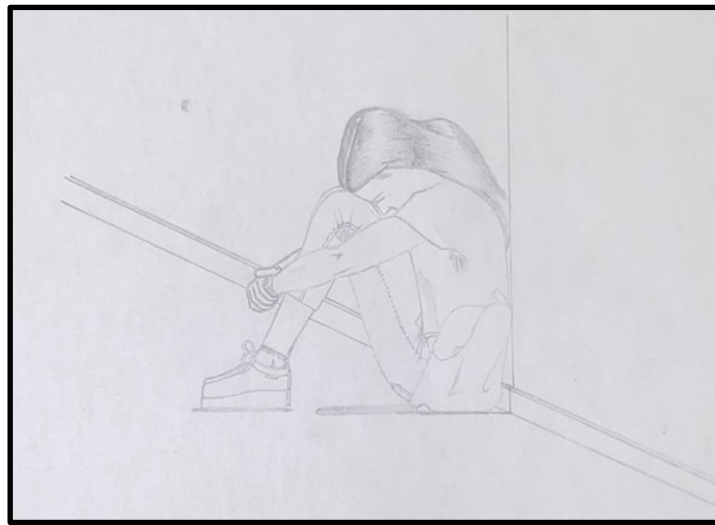
5.4.1 Figure 1: (Rohan's Drawing)



Rohan's drawing shows a rope, a blade, and a questioning bubble. This depicts Rohan's psychological state as impacted by the homophobia he has endured. He explains, *"This drawing represents the thought of killing myself sometimes. I often experience that kind of thought lately due to homophobia."* This statement highlights the profoundly negative impact of the hostile school environment, which has contributed to the disturbing thoughts he has been experiencing recently. According to SCT Bandura (1986), individuals develop their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours through ongoing interactions with their surroundings. Rohan's explanation indicates that he has faced ongoing discrimination, which reinforced his depressive thinking before he developed suicidal thoughts. His statement, *"It's better to die because I'll get peace and be free from the feelings of anxiety and depression"*, illustrates how constant exposure to stigma undermines his resilience and drives him towards unhealthy ways of dealing with anxiety and depression.

Research indicates that LGBTQIA+ learners who face homophobia in their educational environments are statistically more likely to experience suicidal thoughts due to stress and lack of institutional support (Meyer, 2020). Rohan expressed a concerning sentiment, stating, *"If I don't get professional help, I may end my life soon."* This highlights the urgent need for intervention and emphasises that for marginalised youth, overcoming the risks of self-harm depends on both professional assistance and supportive environments (Finlay-Jones et al., 2021). Rohan's drawing and testimony illustrate the severe harm that hostile school settings inflict on LGBTQIA+ learners. Francis (2017) advocates for protective policies and professional mental health support for LGBTQIA+ learners in schools to address these distressing experiences.

5.4.2 Figure 2: (Nomfundo's Drawing)



Nomfundo shared a poignant drawing of a young girl sitting quietly, with her legs folded and, head resting on the knees, with a small bag by her side. She explains, *“This drawing depicts a true picture of how homophobia affects me emotionally and psychologically.”* Nomfundo went on, saying, *“This drawing also depicts how much I’m anxious and depressed due to homophobia.”* Her artwork illustrates the deep psychological toll she suffered and her struggles with anxiety and depression, emphasising how exclusion affects her mental wellbeing, as supported by Taylor-Christie (2025).

SCT Bandura (1986) shows how our environment influences our emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. In the drawing, the girl’s closed-off posture symbolises feelings of isolation and helplessness, common amongst marginalised learners facing internalised stigma (Bandura, 1999; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2020). Her comment, *“I think you can see that it tells a lot about how I feel,”* underscores the power of visual art to convey emotions beyond words (Day et al., 2020; Bacchini et al., 2021).

Nomfundo explained that the small bag next to the girl symbolises a desire to escape a hostile environment, highlighting her emotional exhaustion. She stated, *“I’m emotionally and mentally exhausted because of the feelings of anxiety and depression that homophobia gives me.”* Barragán-Medero and Pérez-Jorge (2020) note that LGBTQIA+ learners facing constant discrimination often develop anxiety and depression and engage less in social participation. Nomfundo’s final remark, *“This drawing shows that sometimes, I feel like I’m lost in the middle of a vast desert, far away from anywhere”*, captures her sense of loneliness. Nomfundo’s experience reinforces the imperative for vulnerable learners to be protected by policies that go

beyond mere lip service (Wright et al., 2019). Schools must establish policies that welcome marginalised children and create safe spaces for them to access essential psychosocial support (Bailey, 2020).

Individuals who face homophobia commonly withdraw themselves from social interactions due to discrimination and social exclusion, which brings psychological problems that lead to social isolation (Meyer, 2003).

In light of Nomfundo’s case and the above claim, research confirms that homophobic incidents cause substantial harm to LGBTQIA+ learners, leading them to withdraw from social activities (Kosciw et al., 2020; Sarika & Maji, 2025). These learners often experience isolation, which affects their academic performance and overall wellbeing (Zamboni & Crawford, 2019). A study by Mbatha (2022) found that South African schools foster environments that contribute to this isolation, pushing LGBTQIA+ learners into social seclusion. The detachment intensifies anxiety and depression, highlighting the critical need for school policies that promote inclusivity and support for LGBTQIA+ learners (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Meyer, 2020; Mbatha, 2022; Mayeza, 2023).

5.4.3 Figure 3: (Sibusiso’s Drawing)

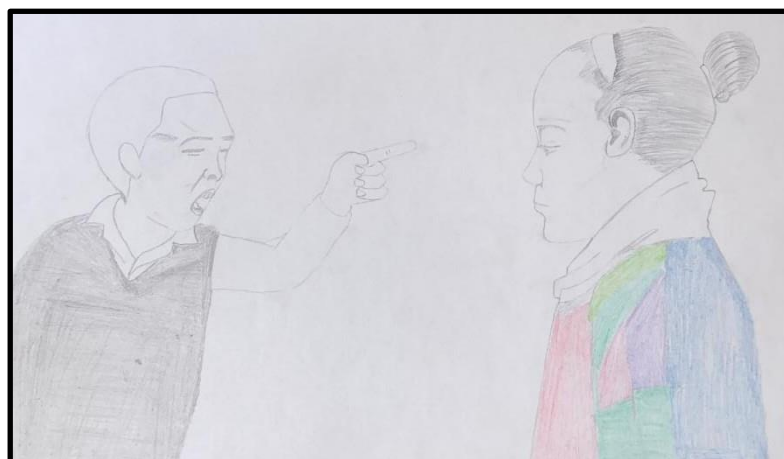


Sibusiso explained that his drawing illustrates the emotional toll of homophobia by depicting a large, shattered heart alongside a smaller heart emerging from its pieces, connected by two green pathways. Reflecting on his feelings, Sibusiso stated, *“This drawing represents my everyday feelings of anxiety and depression due to homophobia.”* He emphasised that his mood swings between anxiety and depression are a direct result of being discriminated against because of his homosexuality (Martinez & Evans, 2023; Fazeli et al., 2023). The red accents

on the large, broken heart represent profound emotional devastation, as he explains, “*A broken big red heart symbolises that my heart is broken into pieces.*” SCT suggests that personal emotions and mental processes emerge in response to environmental stimuli, which influence how individuals react to challenges (Bandura, 1986). Through the imagery of his broken, big red heart, Sibusiso demonstrates how learning in a hostile environment, particularly one that includes homophobia, has negatively affected his self-esteem and sense of belonging at school (Meyer, 2015; Rose, 2022).

Sibusiso notes “*The two green paths demonstrate both hope and the distant path to autonomy as an LGBTQIA+ community.*” Research shows that LGBTQIA+ youth build resilience by believing that life will one day become more accepting and equitable (Mayo, 2022; Ullman, 2022). His last statement, “*A big red full heart illustrates that I will be fine one day ...*”, reflects that his healing journey has a long way to go. Kosciw et al. (2020) highlight that the ongoing discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ learners negatively impact their psychological and emotional wellbeing, even they maintain hope for a better future. Sprague and Walker (2021) call for systemic interventions to promote a sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing for disadvantaged LGBTQIA+ learners.

5.4.4 Figure 4: (Emily’s Drawing)



Emily explained that her artwork represents verbal harassment due to homophobia. It features a boy shouting while pointing at a girl who stands silently with a sad facial expression. She stated, “*This drawing demonstrates the summary of my life of being called names by non-LGBTQIA+ individuals.*” This reveals how often she has faced discrimination from non-LGBTQIA+ people, which has shaped her life and is expressed through this artwork. According to the SCT, individuals adapt their behaviours, emotional patterns, and coping

strategies as a result of influences from their social environment (Bandura, 1986). In Emily's case, experiencing verbal abuse led her to feel intense emotions and helplessness. She explains, *"It hurts a lot being called 'stabane' or 'ngqingili'."* Research indicates that LGBTQIA+ learners are at a higher risk for depression and anxiety when faced with regular verbal abuse, as this type of abuse creates dangerous school environments (Msibi, 2012; Bacchini et al., 2021; Gennosa, 2024).

Furthermore, the multicoloured aspects of her drawing represent her various emotional states. She explained, *"The red, green, blue, and purple colours represent my feelings"*, with each colour carrying a different meaning. Emily clarified that *"Red represents anger in me, green symbolises hope, blue illustrates sadness, purple is for wisdom."* Her emotions illustrate a struggle between inner resistance to pain and a growing resilience that combats both pain and hope. Emily's drawing powerfully highlights how ongoing homophobic treatment can lead to emotional distress and shape one's self-perception (Wright et al., 2019; Kaczkowski et al., 2022; Shannon, 2022). It is crucial for educators to develop school-based interventions that not only promote inclusivity but also offer much needed psychological support (Taylor-Christie, 2025). This proactive approach can significantly reduce the negative impact on marginalised learners (Martino, 2022; Mann & Jones, 2022).

5.5 Non-participant Observations Findings

This section summarises data obtained through non-participant observations during semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, drawings during teaching and learning sessions, breaktimes, and playground activities. The researcher assessed homophobia in the school community and its emotional and social impacts on LGBTQIA+ learners. These observations helped identify behavioural patterns and institutional practices (recorded in a reflexive journal) that participants might not openly acknowledge directly (Moore, 2016; Mtuse, 2021; Schneider, 2023; Rubey, 2024).

Throughout the school day, the researcher observed power dynamics that revealed which forms of discrimination were either perpetuated or left unchallenged. The findings suggest that the school atmosphere significantly affects learners' mental health, as negative peer interactions intensify feelings of anxiety and depression (Meyer, 2020; Carbajal, 2021; Tomas, 2024; Taylor-Christie, 2025). Applying SCT, I explored how learned behaviours and school practices shaped the coping strategies and decisions of LGBTQIA+ learners (Bandura, 1986). To maintain ethical standards, the researcher employed pseudonyms and general descriptions to ensure

anonymity. My findings from non-participant observations revealed several critical patterns that necessitate immediate school-based inclusive initiatives. The results of these observations are presented below.

5.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

(Non-participant Observations Findings)

5.5.1.1 Description One

In this description, the researcher provide a detailed account of my non-participant observations, comparing them with the findings generated from semi-structured interviews in the first theme of this study, titled “*Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological.*”

During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher observed that participants became emotionally affected as they recalled their experiences with homophobia. They displayed psychological distress through tears and emotional expressions, highlighting their struggles to articulate the pain caused by harassment and exclusion. SCT posits that individuals develop emotions and behaviours through social connections with others and by observing others (Bandura, 1986). The repeated discriminatory experiences faced by these participants contributed to their distress, reinforcing feelings of unworthiness and anxiety (Hasan & Bao, 2020; Summers & Joe, 2024; Lavan et al., 2024).

While presenting the findings of this study under theme one (*Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological*), Rohan shared that he experienced exclusion within his group due to derogatory terms like “*stabane*” used by heterosexual members. This limits learners' involvement in collaborative academic work (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). My observations in the Grade 10 classroom supported this. The researcher witnessed Nhlahla (pseudonym) and Zinhle (pseudonym) being silenced by other group members in a Life Orientation session solely because they identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Societal norms coupled with school-based reinforcement, create an environment that leads LGBTQIA+ individuals to recognise negative experiences and to experience elevated anxiety and depression (Msibi, 2012; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024).

During my non-participant observations, verbal harassment occurred constantly. In this study, all participants reported having experienced regular derogatory comments from both teachers and fellow learners, who often used the insulting term “*stabane*” to demean them. SCT illustrates how individuals learn by observing others; thus, when teachers or influential peers

use homophobic language, it can encourage other learners to adopt similar discriminatory beliefs (Bandura, 1986). The experience of being openly victimised, alongside discouragement from both learners and teachers, produces a school environment where bullying behaviour becomes normalised (Romano et al., 2021; Mason & Minerva, 2022). My firsthand observations corroborated these findings, as the researcher witnessed directing verbal hatred towards LGBTQIA+ learners, creating additional barriers to participation. Peer backlash prevents victims from expressing themselves, adding to their emotional problems (Nkosi & Zulu, 2022). In the absence of evidence to the contrary, research suggests that verbal abuse against LGBTQIA+ learners leads to long-lasting psychological harm, resulting in abnormal academic behaviour, diminished self-worth, and potential depression (Kosciw et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2021; Mayeza, 2023).

In addition to verbal abuse and exclusion, the researcher observed incidents of physical harassment through sexual violence. Physical and sexual violence directed against LGBTQIA+ learners is one of the worst dangers they encounter (Francis, 2021; Sarika & Maji, 2025). The incidence of sexual assault on Emily by a boy whom she denied dating. Moreover, the stalking attempt from a grade 10 learner on a grade 8 learner both illustrates the severe threats faced by LGBTQIA+ learners. A justification used by the perpetrator revealed social beliefs about gender nonconformity because he stated, “*Why is she acting like a boy if she’s a girl?*” reveals harmful beliefs about gender nonconformity. According to SCT, such violent behaviours are reinforced through observation, suggesting that unchecked homophobia contributes to these attacks (Bandura, 1999; Vural-Batik, 2020). South African schools often perpetuate hegemonic masculinity through violence (Msibi, 2012). The dangers of school-based homophobia highlight the need for immediate interventions that combat gender-based oppression and promote shared learning spaces (Fordenbacher, 2022).

5.5.1.2 Description Two

In this section, the researcher detail my non-participant observations and compare them with the findings from semi-structured interviews under the theme “*Coping Strategies.*”

A reoccurring theme in my observations is the inconsistent responses to homophobic bullying from both teachers and learners, which significantly affects how LGBTQIA+ learners handle discrimination. Rohan’s experience in seeking support from his teacher highlights the important role educators play in helping learners manage anxiety and depression (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, during a Grade 11 Life Orientation class, a learner, Mandla (pseudonym),

used the offensive term “*stabane*” to refer to another learner, Mbusowenkosi (pseudonym), and the teacher did not intervene. This silence reinforced the acceptability of homophobic language, as noted by Meyer (2020), Taylor-Dunn et al. (2021), and Gebremariam et al. (2023). Taylor-Christie (2025) emphasises that teachers who ignore verbal harassment contribute to a school environment that enables such behaviour to continue. SCT states that people acquire knowledge through observing their role model’s behaviours (Bandura, 1986). When teachers do not actively intervene, it creates an unsafe environment for LGBTQIA+ learners, influencing their coping mechanisms in the face of discrimination (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022; McQuillan & Mayo, 2024).

Similarly, an incident the researcher witnessed involving Nkosikhona (pseudonym) and Mfanafuthi (pseudonym) further highlights the reliance of LGBTQIA+ learners on peer support to deal with homophobia, as supported by Bridge et al. (2022). Mfanafuthi jokingly called Nkosikhona “*stabane*” during a break, causing him to immediately walk away. Nkosikhona’s friends comforted him with hugs, demonstrating a support-seeking coping strategy similar to Nomfundo’s.

SCT highlights the role of observational learning. In this case, the solidarity demonstrated by Nkosikhona’s friends provided positive reinforcement against discrimination. While peer support alleviates some of the adverse consequences of discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ learners, it does not address the core issue here, being the acceptance of homophobic slurs in schools (Kosciw et al., 2020; Yolaç & Meriç, 2021). This evidence indicates that active intervention from educators is essential to combat discrimination, as informal networks, although important, are often insufficient to safeguard LGBTQIA+ learners from harm (Msibi, 2012; Karki et al., 2022).

5.5.1.3 Description Three

In this section, the researcher outline my non-participant observations and comparing them with the findings of the semi-structured interviews under theme “*Factors Influencing Coping Decisions.*”

The core observation here is that LGBTQIA+ learners often feel profound loneliness due to discrimination and exclusion in their schools and communities. For example, Sibusiso mirrors the isolation the researcher witnessed in the playground session, where one learner was set apart from the group, who mocked him. This pattern of exclusion often leads LGBTQIA+ learners to withdraw as a protective measure (Jiang et al., 2023).

According to SCT, people acquire coping methods through observation of social encounters and reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999). Sibusiso's experiences with discrimination have taught him that withdrawal is the safest response. Research confirms that self-isolation is a common self-protective reaction amongst LGBTQIA+ learners when facing rejection, which leads to increased feelings of loneliness and depression (Kosciw et al., 2020; Verly, 2024; Mata, 2024; Sarika & Maji, 2025).

Additionally, my observation of the playground showed that discrimination often intensifies when peer groups collectively mock those who are individuals. Gennosa (2024) explains that when peers stand by and laugh while pointing at an isolated individual, they contribute to reinforcing a marginalising atmosphere as a group. This behaviour creates barriers for the affected learner, making it difficult for them to find social support (Vural-Batik, 2020). SCT establishes that people learn behaviours from observing others (Bandura, 1986). In a school culture that accepts exclusion, learners are likely to avoid confronting such behaviours (Bandura, 1986). Bystanders who remain silent contribute to the discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Msibi, 2012). This suggests that Sibusiso's isolation stems from factors beyond his personal choices; it originates from a social atmosphere that lacks inclusivity and support (Wang et al., 2020; Summers & Joe, 2024). These findings reveal the reoccurring theme of exclusion and underscore the need for programmes that combat discrimination and promote inclusivity in schools.

5.6.2 Focus Group Discussions

(Non-Participant Observations Findings)

5.6.2.1 Description One

In this section, the researcher provide an extensive comprehensive description of my non-participant observations and demonstrate their relevance to findings generated from focus group discussions, specifically related to theme one of this study, "*Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological.*"

According to Rohan, Nomfundo, Sibusiso, and Emily, learners experienced verbal attacks as derogatory terms such as "*stabane*" were directed at LGBTQIA+ learners by both their peers and teachers. However, researcher's non-participant observation did not reveal any instances of teachers using such homophobic slurs. Instead, during a Grade 12 Life Orientation class, the researcher witnessed a teacher calling a learner "*a fool*" after an incorrect response, which elicited laughter from the

other learners. Although this incident did not explicitly target homosexuals, it demonstrated how humiliating behaviour has become normalised and accepted in schools (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Hurtado-Mellado & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2024).

SCT suggests that individuals learn behaviours through observing and modelling those in positions of power (Bandura, 1986). According to Santos and De Jesus (2020), teachers inadvertently endorse public bullying as an acceptable practice through their use of abusive language. Allen (2020) found that the school authorities in South Africa maintain an exclusionary environment by failing to address discriminatory actions effectively. In the above instance, the teacher's derogatory comment reinforces a culture of public humiliation within the school. This prompts learners to mimic unacceptable behaviour, which can result in, amongst other issues, persistent verbal attacks on LGBTQIA+ learners (Nappa et al., 2018; Synan, 2023). The fundamental nature of teacher-led social modelling arises because their conduct establishes significant social patterns in the classroom (Reisner et al., 2020; James, 2021; Taylor-Christie, 2025).

5.6.2.2 Description Two

In this section, the researcher describe my non-participant observation findings and explain how they complement the research results from focus group discussions categorised under the theme "*Coping Strategies.*"

Homophobic bullying was the central theme throughout my observations, revealing how LGBTQIA+ learners cope with exclusion and aggression. For instance, Rohan faced soccer exclusion due to homophobic comments, similar to the playground incident where a learner was bullied for being "...too soft..." and told to "...go and play with girls." These examples show how cultural environments create barriers that prevent LGBTQIA+ learners from participating in activities that could help them cope, reinforcing traditional gender norms (Kumar & Akoijam, 2017). SCT Bandura (1986) highlights how witnessing peers being mocked based on gender expression leads to withdrawal from social interactions, ultimately intensifying emotional challenges.

Another important pattern that emerged from observations is the expression of self-harm and aggressive behaviours as coping mechanisms for dealing with homophobia. Nomfundo's admission that she has resorted to self-harm mirrors, to an extent, my observation of a Grade 12 learner who yelled and beat against a wall after being called "*stabane*" by a peer. Young people often express their feelings of helplessness in the face of discrimination through self-

harm or aggressive actions (Msibi, 2012; Sullivan, 2020; Carbajal, 2021). Research by Meyer (2003) illustrates that minority stress can lead LGBTQIA+ youth to develop unhealthy behaviours, such as self-harm and substance abuse. This aligns with SCT, which posits that people can develop learned helplessness when they experience ongoing negative reinforcement, leading them to feel incapable and reinforcing their engagement in harmful coping behaviours (Bandura, 1999).

In addition, the researcher noticed a concerning pattern of substance use amongst learners, indicating that they often turn to drugs as a way to escape emotional distress (Reisner et al., 2020). For example, Sibusiso's drinking habit reflects Emily's tobacco addiction, highlighting the use of these substances to escape emotionally stressful situations (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Meyer, 2020; Maluleka & Godsell, 2023). Although the researcher did not observe alcohol consumption at school but did witness a quiet gathering of learners smoking outside the school lavatories. They were smoking silently, clearly distressed and seeking emotional regulation. This again illustrates how some learners use tobacco to deal with their internal emotional struggles (Meyer, 2003; Hinds et al., 2022).

Discrimination against LGBTQIA+ youth increases the likelihood that they will turn to substance use as a way to cope with their problems (Winberg et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2021). This is consistent with the concept of reciprocal determinism in SCT, which posits that a learner's environment (homophobic school culture), individual traits (distress and anxiety), and behaviours (substance use), combine to create a negative cycle (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999; Tan et al., 2021). The ethical implications underscore the need for educational institutions to establish discrimination-free environments that enable LGBTQIA+ learners to develop healthy coping strategies and express their identities openly (Santos & De Jesus, 2020; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024; Gennosa, 2024).

5.6.2.3 Description Three:

In this section, the researcher outline my findings from non-participant observation while discussing their connection to the results of the focus group discussions, focusing on the theme "*Factors Influencing Coping Decisions.*"

Here, the recurring theme in the observation was the impact of school environments and policies on the coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ learners. Rohan shared his feelings about not belonging at school due to frequent homophobic abuse, which witnessed when a group of learners mocked a peer by saying, "*You will fall; walk straight like a man. Stop forcing being*

a girl. You irritate us.” The public shaming visibly distressed the learner, prompting her to flee. SCT Bandura (1986) suggests that persistent exposure to hostility exacerbates feelings of exclusion and self-doubt amongst LGBTQIA+ learners. Meyer's (2020) research shows that communities permitting discrimination create psychological strain, leading to LGBTQIA+ individuals developing negative self-perceptions.

Furthermore, the observations indicate that physical aggression often stems from homophobia prevalent in schools. For instance, Nomfundo mentioned, *“Sometimes, you get beaten for looking at someone.”* This statement reflects an incident witnessed involving a Grade 12 learner, Zola (pseudonym), who slapped another learner, Bhekisizwe (pseudonym), for accidentally stepping on his shoe. When questioned about the incident, Zola responded, *“Why is he stepping on me? This ‘stabane’ irritates me.”* The investigation highlights that homophobia in schools can lead to both verbal abuse and physical confrontations amongst learners (Green & Lambert, 2021). From the perspective of SCT, aggression can be learned and become socially acceptable through observation, as learners come to view tolerated homophobic violence as normal behaviour (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999). The lack of discipline in schools when addressing incidents of homophobic bullying incidents puts LGBTQIA+ learners at a constant risk of violence and intimidation (Msibi, 2012; Sarika & Maji, 2025; Taylor-Christie, 2025).

Another significant theme that emerged is the restrictive nature of school policies, particularly those that impact learners’ gender expression. The observations confirmed the concerns raised by Emily and Nomfundo regarding dress code restrictions. For example, the researcher witnessed a teacher scold a Grade 10 learner for wearing a tracksuit during cold weather while enforcing the dress code policy. The teacher exclaimed, *“What’s this now? Are you allowed to wear this? Are you a boy now? Don’t irritate me, get out of my class and see the principal.”* This incident reflects how unnecessarily stringent school regulations can reinforce traditional gender norms, inhibiting LGBTQIA+ learners from expressing their identities freely (Brown et al., 2024; Verly, 2024; Richhariya, 2024).

SCT provides insight into how institutional policies can shape behaviour. Discriminatory enforcement of dress codes, for instance, leads LGBTQIA+ learners to feel that their identities are illegitimate, which negatively impacts their emotional state (Bandura, 1986). Research by Verly (2024) confirms that restrictive school policies contribute to the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ learners by diminishing their sense of security and belonging in the school

environment. Ethically, these findings highlight the urgent need for schools to revise policies to protect LGBTQIA+ learners from institutional discrimination and promote inclusivity (Rubey, 2024; Vik, 2024).

5.6.3 Drawings

(Non-Participant Observations Findings)

The participants were observed individually in their classroom environment, without the presence of other learners. The researcher deliberately arranged this specific setting to ensure both privacy and security, allowing all four participants to freely express their emotions through the drawing process. This methodology relies on the fundamental principle of creating secure spaces for vulnerable self-expression, which is recommended for addressing sensitive issues like anxiety and depression (Hall, 2020). The environment set up minimised external influences and created optimal conditions for participants to convey their feelings about homophobia through uninhibited artistic expression. This research approach aligns with literature-backed recommendations, highlighting the necessity for privacy together and emotional safety when exploring sensitive mental health concerns (Bailey, 2020; Carbajal, 2021; Sreeram et al., 2023; Green et al., 2022; Mauldin, 2023).

5.6.3.1 Description One: Rohan

In this section, the researcher provide a detailed description of my non-participant observations of Rohan during his drawing process. I sat 1.5 meters away from him while he drew (see Figure 5.4.1 above), refraining from engaging in conversation so that the researcher could focus on facial expressions and body language.

During the drawing process, Rohan's paper became soaked with his tears, illustrating the deep psychological impact he faced due to homophobic bullying. He was unable to complete his first draft as the paper was soaked. His artwork depicted a knife and a rope accompanied by a thought bubble, conveying feelings of internal turmoil and despair, as supported by Cocker et al. (2019). Research shows that LGBTQIA+ learners who endure continuous homophobic abuse are more likely to experience severe suicidal thoughts and engage in self-harm (Msibi, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2020; Moyano & del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020; Okanlawon, 2021). From the perspective of SCT, Rohan's experience reflects how harmful social situations, such as those involving homophobic victimisation, can alter cognitive and emotional responses (Bandura, 1986).

Social discrimination and exclusion from peers can develop into negative self-perceptions, and unhealthy coping strategies (Barragán-Medero & Pérez-Jorge, 2020; Allen, 2020; Lehtonen, 2021). My observations revealed the theme of a lack of immediate support structures, leaving Rohan to manage his feelings alone. Ethical considerations played a crucial role in this process, as the researcher provided a secure environment for Rohan to express himself through drawing while respecting his comfort limits. A study by Okanlawon (2021) highlights the urgent need for policies that support LGBTQIA+ learners, as emotional distress persists without institutional protection and support.

5.6.3.2 Description Two: Nomfundo

This section comprehensively reports on my non-participant observations of Nomfundo as she created her artwork (see Figure 5.4.2 above). The researcher sat at a distance of 1.5 meters from her as she drew, carefully observing her body language and facial expressions without interrupting her work.

Nomfundo's drawing and her emotional response during the process revealed a key pattern concerning LGBTQIA+ learners who experience homophobia through their isolated experiences and distressing circumstances. The researcher noticed that Nomfundo stopped working on her artwork several times, resting her head on the desk and crying as she grappled to express her feelings. This brought to mind an earlier observation, involving a Grade 10 learner sitting alone in a similar posture, with their head resting on their knees. The learner began to cry after standing up. Nomfundo's behaviour while drawing, along with that of the Grade 10 learner, is consistent with SCT, which suggests that prolonged exposure to homophobic bullying and social exclusion leads individuals to feel helpless and isolated in such settings (Bandura, 1986).

Additionally, previous research by Meyer (2003) on minority stress theory supports this conclusion by arguing that persistent discrimination and rejection from society leads LGBTQIA+ individuals to experience emotional distress and mental health issues. The observations confirm that the lack of school intervention in addressing homophobia leads learners to withdraw from the world while keeping their inner struggles hidden instead of seeking help (Allen, 2019; Allen, 2020; Brown et al., 2024). The ethical implications of these situations emphasise the importance of ensuring that every learner feels supported in a welcoming school environment, rather than being disregarded during their challenges (Mauldin, 2023).

5.6.3.3 Description Three: Sibusiso

In this section, the researcher provides a detailed account of my non-participant observations of Sibusiso while he was working on his drawing (see Figure 5.4.3 above). The researcher observed Sibusiso's facial expressions and body language from a distance of 1.5 meters away in order to maintain appropriate spacing.

Sibusiso's drawing and emotional state during the process highlighted a consistent pattern of psychological distress and emotional withdrawal amongst LGBTQIA+ learners facing homophobia in school. Although Sibusiso did not cry, his sadness was evident in his facial expressions and physical behaviour, particularly during his attentive gaze out the window instead of focusing on his drawing. The researcher observed similar behaviours in distressed learners during my previous classroom observations; many of them would stare out the window for extended periods when they seemed disengaged from the lesson.

According to the SCT Bandura (1986), individuals develop coping behaviours by observing their social environment and interacting with others. In this case, my observation showed that learners often withdraw emotionally when faced with challenges, indicating a preference to turn inward instead of seeking help. Research by Collis (2024) found that LGBTQIA+ learners frequently disengage from schoolwork and social activities as a coping strategy following experiences of ongoing discrimination. My findings, supported by Gennosa (2024), stress the need for safe educational settings where learners can share emotions and receive guidance, instead of environments that trigger withdrawal. It is the responsibility of educators to recognise these emotional struggles so that they can take action to prevent academic disengagement and mental decline (Allen, 2020).

5.6.3.4 Description Three: Emily

This section provides the details from my non-participant observation of Emily as she produced her artwork (see Figure 5.4.4 above). The researcher ensured to maintain a distance of 1.5 meters away from her, so that I could focus on facial expressions and body language without disrupting her efforts.

Emily's drawing and emotional state vividly reflected the ongoing theme of verbal and physical abuse experienced by LGBTQIA+ learners, which leads to severe emotional harm. Her artwork serves as an expression of her struggles, as she exhibited signs of distress, such as trembling knees and tears, and taking frequent breaks in drawing as she attempted to control her emotions. This behaviour was consistent with my non-participant observation during break time, where

witnessed three learners attacking another learner who appeared to be in distress, subjecting them to both verbal abuse and physical violence.

According to Bandura's SCT, people learn behaviours by observing others and getting positive or negative feedback from their social surroundings (Bandura, 1986). In Emily's case, enduring repeated homophobic bullying events led her to feel helpless and fearful, which has affected her reactions and adaptations to those situations. A study by Meyer (2020) indicates that ongoing discrimination causes LGBTQIA+ people to experience increased levels of depression and anxiety, creating hostility in learning environments instead of fostering safe spaces. Observational evidence supports the ethical responsibility of teachers and school administrators to not only address bullying incidents but also to implement protective policies against verbal and physical harassment of LGBTQIA+ learners (Weinberg & Cooper, 2024; Gennosa, 2024; Verly, 2024). Proactive intervention must occur immediately, as inaction results in further suffering for learners and deepens both trauma and academic disengagement (Lehtonen, 2021; Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024).

5.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the research findings and analysed the data in relation to the research questions, relevant literature, and Bandura's SCT. The next chapter will summarise the study's conclusions, recommendations, and limitations encountered during the research process.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on presenting and discussing the study's findings related to the research questions, theoretical framework, and relevant literature. This chapter gives a concise conclusion by summarising the study's chapters, themes, research findings, personal reflection, and recommendations, as well as the limitations experienced during the data generation process.

6.2 Summary of Chapters

This study consists of six chapters, outlined as follows:

6.2.1 Chapter One

In this chapter, the researcher provided background information on the study, explained the rationale for the research, and set out the research problem statement. Additionally, the researcher outlined the research objectives and research questions and highlighted the study's significance. The researcher also provided an overview of the study's structure and defined key terms.

This study was guided by the following three research objectives:

- To explore anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district.
- To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia.
- To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

- What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia?
- Why do they cope in the way that they do?

6.2.2 Chapter Two

This chapter reviewed the existing literature that provides the context and scope of this study.

This review utilised recent, peer-reviewed national and international relevant literature

on anxiety and depression amongst learners experiencing homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown district.

6.2.3 Chapter Three

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the theoretical perspective of Bandura’s SCT. This theory offered insight into how learners’ psychological reactions to homophobia are influenced by their observations of others, their perceived self-efficacy, and how their behaviour impacts the school environment and vice versa.

6.2.4 Chapter Four

This chapter outlines the research approach and design used in this study. It also discussed the research paradigm, target population, and sampling methods, including the participant selection process. Furthermore, the chapter described the data generation and analysis methods utilised, and considerations of trustworthiness and ethics.

6.2.5 Chapter Five

In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings, discussion, and conclusion of this study.

6.2.6 Chapter Six

This final chapter provides a summary and concludes the discussion of the findings and recommendations. The findings align with the objectives of the study, which aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia, specifically in the Pinetown district.

Table 6.3: Study’s Themes Summary

Themes:
1. Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological.
2. Coping Strategies.
3. Factors Influencing Coping Decisions.

6.4 Summary of Findings

To conclude effectively, it is important to review the study's key findings to determine whether they addressed the essential research questions. The following section presents a summary of the main findings of this study.

6.4.1 Persistent Homophobia: Emotional and Psychological

The study's key findings indicated that homophobic bullying has a severe impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners. Participants such as Rohan and Nomfundo shared their feelings of isolation, diminished self-worth, and worsening mental health due to name-calling, social ostracism, and physical abuse. Rohan's experience highlights how facing verbal harassment and rejection contributes to symptoms of anxiety and depression, resulting in sleep problems and feelings of despondency. Similarly, Nomfundo faced discrimination from her teacher, which led to violations of her right to safety, issues with concentration in public settings, heart rhythm irregularities, and a lasting sense of low self-worth. These cases emphasise the necessity for educational institutions to implement policies that promote acceptance amongst learners and provide psychological support for LGBTQIA+ learners (Çon & Osmanağaoğlu, 2024).

Sibusiso's narrative underscores the persistent social prejudice against LGBTQIA+ learners within educational institutions, family units, and local communities. His experiences of being rejected by his father and ignored by neighbours illustrate how multiple incidents of discrimination challenge his resilience and negatively impact his mental wellbeing. The scientific indicators for anxiety and depression, such as sleeplessness, increased sweating, and social withdrawal, align with his reported symptoms (Meyer, 2003) This study's findings demonstrate that the enduring stigma and social rejection cause psychological harm to LGBTQIA+ learners, supporting MST, which explains how discrimination-related stressors contribute to negative mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Meyer, 2020; McConnell & Birkett, 2021).

Emily's situation highlights the serious and tragic consequences of homophobic violence. She endured both physical assaults and verbal harm, including sexual assault, due to her sexual orientation. Her experiences illustrate how prejudice against homosexual individuals can lead to significant attacks on physical boundaries, resulting in lasting emotional trauma. The traumatic effects of these experiences are evident in her descriptions of suicidal thoughts and a loss of interest in life. The widespread acceptance of violence against homosexual

individuals, along with their exclusion in various contexts and settings, stemming from toxic masculinity and societal intolerance, contributes to the increased stigmatisation of victims (Hanimoglu, 2019). This underlines the need for legal defence mechanisms, comprehensive mental support, and informative campaigns.

The findings of this study confirmed that homophobic bullying is not an isolated issue but rather a widespread problem within schools that affects LGBTQIA+ learners. All participants reported witnessing and experiencing verbal abuse, which many of them perceived as an accepted norm in the school environment. This reinforces the notion that deviating from traditional heterosexual identities is viewed as inferior. According to Mann and Jones (2022), the normalisation of discrimination fosters feelings of worthlessness amongst LGBTQIA+ learners when schools fail to challenge such behaviour, allowing discrimination to escalate within the school environment. These findings demonstrate the need for educational institutions to implement anti-homophobia measures and provide support structures for LGBTQIA+ learners. Additionally, schools should cultivate a teaching environment based on Ubuntu principles, emphasising respect, empathy, and dignity for every learner (Mauldin, 2023; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024). Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasising compassion, interconnectedness, and communal care (Mauldin, 2023).

6.4.2 Coping Strategies

The findings of this study showed that LGBTQIA+ learners employ various coping strategies to manage anxiety and depressive symptoms stemming from homophobic experiences. Some participants, like Rohan and Nomfundo, reported using physical activities combined with mindfulness exercises and social support as effective ways to relieve distress when faced with homophobia. However, they expressed concern that these coping strategies only offer short-term relief, raising questions about their long-term effectiveness. Additionally, the study identified that the primary barrier preventing LGBTQIA+ learners from seeking mental health assistance is a financial limitation, which impedes their access to professional psychological support.

This study highlighted that while certain coping strategies offer relief, others can be unhelpful and potentially harmful. For example, Sibusiso finds comfort in journaling and socialising with like-minded friends, but he avoids contact with his homophobic family, which deepens his emotional burden. Emily, on the other hand, deals with her anxiety and depression through self-imposed solitude and late-night walks. Although she enjoys these solitary outings, they prevent her from seeking external help. The study revealed that some learners resort to harmful coping

strategies, such as self-harm, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption, only to discover the destructive consequences of these behaviours.

These findings highlight the critical need for well-organised and accessible support networks, including counselling programmes and safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ learners within the school environment. The experiences shared by participants indicate that current coping strategies are not effective enough in addressing the profound impacts of homophobia. Additionally, participants expressed a desire for professional mental health, which remains unmet due to financial barriers. This underscores the necessity for cost-free psychological assistance in educational institutions.

6.4.3 Factors Influencing Coping Decisions

This study found that LGBTQIA+ learners adopt coping strategies influenced by personal, social, and environmental factors. Participants utilise a variety of coping mechanisms based on their individual attributes and emotional needs. Rohan and Nomfundo prefer activities like sports, yoga, meditation, and deep breathing because these pursuits offer them non-judgmental relief and support. In contrast, Emily tends to isolate herself, avoiding interactions with others and internalising negative emotions. Although she recognises that this approach has limited effectiveness, she feels unsupported by those around her. Additionally, Sibusiso's experiences of being treated as an outsider by his biological father and community encourage him to value self-reflection, illustrating how family dynamics and social attitudes can shape individual coping strategies.

The findings of this study also indicated that social support plays a crucial role in shaping coping decisions. The participants highlighted the importance of this support by seeking emotional assistance from friends, teachers, and family members. Nomfundo finds comfort in her mother and lesbian friends, who continue to support her regardless of public bias and rejection. Rohan confides in his supportive teacher, while Sibusiso relies on peers who share similar experiences for emotional support. However, the lack of supportive relationships leads individuals to develop unhealthy coping strategies (Craig & McInroy, 2021). In Emily's case, her tendency to withdraw and avoid social interactions arose from feeling unheard and isolated. This highlights the importance of social connections, which play a crucial role in creating an accepting environment, thereby encouraging the adoption of effective coping strategies (Gao et al., 2020; Calvo et al., 2021).

This study found that the school environment and policies have a negative impact on the coping decisions of LGBTQIA+ learners. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the unwelcoming atmosphere, citing visible incidents of homophobia and inadequate protective measures. Rohan and Nomfundo reported feeling endangered due to consistent discriminatory treatment, while Sibusiso and Emily's experiences illustrate how gender-specific policies at school reinforce exclusion and bias. The strict enforcement of gender norms, such as controlling what learners can wear and assigning gendered tasks, further marginalises LGBTQIA+ learners (Verly, 2024). Consequently, this environment led some participants to withdraw from social interactions at the school, reducing their overall involvement in daily activities. These findings demonstrate the need for schools to implement inclusive policies that actively prevent discrimination against LGBTQIA+ learners.

6.4.4 Drawings Findings

The findings from this research showed how the severe emotional and psychological effects of homophobia on LGBTQIA+ learners at school. Through accounts and visual representations of participants Rohan, Nomfundo, Sibusiso, and Emily, it became evident that discrimination within the school leads to emotional distress, resulting in anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. For example, Rohan's self-harm drawing depicts the adverse impact of continuous stigmatisation on his mental health, pushing him toward suicidal thoughts. Similarly, Nomfundo's artwork of a withdrawn girl depicts deep feelings of loneliness and exhaustion, as being targeted for her sexuality creates overwhelming solitude. Their shared experiences align with the SCT, which explains how individuals learn from their environment, shaping their thoughts, emotions, and responses (Bandura, 1986). The participants expressed a desire to escape, highlighting the urgent requirement for schools to implement supportive mental health systems backed by inclusive standards.

Despite the trauma they face, the study also revealed that LGBTQIA+ learners show resilience in overcoming the harm they experience. Sibusiso's artwork combines a broken heart segment with green paths, illustrating the profound emotional hurt brought on by discrimination while also hinting at future redemption and unity. His vision of eventual self-assurance, where he believes he will "*be fine one day*", demonstrates the capacity for individuals to become resilient when appropriate services are available. Likewise, Emily's drawing reflects her emotional conflict through a variety of colours in her drawing, as she grapples with a combination of frustration and depression alongside suppressed optimism. Her experiences

with abuse and the consequences she continues to suffer as a result of this support this study's conclusion that enduring homophobic abuse can lead to lasting mental health complications. However, through Emily's use of different colours to express her hope and wisdom, she demonstrates a reserve of inner strength to combat oppression. These insights again highlight the necessity for educational institutions to implement comprehensive diversity programs and mental health care initiatives, as supported by Taylor-Christie (2025). Such measures would support LGBTQIA+ learners in their academic pursuits while ensuring they are free from discrimination (Carbajal, 2021).

6.4.5 Non-Participant Observations Findings

The findings of the non-participant observations also point to persistent homophobic bullying, which seriously harms the emotional and psychological health of LGBTQIA+ learners. They encounter social and academic exclusion, exacerbated by the use of homophobic slurs such as "*stabane*", which intensifies their marginalisation. Classroom observations indicate that both exposed learners and teachers contribute to this discrimination by either participating in verbal harassment or failing to intervene when necessary. According to SCT, when authority figures such as teachers remain silent, they inadvertently endorse homophobic behaviour, increasing anxiety and depression in LGBTQIA+ learners (Bandura, 1986). Overall, this study emphasises that homophobic aggression creates unsafe learning environments, leading to challenges with self-worth and academic engagement, which require immediate attention (Meyer 2003; Msibi 2012; Kosciw et al., 2020).

In addition to verbal abuse, the study exposed significant levels of violence, including physical assaults and sexual attacks. This violence reflects both societal-based hostility and institutional reinforcement of aggressive masculine behaviour within educational environments (Msibi, 2012). A perpetrator's justification for their actions, suggesting that a girl should not "*act like a boy*", highlights how rigid gender norms can incite acts of aggression, as noted by Bandura (1986). Additionally, the lack of institutional support exposes LGBTQIA+ learners to emotional challenges, leading them to develop harmful coping strategies such as self-isolation, self-harm, and substance abuse. When homophobic norms within educational institutions go unchallenged, they contribute to negative experiences for these learners, increasing the likelihood of victimisation and driving them further into loneliness and depression (Kosciw et al., 2020). National policies need to be reformed to provide teacher training on inclusivity and

to transform schools to safeguard the emotional and psychological wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ learners (Mata, 2024; Richhariya, 2024).

6.5 Personal Reflection

This research experience has significantly developed my intellectual knowledge and personal growth. As a qualified educator who is passionate about inclusive education, the researcher gained valuable insights into how LGBTQIA+ learners experience homophobia in school settings. Exploring the impact of homophobia on the mental health of selected secondary school learners transformed my perspective about this phenomenon and deepened my commitment to social justice education.

However, exploring such a sensitive topic presented challenges, particularly in addressing ethical implications and ensuring participants' confidentiality and safety, as supported by Kousholt and Juhl (2023). Engaging with parents and guardians for informed consent was also difficult, as many communities in South Africa hold negative views about sexual orientation and mental health.

Managing my emotions during the research process proved a significant challenge. The researcher found that had to keep their emotional responses in check, as they were deeply affected by the direct testimonies of pain and discrimination shared by the participants. To maintain objectivity, the researcher felt that it was essential to practice reflexivity by recording my thoughts and feelings in a reflective journal. Engaging with the philosophy of Ubuntu helped me navigate these emotions, highlighting how our connectedness creates shared responsibilities to combat an alarming issue of homophobia.

Methodologically, the researcher used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and drawings as one of the key data generation methods. These approaches allowed participants to express themselves in different ways, revealing their experiences with discrimination and their emotional resilience. Many participants displayed strong coping strategies, which shifted my perception of them from being victims of homophobia to powerful individuals capable of taking action.

This research has enhanced researcher's professional capacity as a teacher and researcher. The researcher have become more mindful of their perspectives, ensuring that they amplify participants' voices rather than overshadow them with my own experiences. This study has reinforced researcher's belief that

educational institutions should create safe spaces that affirm every learner, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Looking ahead, the researcher is committed to advocating for mental health and inclusion policies in both schools and society, supported by appropriate training for teachers. This study has evolved from being an academic work; it has become a movement that deepens researcher's commitment to establishing Ubuntu practices, where every learner is treated with respect, dignity, and compassion in school. Through open dialogue, policy modifications, and community-based participation, the researcher hope to see South African schools transform into environments that fully embrace inclusion in education.

6.6 Study Recommendations

6.6.1 A Zulu Name to Support LGBTQIA+ Learners

The researcher propose using the Zulu name “*Uhlanga*” which represents love, acceptance, and support for LGBTQIA+ learners. The name “*Uhlanga*” (pronounced: oo-hlan-ga) means “a bundle of reeds” or “a family” (Mdhluli & Mphasha, 2024). According to Ndaba (2022), reeds are known to grow together and strengthen one another, making this name a powerful symbol of strength, unity, and mutual support. By adopting this term, we can promote acceptance of LGBTQIA+ learners and move away from outdated derogatory terms such as ‘*stabane*’ and ‘*ngqingili*.’ The researcher is optimistic that by challenging these harmful words, we can foster greater acceptance and encourage a change in attitudes.

6.6.2 Promoting Inclusive Education and Awareness

The schools should implement diversity and inclusion programmes to educate teachers, learners, and parents about LGBTQIA+ rights and experiences. Furthermore, regular workshops with sensitisation programmes should be conducted frequently to address misconceptions and combat discrimination. Additionally, teachers should receive training to create safe and supportive classroom environments where all learners are treated positively and appreciated.

6.6.3 Reforming School Policies for Equality

Schools should amend their policies to protect LGBTQIA+ learners from discrimination. This includes implementing safety measures such as adopting gender-neutral uniform policies and ensuring appropriate disciplinary actions are taken alongside strict enforcement of anti-

bullying policies. Additionally, learners should have secure and confidential procedures in place to report cases of discrimination cases without fear of facing consequences for their disclosures.

6.6.4 Providing Free Psychological Support

All learners, including those from the LGBTQIA+ community, should have access to free psychological care through collaborative efforts involving government institutions, schools, and mental health organisations. Establishing school counselling services and peer support groups can help learners cope with negative effects, such as anxiety and depression, that may arise from experiences of homophobia.

6.6.5 Future Research on LGBTQIA+ Learners' Mental Health in School

Future research should examine the long-term psychological effects of homophobia on LGBTQIA+ learners, as well as the effectiveness of inclusive measures in schools. Additionally, it should investigate the role of peer support systems and teacher interventions in creating an accepting school environment where all learners feel welcome, regardless of their sexual orientation.

6.7. Limitations

In qualitative research, study limitations are inherent challenges that can affect the study's scope, validity, or applicability. These limitations include the researcher's bias, time constraints, and contextual factors specific to the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2022). Scholars such as Creswell and Poth (2018) note that these limitations may weaken the study's design or execution, ultimately impacting the transferability and depth of the findings.

6.7.1 Time Restrictions

In qualitative research, time restrictions refer to the limited time duration available to conduct research, which can affect the depth and breadth of data generation and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wanat et al., 2024). The researcher had a maximum of two years to complete this research, which required careful strategic planning to ensure the researcher could finish within that timeframe. Time constraints often compel researchers to expedite data generation, which can reduce the level of participant engagement, and the richness of the insights gained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). To manage this, the researcher prioritised efficient scheduling by organising data generation methods – such as

semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings — into focused phases. This approach enabled me to gather in-depth data while maintaining its quality. Consequently, applying this systematic method allowed for sufficient time to be dedicated to each technique, maximising the study’s validity despite the time constraints (Patton, 2015).

6.7.2 Financial Constraints

In a qualitative study, financial constraints refer to the lack of sufficient funds required to carry out the research, which can limit access to materials, participant incentives, and travel expenses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher had to be resourceful in determining how the researcher was going to conduct this study without adequate financial support. Funding limitations can affect the sample size and the ability to use more expensive analytical tools, potentially impacting the robustness of research findings (Patton, 2015; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018; Mwita, 2022). To overcome this limitation, the researcher utilised existing resources at the selected school, conducting interviews and discussions in the school’s facilities and analysing the data with commercially available software provided by my academic institution. Furthermore, by maintaining open communication with the school and parents of the learners, the researcher was able to minimise costs significantly while adhering to ethical guidelines.

6.7.3 Loss of Data

In qualitative studies, data loss can occur due to incidents such as accidental omissions, deletion, or corruption of data originating from technical issues, lack of backups, or participants withdrawing from the study (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2023). The researcher recognised that using various data generation methods — such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and drawings — could increase the risk of data loss. The researcher also understood that such a loss could compromise the integrity of the research by limiting the range of perspectives included.

To mitigate this risk, the researcher implemented a strict data management protocol that involved distributing digital files across multiple backups. The researcher ensured that physical documents were securely stored, and that the data were regularly checked to prevent any gaps that could weaken the study's conclusions. By utilising these strategies, the researcher maintained the integrity of the data for analysis and ensured reliable findings.

6.7.4 Parental Resistance and Misinterpretation of the Study

During my data generation process, as discussed in section 6.5, the researcher encountered significant challenges, particularly with parents who were hesitant to allow their children to participate in the study. Their main concern was whether the research aimed to prejudice or to support LGBTQIA+ learners or advocate for the recognition of these learners in the school environment. Misunderstanding of a study's purpose often stems from social prejudices and misconceptions regarding research on minority populations (De Jager & Moosa, 2023). To address this, the researcher took the time to explain the purpose of the study clearly. Eventually, most parents understood and agreed to allow their children to participate in the study. In cases where parents were reluctant, the researcher sought another participant whose parents had consented. This aligns with the documented challenges in qualitative research, where researchers frequently encounter ethical issues and parental interference when interviewing children (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kousholt & Juhl, 2023).

6.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school learners, their coping mechanisms, and their motivations for dealing with anxiety and depression in the face of homophobia, particularly in the Pinetown district. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: What are learners' experiences of anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? How do they cope with anxiety and depression when facing homophobia? Why do they cope in the way that they do? This chapter offered a comprehensive conclusion by summarising the main points of the study, including outlines of chapters, key themes, research findings, personal reflections, recommendations, and the limitations encountered during the data generation process. Ultimately, this study advocates for the elimination of homophobia in schools and emphasises the importance of creating a safe learning environment for all learners, regardless of their sexual orientation, so they can thrive without fear or psychological disorders.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL



08 October 2024

Xolani Hopewell Methula (219019542)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear XH Methula,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007394/2024

Project title: Anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown District.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 26 July 2024 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.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 08 October 2025.

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.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FROM THE SCHOOL

**121 Mariannahill Rd
Pinetown
Durban
3605**

**The principal
210 Mkhize Rd
Southmead
Pinetown
3600**

Dear Principal,

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

My name is **Xolani Hopewell Methula**, I am an M.Ed. student at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus, Pinetown. My student number is **219019542**. In order for me to fulfill a degree requirement, I am expected to conduct a research project. My research project title is **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District**.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of anxiety and depression among learners who face homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown District. By examining the personal narratives and coping mechanisms of affected learners, the study aims to shed light on the psychological impact of homophobia on their well-being. Additionally, this study seeks to provide a platform for these learners to voice their experiences and challenges, offering them a safe space to speak openly about the pressing issues they face. In doing so, the research hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of the support systems needed to address and mitigate the negative effects of homophobia in educational settings.

I believe that this study is needed as it will help draw up care and support strategies for learners who are vulnerable as a result of homophobia that leads to psychological challenges such as anxiety and depression. In this regard, your school is selected for the study, as I believe valuable information will be provided for the school and educators to support learners who are experiencing psychological challenges such as anxiety and depression as a result of homophobia.

We would be grateful for your permission to carry out the research at your school. As an educator, I believe that understanding the impact or experiences of homophobia on learners is crucial for providing effective support and guidance. The names of all the participants will be fiercely protected per the code of ethics established by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) because participation in the study is voluntary, individuals are allowed to discontinue at any moment without suffering any unfavorable effects. The participants will need to fill out

a consent form though. After the study participants will get feedback and also offer counselling for free to learners who might need it.

The research study requires data generation, and I will meet with participants for 15 -20 minutes per day for three days upon commencement of the data generation process which involves interviews and recording.

My supervisor's contact details are as follows Dr. V. Jairam, who is a Doctor in Education at a school of education, UKZN. Dr. V Jairam can be contacted at 0312601438 jairam@ukzn.ac.za

If you have any issues, questions, or concerns relating to the rights of participants you can contact Ms. Simangele Shezi who is a senior administrator officer at UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics office on 0312603587 Shezis2@ukzn.ac.za.

If you enquire about any other information about this study upon its completion kindly contact me at [REDACTED] or 219019542@ukzn.ac.za

Yours Faithfully,
Xolani Methula

PRINCIPAL DECLARATION

I..... (Full names of principal) hereby grants permission to the researcher to conduct research in my school. I understand that participants have willingly agreed to participate in this research study and are at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time, so should they desire. I also understand that the name of the school, the name of the participants, and their responses will be kept confidential.

I give permission for the use of the following record device during the interview.

	Willing	Not Willing
Audio recording		
Photographic equipment (if need be)		

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL

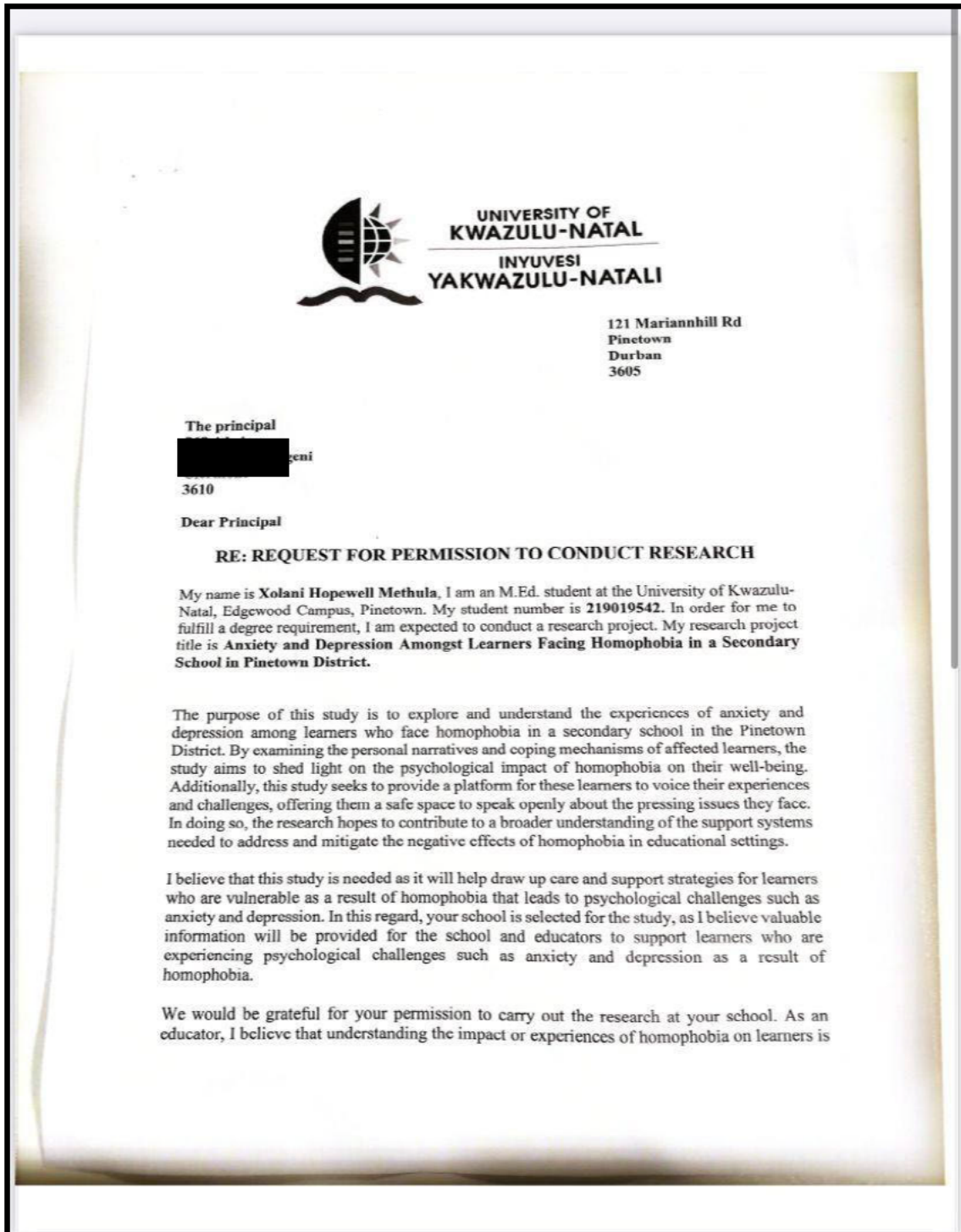
DATE

.....

.....

APPENDIX C

CONFIRMATION OF APPROVAL FROM THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL



Names of all the participants will be fiercely protected per the code of ethics established by the Univezsiiy or Kw »Tu Najat (UKZN) because participation in the study is voluntary,

Research Study Tejp; dna •, e ati and I will meet with participank for 15 -20 minutes per day for three days upon commencement of the data generator Ph which involves interviews and recording.

My supervisor's contact details are as *^! Dr. V. Jairazn, who is a Doctor in Education at a school of education, UKZN. Azzd Dr. V Jairam can be contacted at 0312601438 jairam@ukzn.ac.za

If you have any issues, questi concerns relating to the right of participants you can contact Ms. Sibe Shezj who is g senior administrator officer at UKZN Humanities and Social Sci'..ces Reaeazch i offic on 13603387 Shezis2@ukzn.ac.za * " "inr0tYB8ti0i3 ab0ztt this study upon its completion kindly contact me at 076 641 5476 or2 I

ours Faithfully
Mr. XH Mehute

PrINCIPAL DECLARATION

I, CLIFFORD KHEHLA VUNDLA

(names of principal) hereby grants permission to the researcher to conduct research ... my ... I. ! u«d ta•d a•tp• ia pants have willingly agreed to participate in this research study and liberty ... withdraw from the study at any time, so should they desire. I also understand that the name of the school, the name of the participants and their responses will be kept confidential

>^ • ate uBc of«B• «allowing m«xd g yi t

	Willing	Not Willing
Audio recording	✓	
Photographic equipment (if needed)	✓	

SITHENGILE SECONDARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL



02 OCT 2024

02/10/2024

P.O. BOX 419, CLERNAVILLE, 3602
TEL: 031 711 7466
EMAIL: sithenifsecondary@gmail.com

APPENDIX D

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE STUDY IN KZN DOE



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200

Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201

Email: buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za

Tel: 033 392 1051

Ref: 2/4/8/225

Enquiries: Mrs B. T. Ntuli

Mr Xolani Hopewell Methula
15 Kombuzi
NONGOMA
3950


Dear Mr Methula

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: "**ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONGST LEARNERS FACING HOMOPHOBIA IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN PINETOWN DISTRICT**", in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 18 October 2024 to 31 October 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

PINETOWN DISTRICT


Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 18 October 2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX E

PARENT'S INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



School of Education,
College of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Edgewood Campus, KwaZulu Natal

Date: _____

Dear Parent,

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER PARENT

My name is Xolani Methula; I am a **Master of Education (Med)** student from the School of Education, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research titled: **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.**

In the South African context, there is limited research on the specific coping strategies employed by LGBTQIA+ learners facing homophobia (Fliegelman, 2023). A study by Dennehy et al., (2020) highlights the challenges these learners face in accessing supportive resources, often due to fear of further victimisation or lack of awareness about available support systems. This points to a critical gap in the literature, emphasizing the need for more research on how South African learners navigate homophobic environments and the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employ when they are experiencing anxiety and depression (McDiarmid et al., 2022).

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To explore learners' experiences of homophobia that lead to anxiety and depression.
- Determine how they cope with homophobia.
- Evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.

You are invited to permit your child to participate in this study since he/she is under 18. To gather the information, I will conduct semi-structured group discussions, focus group interviews, observations, and drawings for 10-15 minutes, asking general questions relating to Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

Please note that:

- Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw your child from the research study at any stage. The decision to not participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.
- Your child's confidentiality is guaranteed, as well as their input; pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity.
- The focus group discussions will last for about 10-15 minutes.
- Any information your child gives cannot be used against you or them, and the collected data will be used for this research only.
- Data will be in the form of interview and focus group transcripts, and observations will be stored securely and destroyed by shredding after five years. Digitally recorded data will be deleted after five years.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes, and no financial benefits are involved. However, it is expected that you and your teachers will gain insight into remediating the barriers and challenges during the transition of learners to formal schooling.

Parental Role:

- The parents or guardians are required to provide consent for their child's participation in the study, as the learners are minors.
- The letter should explain that while parents are not directly involved in the study's data collection, their consent is essential for their child's participation in interviews, group discussions, and drawings.

Support Services:

- Parents should be informed that support services will be available for their children should they experience any emotional distress and that they will be notified if any serious concerns arise

School-Based Support Team (SBST)

- **Role:** The SBST at Secondary School, which includes teachers and parents, will be prepared to offer immediate support to participants during or after the data collection process.
- **Contact:** SBST Coordinator (Ms. Ndlovu) – *Tel: 031-123-4567*

Lifeline South Africa

- **Role:** Lifeline offers free and confidential counseling services via phone or face-to-face sessions. Participants who require additional support beyond the school environment will be referred to Lifeline for professional mental health support.

Contact: *Toll-free helpline: 0861-322-322*

Website: www.lifelinesa.co.za

Thank you

Yours faithfully,
Xolani Methula

My contact details are as follows:

Email: [REDACTED] / 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Cell phone: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is **Dr Visvaranie Jairam**. School of Education, College of Humanities, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal

My supervisor's contact details are:

Email: Jairam@ukzn.ac.za

Phone number: N/A

You may also contact the Research Office at:

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics

Govan Mbeki Centre

Tel +27312604557

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for reading this document about this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I (Full names of participants) at this moment, I have been informed about the study entitled **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District** by Xolani Methula. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I voluntarily permit the interviews to be audio-recorded.

I permit the researcher to carry out observations in my classroom.

My identity will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] a [REDACTED] / 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za or cell phone: [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent

- I agree that the interviews and focus group discussions are being audio recorded.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

.....
Name of Participant

.....
Signature of Participant

.....
Date

APPENDIX F
LEARNER'S INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



School of Education,
College of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Edgewood Campus, KwaZulu
Natal

Date: _____

Dear Learner,

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER PARTICIPANT

My name is **Xolani Methula**; I am a **Master of Education (Med) student** from the School of Education, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research titled: **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.**

In the South African context, there is limited research on the specific coping strategies employed by LGBTQIA+ learners facing homophobia (Fliegelman, 2023). A study by Dennehy et al., (2020) highlights the challenges these learners face in accessing supportive resources, often due to fear of further victimisation or lack of awareness about available support systems. This points to a critical gap in the literature, emphasizing the need for more research on how South African learners navigate homophobic environments and the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employ when they are experiencing anxiety and depression (McDiarmid et al., 2022).

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To explore anxiety and depression amongst learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown district
2. To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing Homophobia.
3. To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.

You are invited to participate in this study. To gather the information, I will conduct semi-structured, group discussions and focus group interviews, observations, and drawings for 10-15 minutes, asking general questions relating to Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

Please note that:

- Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw your child from the research study at any stage. The decision to not participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.
- Your child's confidentiality is guaranteed, as well as their input; pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity.
- The focus group discussions will last for about 10-15 minutes.
- Any information your child gives cannot be used against you or them, and the generated data will be used for this research only.
- Data will be in the form of interview and focus group transcripts, and observations will be stored securely and destroyed by shredding after five years. Digitally recorded data will be deleted after five years.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes, and no financial benefits are involved. However, it is expected that you and your teachers will gain insight into remediating the barriers and challenges during the transition of learners to formal schooling.

Participation Requirements:

- Learners will participate in semi-structured interviews that will take approximately 10-15 minutes, where they will share their experiences related to homophobia, anxiety, and depression.
- They will also engage in focus group discussions, which will last around 10-15 minutes, allowing them to express their views in a group setting with peers.
- Learners may also be asked to participate in non-participant observations during normal school activities. This does not require active involvement but rather the observation of interactions in everyday settings.
- They will have the option to create drawings that represent their feelings or experiences with homophobia, offering a non-verbal form of expression.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation:

- The consent letter will state that learners can withdraw from any of these activities at any time without penalty, and their identities will remain confidential.

Support Services:

- Parents should be informed that support services will be available for their children should they experience any emotional distress and that they will be notified if any serious concerns arise

School-Based Support Team (SBST):

- Role: The SBST at Secondary Schools, which include teachers and parents, will be prepared to offer immediate support to participants during or after the data collection process.
- Contact: SBST Coordinator (Ms. Ndlovu) – *Tel: 031-123-4567*

Lifeline South Africa:

- Role: Lifeline offers free and confidential counseling services via phone or face-to-face sessions.
- Participants who require additional support beyond the school environment will be referred to Lifeline for professional mental health support.
- Contact: *Toll-free helpline: 0861-322-322*
Website: www.lifelinesa.co.za

Thank you

Yours faithfully,
Xolani Methula

My contact details are as follows:

Email: [REDACTED] / 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Cell phone: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is **Dr Visvaranie Jairam**. School of Education, College of Humanities, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal

My supervisor's contact details are:

Email: Jairam@ukzn.ac.za

Phone number:

You may also contact the Research Office at:

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics

Govan Mbeki Centre

Tel +27312604557

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for reading this document about this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I (Full names of participants) at this moment, I have been informed about the study entitled Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District by Xolani Methula. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I voluntarily permit the interviews to be audio-recorded.

I permit the researcher to carry out observations in my classroom.

My identity will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] / 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za or cell phone: [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent

- I agree that the interviews and focus group discussions are being audio recorded.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

.....

Name of Participant

.....
Signature of Participant

.....
Date

APPENDIX G
TEACHERS' INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



School of Education,
College of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Edgewood Campus, KwaZulu Natal
Date: _____

Dear Teacher,

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER PARTICIPANT

My name is **Xolani Methula**; I am a **Master of Education (Med) student** from the School of Education, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research titled: **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.**

In the South African context, there is limited research on the specific coping strategies employed by LGBTQIA+ learners facing homophobia (Fliegelman, 2023). A study by Dennehy et al., (2020) highlights the challenges these learners face in accessing supportive resources, often due to fear of further victimization or lack of awareness about available support systems. This points to a critical gap in the literature, emphasizing the need for more research on how South African learners navigate homophobic environments and the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employ when they are experiencing anxiety and depression (McDiarmid et al., 2022).

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To explore anxiety and depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District
2. To determine how they cope with anxiety and depression when facing Homophobia.
3. To evaluate why they cope in the way that they do.

You are invited to participate in this study. To gather the information, I will conduct non-participant observations where I will be observing you while teaching during the teaching and

learning process for my study on anxiety and depression among learners facing homophobia in a secondary school in Pinetown District.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number _____).

Please note that:

- Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the research study at any stage. The decision to not participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.
- Your confidentiality is guaranteed, as well as their input; pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity.
- The non-participant observations will last for about 30-40 minutes.
- Any information you give cannot be used against you or them, and the generated data will be used for this research only.
- Data will be in the form of observation transcripts and will be stored securely and destroyed by shredding after five years.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes, and no financial benefits are involved. However, it is expected that as a teacher, you will gain insight into remediating the barriers and challenges during the transition of learners to formal schooling.

Teacher Involvement:

- Teachers will be involved mainly in the study through non-participant observations and may provide background information on the school's environment and learners' general well-being.
- Teachers may also act as facilitators or supporters during the data collection process, particularly during focus group discussions or if emotional support is needed by the learners.

Confidentiality and Professional Conduct:

- Teachers should be informed that their participation is voluntary and that any observations or feedback they provide will be used solely for research purposes and kept confidential.

Thank you

Yours faithfully,
Xolani Methula

My contact details are as follows:

Email: [REDACTED]m/ 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Cell phone: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is **Dr Visvaranie Jairam**. School of Education, College of Humanities, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal
My supervisor's contact details are:
Email: Jairam@ukzn.ac.za
Phone number: N/A

You may also contact the Research Office at:
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics
Govan Mbeki Centre
Tel +27312604557
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for reading this document about this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I (Full names of participants) at this moment, I have been informed about the study entitled: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District by **Xolani Methula**. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I permit the researcher to carry out observations in my classroom.

My identity will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] / 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za or cell phone: [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent

- I agree that the observations are being conducted.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

.....
Name of Participant

.....
Signature of Participant

.....
Date

APPENDIX H
CHILD'S ASSENT DOCUMENT



Child Assent Document (Form)

Study Title: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District

Mr. Xolani Hopewell Methula (Med student)

Introduction

I am inviting you to take part in a research study before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether or not to participate.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of anxiety and depression among learners who face homophobia in a secondary school in the Pinetown District. By examining the personal narratives and coping mechanisms of affected learners, the study aims to shed light on the psychological impact of homophobia on their well-being. Additionally, this study seeks to provide a platform for these learners to voice their experiences and challenges, offering them a safe space to speak openly about the pressing issues they face. In doing so, the research hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of the support systems needed to address and mitigate the negative effects of homophobia in educational settings.

Procedures

If you agree to take part in the study the researcher will explain the study to all participants verbally, providing all pertinent information and allowing the participant to ask questions; since this study involves learners, the researcher will explain all the details to the parents. The researcher will provide the participants with the informed consent document, and they will be allowed to consider whether they want to participate or not. The consent form will include

ethical considerations etc. and answer any follow-up questions. Lastly, the researcher will obtain written consent from the participant to participate in the research project.

Risks and Discomforts

Participants may experience emotional distress when discussing their experiences, potentially triggering memories of trauma or discomfort. There is also a risk of stigma or backlash from peers if their participation becomes known, which could lead to feelings of isolation or anxiety. Additionally, the sensitive nature of the topics may lead to feelings of vulnerability or discomfort during interviews or discussions.

Benefits

The benefit of this study is that the participants will develop resilience and adaptability skills. The participants who did not have a chance to talk or open up about their experiences of homophobia will have the opportunity to do so, and those who need counseling after the study will be offered it for free, which may lead to their emotional healing.

Confidentiality

The participant's confidentiality is guaranteed, and their input and pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity. Anonymity will be ensured in this research study. The researcher will alias when the data was captured. Confidentiality will be upheld in this study because even though the researcher knew the participants and their responses, they will not be made public. Ethical considerations will be seriously followed because of the sensitivity of the study

Voluntary Participation

Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the research study at any stage. The decision to not participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.

Participation Requirements:

Learners will participate in semi-structured interviews that will take approximately 10-15 minutes, where they will share their experiences related to homophobia, anxiety, and depression. They will also engage in focus group discussions, which will last around 10-15 minutes, allowing them to express their views in a group setting with peers. Learners may also be asked to participate in non-participant observations during normal school activities. This does not require active involvement but rather the observation of interactions in everyday settings. They will have the option to create drawings that represent their feelings or experiences with homophobia, offering a non-verbal form of expression.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation:

The consent letter will state that learners can withdraw from any of these activities at any time without penalty, and their identities will remain confidential.

Support Services:

Parents should be informed that support services will be available for their children should they experience any emotional distress, and that they will be notified if any serious concerns arise.

School-Based Support Team (SBST):

Role: The SBST at Secondary School, which includes teachers and parents, will be prepared to offer immediate support to participants during or after the data collection process.

Contact: SBST Coordinator (Ms. Ndlovu) – *Tel: 031-123-4567*

Lifeline South Africa:

Role: Lifeline offers free and confidential counseling services via phone or face-to-face sessions.

Participants who require additional support beyond the school environment will be referred to Lifeline for professional mental health support.

Contact: *Toll-free helpline: 0861-322-322*

Website: www.lifelinesa.co.za

Thank you
Yours faithfully,
Xolani Methula

My contact details are as follows:

Email: 219019542@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Cell phone: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is **Dr Visvaranie Jairam**. School of Education, College of Humanities, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal

My supervisor's contact details are:

Email: Jairam@ukzn.ac.za

Phone number:

You may also contact the Research Office at:

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics

Govan Mbeki Centre

Tel +27312604557

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for reading this document about this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I (Full names of participants) at this moment, I have been informed about the study entitled: **Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District** by **Xolani Methula**. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I voluntarily permit the interviews to be audio-recorded.

My identity will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at 219019542@ukzn.ac.za or cell phone: [REDACTED]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent

- I agree that the interviews and focus group discussions are being audio recorded.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

.....
Name of Participant

.....
Signature of Participant

.....
Date:

APPENDIX I
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section A

Name of the school: _____

Name of the circuit: Pinetown

Section B: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

Main Questions

1. Can you describe any instances where you have faced homophobia at school, and how did those experiences make you feel? (*Ungakwazi yini ukuchaza noma yiziphi izimo lapho uke wabhekana khona ne-homophobia esikoleni, futhi lokho okuhlangenwe nakho kwakwenza wazizwa kanjani?*)
2. In what ways do you believe that experiencing homophobia has affected your mental health, particularly in terms of anxiety and depression? (*Yiziphi izindlela okholwa ngazo ukuthi ukuba ne-homophobia kube nomthelela empilweni yakho yengqondo, ikakhulukazi mayelana nokukhathazeka nokucindezeleka?*)
3. What strategies or coping mechanisms do you use to manage anxiety and depression related to experiences of homophobia? (*Imaphi amasu noma izindlela zokubhekana nezimo ozisebenzisayo ukuze ulawule ukukhathazeka nokudangala okuhlobene nesipiliyoni se-homophobia?*)
4. What support systems (friends, family, teachers, counselors) do you have in place, and how effective do you think they are in helping you cope with feelings of anxiety and depression? (*Yiziphi izinhlelo zokusekela (abangane, umndeni, othisha, abeluleki) onazo, futhi ucabanga ukuthi zisebenza kangakanani ekusizeni ukuthi ubhekane nemizwa yokukhathazeka nokucindezeleka?*)
5. How would you describe the overall environment at your school regarding the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and how does it impact your well-being? (*Ungasichaza kanjani isimo sendawo yonke esikoleni sakho mayelana nokwamukela abantu be-LGBTQIA+, futhi kuba nomthelela onjani enhlalakahleni yakho?*)

General Questions

6. Do you think there is enough awareness and education about LGBTQIA+ issues in your school? Why or why not? *(Ingabe ucabanga ukuthi kunokuqwashisa okwanele kanye nemfundo mayelana nezindaba ze-LGBTQIA+ esikoleni sakho? Kungani noma kungani kungenjalo?)*
7. How do your peers typically respond to discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity in your school? *(Ngokuvamile ontanga yakho basabela kanjani ezingxoxweni ezimayelana nokukhetha ubulili noma ubunikazi bobulili esikoleni sakho?)*
8. How do you think your experiences with homophobia might affect your future aspirations or goals? *(Ucabanga ukuthi isipiliyoni sakho nge-homophobia singathinta kanjani izifiso noma izinjongo zakho zesikhathi esizayo?)*
9. What changes would you suggest to improve the school environment for LGBTQIA+ learners and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression? *(Yiziphi izinguquko ongaziphakamisa ukuze uthuthukise indawo yesikole yabafundi be-LGBTQIA+ futhi unciphise imizwa yokukhathazeka nokudangala?)*

APPENDIX J
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Section A

Name of the school: _____

Name of the circuit: Pinetown

Section B: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

1. Can each of you share a specific experience where you encountered homophobia at school and how it impacted your emotional well-being? (*Ingabe ngamunye wenu angabelana ngolwazi oluthile lapho ahlangane khona ne-homophobia esikoleni nokuthi kube nomthelela kanjani enhlalakahleni yenu engokomzwelo?*)
2. Have you ever heard or witnessed someone being called derogatory names such as “Stabane” or “Ngqingili”? If so, please describe the situation in detail. (*Wake wezwa noma wabona umuntu ebizwa ngamagama ayiziswana njengokuthi “Stabane” noma “Ngqingili”? Uma kunjalo, sicela uchaze isimo ngokuningiliziwe.*)
3. How do these experiences of homophobia manifest in your feelings of anxiety or depression? Can you describe any physical or emotional symptoms you have experienced? (*Lezi zigameko zokucwaswa kwabantu abathandana nobulili obufanayo zibonakala kanjani emizweni yakho yokukhathazeka noma yokucindezeleka? Ungakwazi yini ukuchaza noma yiziphi izimpawu zomzimba noma zemizwa oye wabhekana nazo?*)
4. What coping strategies have you found helpful in dealing with the anxiety and depression stemming from these experiences? Are there specific activities or support systems that you rely on? (*Imaphi amasu okubhekana nawo owathole ewusizo ekubhekaneni nokukhathazeka nokudangala okuvela kulokhu okuhlangenwe nakho? Ingabe ikhona imisebenzi ethile noma izinhlelo zokusekela othembele kuzo?*)
5. Have you adopted any coping strategies that did not work for you? If so, please explain why. (*Ingabe usuwasebenzisile amasu okubhekana nesimo angakusebenzelanga? Uma kunjalo, ngicela uchaze ukuthi kungani.*)
6. How did the overall school environment and its policies influence your coping choices? (*Ingabe isimo sesikole sisonke kanye nezinqubomgomo zaso zibe nomthelela kanjani ekukhetheni kwakho ukubhekana nezimo?*)

7. How do your friends or peers react when you share your experiences of homophobia? Have you felt supported or isolated by those around you? (*Basabela kanjani abangani bakho noma ontanga lapho ubaxoxela okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho kwe-homophobia? Ingabe uke wazizwa usekelwe noma uhlukaniswa yilabo abaseduze nawe?*)
8. In your opinion, how does the overall school environment contribute to or alleviate feelings of anxiety and depression related to homophobia? (*Ngokubona kwakho, isikole sisonke imvelo inomthelela kanjani noma idambise kanjani imizwa yokukhathazeka nokudangala okuhlobene ne-homophobia?*)
9. Are there adequate mental health resources available at your school for students dealing with anxiety and depression? What improvements would you suggest? (*Ingabe zikhona izinsiza zempilo yengqondo ezanele ezitholakala esikoleni sakho zabafundi ababhekene nokukhathazeka nokudangala? Yiziphi intuthuko ongayiphakamisa?*)
10. How do you think your experiences with homophobia will affect your future, both in terms of mental health and your aspirations in life? (*Ucabanga ukuthi okuhlangenwe nakho kwakho nge-homophobia kuzolithinta kanjani ikusasa lakho, kokubili mayelana nempilo yengqondo kanye nezifiso zakho empilweni?*)

General Questions

11. How aware do you think your school community is about the issues faced by LGBTQ+ students, and how does that awareness impact your experiences? (*Ucabanga ukuthi umphakathi wesikole sakho wazi kangakanani ngezinkinga abafundi be-LGBTQ+ ababhekana nazo, futhi lokho kuqaphela kukuthinta kanjani ukuzizwisa kwakho?*)
12. What role do you believe educators should play in addressing homophobia and supporting students facing these challenges? (*Iyiphi indima okholelwa ukuthi othisha kufanele bayibambe ekubhekaneni ne-homophobia kanye nokweseka abafundi ababhekene nalezi zinsalelo?*)
13. If you could implement one change in your school to improve the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students, what would it be? (*Uma ungase wenze ushintsho olulodwa esikoleni sakho ukuze uthuthukise impilo yengqondo nokuphila kahle kwabafundi be-LGBTQIA+, bekungaba yini?*)

APPENDIX K
OBSERVATION SCHEDULE:

Research Topic: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

School: _____

Location: KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, Pinetown

Date: _____

Start Time - End Time: 07:00 – 14:30

Observation Categories:

1. Classroom Environment:

- Classroom layout and organisation: _____
- Availability of learning materials: _____
- Noise levels and distractions: _____
- Teacher-student interactions: _____

2. Learner Behavior and Engagement:

- Attention and focus during class: _____
- Participation in class activities: _____
- Interactions with peers: _____
- Behavior towards teachers: _____

3. Emotional Well-being:

- Signs of anxiety and depression: _____
- Mood and emotional expressions: _____
- Engagement in activities: _____
- Response to challenging situations: _____

APPENDIX L
RESEARCH DATA CAPTURING SHEET

Study Title: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District.

Researcher: Xolani Methula

Date: _____

School Name: _____

Grade: _____

Gender: _____

Age: _____

1. Psychological Challenges:

- Anxiety levels (scale of 1-5): _____
- Depression symptoms (yes/no): _____

2. Academic Performance:

- Grade Point Average (GPA): _____
- Subject performance (scale of 1-5): _____
- Attendance record (percentage): _____
- Dropout history (yes/no): _____

3. Support Systems:

- Counseling services availability (yes/no): _____
- Parental involvement (scale of 1-5): _____
- Teacher support (scale of 1-5): _____
- Peer support (scale of 1-5): _____

4. Coping Mechanisms:

- Exercise habits (yes/no): _____
- Hobbies and interests (list): _____
- Social media usage (hours per day): _____
- Sleep patterns (hours per night): _____
- Seeking professional help (yes/no): _____

APPENDIX M
RESEARCHERS'S REFLEXIVE JOURNAL SHEET

Name: Xolani Methula

Date: _____

Location: Pinetown District

Topic: Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District

1. Context of the Reflection

- Describe the environment and situation:

(Briefly outline the setting, including any relevant events or discussions related to homophobia and its impact on mental health among learners.)

2. Personal Experience

- What happened?

(Summarise any interactions or observations regarding learners who have faced homophobia.)

- **How did I feel during this experience?**

- What assumptions did I have, and how have they changed?

(Reflect on any preconceived notions you had before this experience and how they may have evolved.)

5. Action Plan

- What steps can I take to support learners facing homophobia?

(Outline specific actions you plan to implement to create a more inclusive environment (e.g., workshops, advocacy).)

- How can I encourage dialogue and raise awareness?

(Suggest ways to facilitate conversations and educate others about the impact of homophobia.)

6. Future Reflections

- What will I focus on moving forward?

(Identify areas for further exploration or study related to anxiety, depression, and homophobia.)

- How will I measure the impact of my actions?

(Consider how you will assess the effectiveness of your initiatives or support efforts in the school.)

Signature: _____

APPENDIX N
DRAWING SHEET

Participant Code: _____

Date: _____

Instructions:

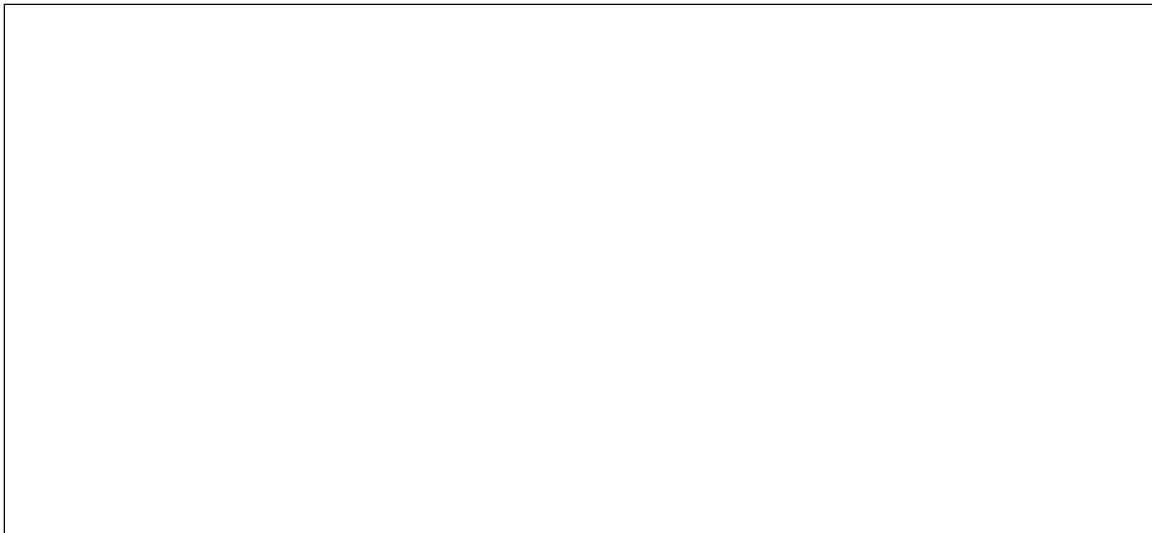
This drawing activity is an opportunity for you to express your feelings, experiences, and thoughts about school life, particularly about any experiences with homophobia, anxiety, or depression. You do not have to be an artist—just draw what comes to mind. Your drawings can include anything that represents how you feel or what you have experienced. You can use colors, symbols, or even stick figures. The goal is to express your feelings visually.

Drawing 1: How I Feel at School

Prompt:

In the space below, please draw a picture that represents how you feel when you are at school. Think about a day when you felt anxious, depressed, or affected by homophobia. Your drawing can be abstract or realistic—whatever you feel best expresses your emotions.

Use the space below for your drawing.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to draw their response to the prompt.

Drawing 2: What Homophobia Looks Like to Me

Prompt:

In the space below, please draw what homophobia looks like to you. This could be a scene, a symbol, or any visual representation that shows what homophobia feels like or how you experience it in your school environment.

Use the space below for your drawing.

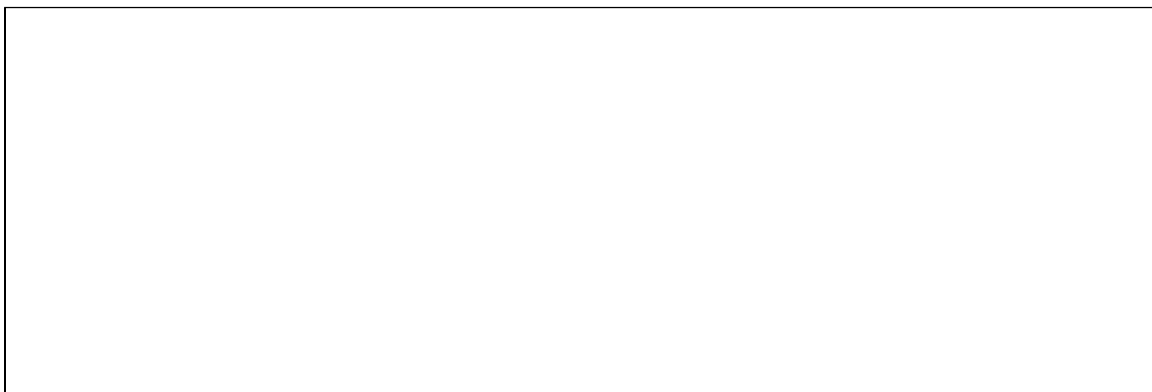


Drawing 3: My Safe Place

Prompt:

In the space below, please draw a picture of a place, person, or thing that makes you feel safe and helps you cope with the anxiety or depression you experience. This could be real or imagined, something that brings you comfort and relief.

Use the space below for your drawing.



Reflection:

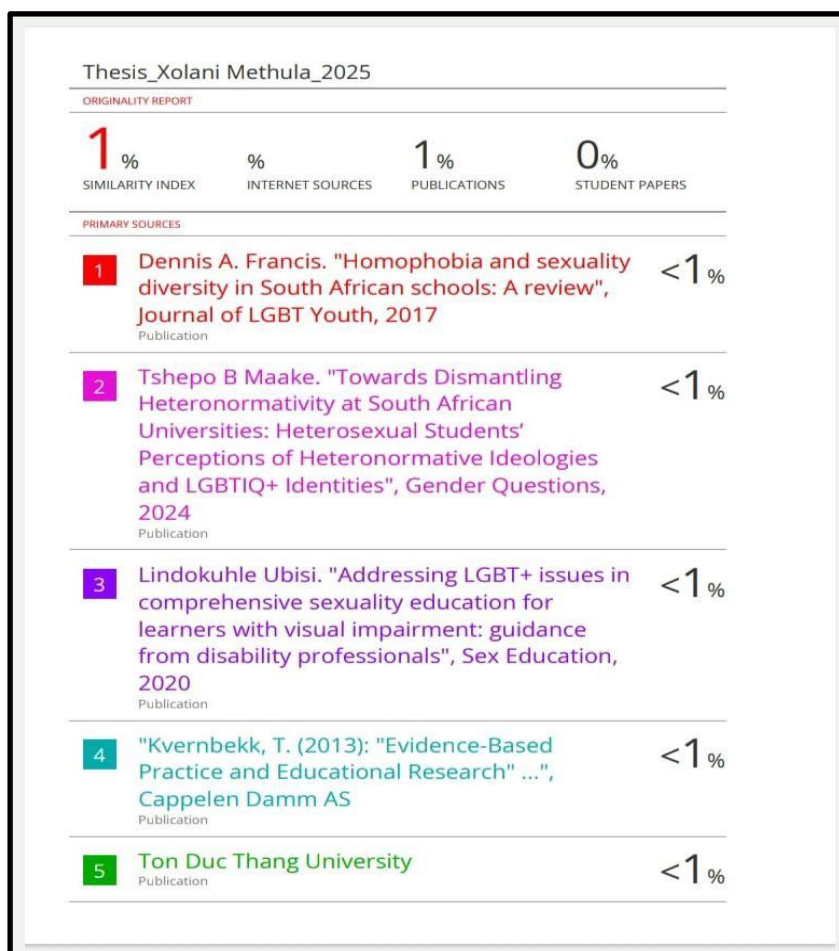
If you feel comfortable, please write a few words or sentences about your drawings. You can explain what your drawings mean, how they relate to your feelings, or anything else you want to share about them.

Use the space below for your reflection.

Thank you for sharing your drawings and thoughts. Your participation helps me understand more about the experiences of learners like you.

APPENDIX O

TURNITIN REPORT



APPENDIX P
EDITOR'S REPORT

Lauren Frizelle
B.Soc.S. LLB (Cum Laude)

13 Susan Avenue
Ballito

Date: 24 March 2025

To Whom It May Concern

This is to certify that the thesis entitled 'Anxiety and Depression Amongst Learners Facing Homophobia in a Secondary School in Pinetown District' by Xolani Hopewell Methula has been edited by me for language.

Please contact me should you require further information.

Kind regards

Lauren Frizelle
Frizelle Consulting

lauren@frizelleconsulting.co.za

072 143 2001

