

Negotiating identity: The experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal

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**By
Prim-Rose Makhosazane Shabane
Supervisor: Professor Thabo Msibi**

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DECLARATION

I, PRIM-ROSE MAKHOSAZANE SHABANE, declare that:

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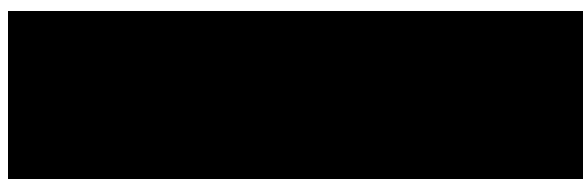
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DEDICATION

I first dedicated this work to my daughter Nompilo, who understood my efforts and continued to listen and gave support in all my endeavours. Your encouragement has made me stronger, better, and more content than I could have ever imagined. I love you dearly, your love and presence in my life has played a crucial role in my achievements.

This is also devoted to my late mother, u “Sisi Zo”. Without your endless love and encouragement to work hard and do what I love the most, I would not have been able to finish my thesis. Though you left us towards the end of this project, I appreciate and love you sincerely. I will forever be grateful to you for sacrificing your life so that we can have better lives.

To my late father, Henry Mbono Shabane, for his belief in learning as a never-ending journey. His vision was for all his children to engage in a continuous cycle of learning new things, and he believed that developing one’s skills was a necessary part of one’s life so that they can enhance their quality of life.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Alcoholic Anonymous
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CBD	Central Business District
CNN	Cable News Network
GLOW	Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand
HRW	Human Rights Watch
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LO	Life Orientation
LRC	Learner Representative Council
NPA	National Prosecution Authority
NP	National Party
RAF	Road Accident Fund
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission
SARRI	South African Race Relations Institute
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
OHCHR	United Nations office of the high Commissioner for Human Rights
USA	United States of America

ABSTRACT

While lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth face the typical challenges of South African youth, their lives are shaped by unique and complex experiences of discrimination and marginalisation within the family, school and in cultural and religious settings. The study reported in this thesis explored the experiences of 12 black self-identified lesbian youth of school going age in township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal. The study sought to explore how they construct and negotiate their experiences in the way that they do. This qualitative study was located within the interpretive paradigm and used a narrative inquiry design, with grounded conversations, focus group discussions, photovoice and diaries as data gathering tools. Six participants were selected through snowball sampling from rural contexts and six from township contexts. Ten were raised by their mothers and grandparents, one by her mother and adoptive father and the other one by her biological parents.

The two theories that informed data analysis in the study were queer theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality. Queer theory became an appropriate tool in unpacking and understanding the multiple interpretations and fluidity of participants' sexual identity. Intersectionality offered insight into how these youth's experiences were caught up in inequalities of power related to gender, race, age, and social backgrounds.

Ten themes and three sub-themes emerged in the findings: Firstly, it was family networks as either supportive or demoralising and the three sub-themes, namely: a) difference enriching family relationships, b) children raised to think that they are useless, a shame and worthless and c) dysfunctional families and hatred of difference. Secondly, "Understandings of (absent) fatherhood". The third theme was about the village failing to raise a child. The fourth was about schools as unsafe spaces. The fifth theme was on the teachers' perspective about "*Use the boys' toilets because you are boys*". Sixth, other learners told them that "*You are not competition; you need to be reminded that you are a girl*". The seventh theme was reminding the participants about their culture, "*Behave properly, as expected in our culture*". The eighth theme exposed rejection and isolation: the cleansing of the sin. The ninth theme revealed participants' assertion and self-esteem through sport, art and healing. The tenth theme highlighted the violence, trauma and resilience that were experienced by the participants.

A major focus became my struggle in dealing with the traumatic situations of participants, situations I had not been prepared for, which pointed to the need for a fully reflexive approach to such research. The study concludes with the responses to the research questions, in particular

the factors that led to the emphatic proclamation of a lesbian identity by participants, and with proposals for action and for further study.

Key terms:

LGBT, lesbian, black, youth, self-identified, sexuality, homophobia, discrimination, violence, queer, intersectionality, KwaZulu-Natal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	II
DEDICATION.....	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
ABBREVIATIONS	V
ABSTRACT.....	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VIII
TABLE OF FIGURES	XV
TABLE OF TABLES.....	XV
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	2
1.2.1 <i>Experiences of LGBT people globally</i>	<i>4</i>
1.2.2 <i>Experiences of LGBT people in the South African context.....</i>	<i>5</i>
1.2.3 <i>Consequences of homophobia in society</i>	<i>6</i>
1.2.4 <i>The schooling experiences of LGBT learners globally</i>	<i>7</i>
1.2.5 <i>The schooling experiences of LGBT learners in South African context</i>	<i>7</i>
1.3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM ON CULTURE, RELIGION AND SEXUALITY IN AFRICA	9
1.3.1 <i>Religious and cultural influence on sexuality in Africa</i>	<i>10</i>
1.3.2 <i>Colonial and cultural understandings in South Africa</i>	<i>12</i>
1.3.3 <i>Legislation regarding sexuality in Africa</i>	<i>13</i>
1.3.4 <i>Legislation on sexuality in South Africa</i>	<i>13</i>
1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	14
1.5 THE RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY	18
1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	20
1.7 KEY FEATURES OF THE CONTEXT	20
1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	22
1.9 SHORT SYNOPSIS OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	23
1.10 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	24

1.11	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STUDY	25
1.12	SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	26
1.13	CHAPTER DIVISIONS.....	26
1.14	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	28
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....		29
2.1	INTRODUCTION.....	29
2.2	DEFINING THE TERMS LESBIAN, HOMOSEXUAL, HETEROSEXUAL, AND HOMOPHOBIC	30
2.2.1	<i>Heterosexuality</i>	30
2.2.2	<i>Homosexuality</i>	31
2.2.3	<i>Lesbian</i>	32
2.2.4	<i>Homophobia</i>	33
2.3	EXPERIENCES OF LGBT PEOPLE: AN INTERNATIONAL OVERVIEW	34
2.4	EXPERIENCES OF LGBT PEOPLE: AN AFRICAN OVERVIEW	37
2.5	HOW COLONIALISM RESHAPED SEXUALITY IN AFRICA	41
2.6	EXPERIENCES OF LGBT PEOPLE: A SOUTH AFRICA ON THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE	45
2.7	GENDER, RACE AND SEXUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	47
2.8	LGBT YOUTH AND SCHOOLING: SILENCING AND POLICING OF SEXUALITY.....	50
2.9	LGBT YOUTH AND SCHOOLING WORLDWIDE.....	51
2.9.1	<i>The experiences of LGBT youth in South African schools</i>	56
2.9.2	<i>Limitations of existing literature</i>	60
2.10	IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY OF THE REVIEWED LITERATURE.....	61
2.11	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	62
CHAPTER THREE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK		64
3.1	INTRODUCTION	64
3.2	WHAT CONSTITUTES A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK?	65
3.2.1	<i>Foundations of queer theory</i>	65
3.2.2	<i>Deliberations and criticisms of the queer theory</i>	72
3.3	HISTORY OF THE INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY	74
3.3.1	<i>Debates about intersectionality</i>	76
3.3.2	<i>How will the application of intersectionality theory assist in the study?</i>	78
3.4	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	80

CHAPTER FOUR RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE INQUIRY

.....	81
4.1 INTRODUCTION	81
4.2 THE RESEARCH DESIGN.....	82
4.2.1 <i>Positioning of the inquiry</i>	82
4.2.2 <i>Epistemological underpinnings of the inquiry</i>	84
4.2.3 <i>Qualitative Approach</i>	86
4.2.3.1 Using narrative inquiry.....	88
4.2.3.2 Narrative inquiry as methodology	89
4.2.4 <i>Bridging the gap</i>	90
4.3 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT.....	91
4.4 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS	94
4.4.1 <i>Underlying sampling techniques</i>	94
4.4.2 <i>Brief introduction of participants</i>	97
4.5 DATA GENERATION METHODS.....	107
4.5.1 <i>Personal documents</i>	108
4.5.2 <i>Photovoice as a method</i>	108
4.5.3 <i>Sequence of activities</i>	110
4.5.3.1 Training.....	110
4.5.3.2 Assessment of the steps followed.....	111
4.5.3.3 Choosing diaries as data collection tools.....	113
4.5.3.4 Making entries.....	113
4.5.3.5 Field notes.....	114
4.6 THEMATIC DATA ANALYSIS	116
4.6.1 <i>Generating codes, identifying patterns and defining themes</i>	117
4.6.2 <i>Familiarising myself with data</i>	117
4.6.3 <i>Generating codes</i>	117
4.6.4 <i>Naming the themes</i>	119
4.6.5 <i>Defending the trustworthiness of the study</i>	120
4.7 CREDIBILITY	120
4.8 DEPENDABILITY	120

4.9	CONFIRMABILITY	121
4.10	RIGOUR	121
4.11	RESEARCH ETHICS	122
4.11.1	<i>Ethical standards observed during the inquiry</i>	122
4.11.2	<i>The unpredicted episode</i>	123
4.12	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	125
CHAPTER FIVE BLACK SELF-IDENTIFIED LESBIAN YOUTH LIVED AND TOLD STORIES: NARRATIVES RETOLD		127
5.1	INTRODUCTION	127
5.2	BONGIWE'S STORY	128
5.2.1	<i>Loveless childhood</i>	128
5.2.2	<i>Leading a fearful life</i>	129
5.2.3	<i>They thought I was playful at first</i>	131
5.2.4	<i>A future traditional healer</i>	133
5.3	BALU'S STORY	134
5.3.1	<i>My early life</i>	134
5.3.2	<i>My mother: the strength of my life</i>	136
5.3.3	<i>My future aspirations</i>	138
5.4	THEMBISILE'S STORY	139
5.4.1	<i>My childhood memories</i>	140
5.4.2	<i>The absent father</i>	141
5.4.3	<i>Who am I?</i>	142
5.4.4	<i>Walking a lonely path</i>	143
5.5	VELILE'S STORY	144
5.5.1	<i>My childhood life and family struggles</i>	144
5.5.2	<i>I understand your feelings</i>	146
5.5.3	<i>Family ties</i>	147
5.6	NOMALANGA'S STORY	148
5.6.1	<i>A girl from the humble beginnings</i>	149
5.6.2	<i>Adapting to a new way of life</i>	150

5.6.3 The runaway kid	151
5.5.4 Learning to love myself.....	152
5.7 PHAKAMILE’S STORY	153
5.7.1 Changes and challenges in my early life.....	154
5.7.2 Art gave me strength to live my life for better	155
5.7.3 Increased adaptability	158
5.8. STHABILE’S STORY	160
5.8.1 The best years of my life	160
5.8.2 I overcame my fears and I did not let them take control of my life.....	162
5.8.3 My future aspirations.....	167
5.9 YAZILE’S STORY	167
5.9.1 Being raised with a ‘hard hand’	167
5.9.2 My aunt: my beacon of hope.....	171
5.10. SIBUSISIWE’S STORY	172
5.10.1 Being raised in a Christian and moralistic home.....	172
5.10.2 Difficulty creating my own life.....	173
5.10.3 Decision making	176
5.10.4 Filling the vacuum in my life.....	177
5.11 MBALI’S STORY	178
5.11.1 Within battles I lost myself.....	178
5.11.2 The lack of stability and security in my life.....	180
5.11.3 Toxic relationships.....	181
5.11.4 Renewed purpose in life.....	183
5.12. ZABA’S STORY.....	184
5.12.1 Growing up in a loving home.....	184
5.12.2 A soccer player and a dancer	186
5.12.3 Passion is important to anyone’s life: stick with it.....	188
5.13 ZOEY’S STORY	189
5.13.1 A fighter.....	190
5.13.2 Living in fear	192

5.13.3	<i>My teacher: my lifesaver</i>	193
5.14	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	194
6	CHAPTER SIX: MEANINGS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF BLACK SELF-IDENTIFIED LESBIAN YOUTH	196
6.1	INTRODUCTION.....	196
6.2	THEME 1: FAMILY NETWORKS AS EITHER SUPPORTIVE OR DEMORALISING	196
6.2.1	<i>Difference enriching family relationships</i>	197
6.2.2	<i>Children raised to think that they are useless, a shame and worthless</i>	200
6.2.3	<i>Dysfunctional families and hatred of difference</i>	206
6.3	THEME 2: “HE IS JUST A FATHER BECAUSE HE GAVE ME LIFE”	207
6.4	THEME 3: THE VILLAGE FAILS TO RAISE A CHILD.....	210
6.5	THEME 4: SCHOOLS ARE AN UNSAFE SPACE	215
6.6	THEME 5: “USE THE BOYS’ TOILETS BECAUSE YOU ARE BOYS”: THE TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE	219
6.7	THEME 6: “YOU ARE NOT COMPETITION; YOU NEED TO BE REMINDED THAT YOU ARE A GIRL”: OTHER LEARNERS	223
6.8	THEME 7: “BEHAVE PROPERLY, AS EXPECTED IN OUR CULTURE”	225
6.9	THEME 8: REJECTION AND ISOLATION: THE CLEANSING OF THE SIN	227
6.10	THEME 9: VIOLENCE, TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE	229
6.11	THEME 10: ASSERTION AND SELF-ESTEEM: SPORT, ART AND HEALING.....	233
6.12	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	236
	CHAPTER SEVEN REFLEXIVITY: THE PROCESS.....	238
7.1	INTRODUCTION.....	238
7.2	MY POSITIONALITY	239
7.3	REFLEXIVITY IN METHODOLOGY.....	241
7.4	A PERILOUS PROCESS.....	243
7.5	LEAVING OUR FOOTPRINTS.....	248
7.6	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	250
	CHAPTER EIGHT IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION	252
8.1	INTRODUCTION.....	252
8.1.1	<i>Research question one</i>	254
8.1.2	<i>Research question two</i>	257

8.1.3	<i>Research question three</i>	260
8.2	THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	264
8.3	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	268
8.4	IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH.....	269
8.5	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	270
8.6	IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION.....	271
8.7	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	272
	REFERENCES.....	275
	APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS.....	311
	APPENDIX B: PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	314
	APPENDIX C: SECOND INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	315
	APPENDIX D: THIRD INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....	316
	APPENDIX E: FOURTH INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....	317
	APPENDIX F: ETHICAL CLEARANCE	318
	APPENDIX G: EDITOR’S LETTER.....	319

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0-1 Racial composition, KwaZulu-Natal Figure.....	93
Figure 0-2 Map of KwaZulu-Natal... ..	93
Figure 6.1 Yazile’s picture with friends on a way to school.....	204
Figure 6.2 A picture of a dangerous place, where Thembisile fetching water.....	209
Figure 6.3 A picture of Thabisile’s mother on her way to get her medicine from the clinic.....	211
Figure 6.4 A picture of community view through Bongiwe’s eyes... ..	212
Figure 6.5 Clean, apparently peaceful but dangerous veranda in Velile’s high school.	224
Figure 6.6 Yazile’s sanctuary, where only beauty exists even in messed up spaces... ..	235

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1	Biographical information of participants	99-99

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the study

1.1 Introduction

“If I wait for someone else to validate my existence, it will mean that I’m short-changing myself” (Dey & Bhaskaran, 2021). What made me to draw on this quotation when I introduce this study, which explores the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts, is Muholi’s emphasis on agency and the assertion of the right to existence and recognition for marginalised lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT). It is important to note that the acronym ‘LGBT’ will be used throughout this thesis to refer to participants, who do not identify as heterosexual in this study. The study focuses on the experiences of individuals who do not identify as heterosexual; therefore, LGBT serves as a useful umbrella term. Additionally, LGBT is widely recognised as an inclusive term that encompasses a diverse range of sexual orientations and gender identities. I am aware of the contestations about LGBT category, but I will deal with this issue later in the thesis. The group of people who fall into this category are generally considered marginalised in society and have experienced discrimination in different ways in their lives. Whilst literature shows that there has been a shift towards acceptance of and greater knowledge about LGBT people globally, it is still known that, universally, their experiences have been compounded by prevalent, specific and significant challenges that are different from those of heterosexual people (Williams et.al., 2021). Though literature reveals that the situation is improving in some countries, LGBT people still find themselves discriminated against and oppressed in many parts of the world.

The increase in the number of murders and spate of violence directed against people who engage in same-sex relationships in South Africa is an indication of the reality and existence of ongoing homophobia which refers to an irrational fear, of being in close contact with individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (Ngcobo, 2021; Jagessar, 2015; Reygan & Lynette, 2014). Homophobia suppresses choices available to people with different sexual identities. For instance, Follins, Walker and Lewis (2014) point out that LGBT people are more highly likely to experience violence than their counterparts. These very high numbers of murders and rape of people who openly identify as LGBT indicate that there exist many injustices and violence directed to anyone who sexually identifies differently. This is in line with the

assertion by Meer et al. (2017) that homophobic attitudes are deeply embedded in South African societies and these attitudes expose lesbian and gay identifying individuals to gross violations of their rights. They are deliberately denied their constitutional right to be treated with dignity whatever their sexual orientation (p. 6). The mistreatment and infringement of their rights is multi-layered and usually interconnected in every sphere of their lives, such as family living arrangements, work environment and educational institutions, including schools.

As indicated above, the societal contempt and prejudice directed towards LGBT people remain a contentious issue within some countries, resulting in dismissing and hostile cultural climate available to LGBT people. Research undertaken highlights the prevalence of homophobia within the South Africa community (Patrick & Mphahlele, 2025; Kasa, 2024; Bhana 2012; 2014; Chard, Finneran & Sullivan, 2015; Francis, 2017; Reygan & Lynette, 2014) despite the legal framework put in place to safeguard and uphold the rights and freedoms of people who are homosexual. While there are a few studies that have been conducted about the experiences of lesbian youth in South African schools (Bhana, 2012, 2014; Daniels, Struthers, & Maleke, Catabay, 2019; Francis, 2021, 2017; Potgieter & Reygan, 2012), there is a dearth of published work on the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in South Africa, particularly in educational literature. It was against this background that a study that explored these experiences became important. This study sought to contribute to the understanding of the lesbian youth lived experiences and further to better the knowledge of how these youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities in the ways that they do.

Chapter One starts by providing the background to the study, indicating the problem statement and outlining research questions and the aims and objectives that propelled the study. Secondly, it presents a justification for conducting the study, the context and the significance of the study. Thirdly, the theoretical framework and the synopsis of the methodological approach are presented. Fourthly, it presents the ethical considerations of the study and, fifthly, a discussion of scope and limitations. Finally, it provides an outline of the chapters within the study.

1.2 Background to the study

Despite numerous changes in policies and the legislation that guarantee democratic and constitutional rights for homosexual people in South Africa,

homophobic attitudes and utterances continue to be the main challenges for LGBT people in South African communities (Graham & Kiguwa, 2004). LGBT people experience homophobia, including name-calling, hate crimes and physical and sexual violence, discrimination, isolation and rejection, sexual assault, and even murder. Experiencing all these forms of homophobic activities are damaging not only for LGBT people, but for the South African society at large. Homophobia infringes on the basic human and equal rights of LGBT people based on sexual orientation.

While there has been noticeable advancement in recognising sexual minority rights as stipulated in the Constitution, which forbids any prejudicial action based on sexual orientation and guarantees equality to people who engage in same-sex relationships, many LGBT people have been forced to live homophobic environments that require that they navigate their lives through a number of intersecting identities because of fear of victimisation. The increase in physical attacks, verbal abuse directed towards sexual minorities or LGBT people have continued to leave them vulnerable and exposed to different kinds of dangers. According to Matebeni (2009), Msibi (2013) and Richardson (2004), many black lesbian women and girls' rights have just been a distant reality, visible on paper but hardly ever enjoyed. The inclusion of the LGBT people's rights is what Msibi (2013) terms a symbolical representation, since it served merely as an important marker for the shift away from the apartheid injustices to the post-apartheid, democratic dispensation. Furthermore, the rebirth of democracy was supposed to bring hope to all South Africans, particularly those who were marginalised, envisioning a country free from the shackles of discrimination, prejudice and intolerance (Bucarolltler et al., 2003). The democratic rights for LGBT people in South Africans remain infringed upon if they are still exposed to hate crimes, violence and extremely harsh conditions. In Bhana's (2012) view, homophobic crimes seem to taint South Africa's progressive democracy.

In this study, I sought to explore the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth of school-going age in township and rural contexts. This focus was informed by the continued homophobia which circulates in South African schools and in society. Also, the emphasis is on an issue that has been silenced in South African educational settings. The sexuality of black self-identified lesbian youth has remained an issue that has been under-researched. Francis (2017) views schools as significant social spaces within society, not only responsible for curricular implementation, but also for the integration of children into society and for the preservation of their social-emotional experience while they are within these institutions. However, in research conducted by Human Rights Watch, it was found that schools are not adequately resourced to educate teachers and learners about homosexuality, heterosexism and homophobia (Richardson, 2004). Most people who consider themselves as heterosexuals continue to be supported by dominant sexual cultures within the school and in the community that always

reproduce homophobic social norms (Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher, & Astbury, 2003; Richardson, 2004).

Additionally, it is important to highlight that this chapter gives a historical discussion of the experiences of LGBT communities because it is crucial for numerous reasons. To begin with, it offers a thorough understanding of the enduring challenges and victories encountered by this marginalised community, revealing the socio-political, cultural, and legal contexts that have influenced their lives throughout numerous periods and countries. By giving an analysing historical narratives, I intend to give a picture of societal attitudes towards LGBT communities worldwide. This historical perspective is essential for comprehending the enduring impact of past injustices on present-day LGBT communities and exploring the origins of current prejudices in many countries. The discussion also highlights the experiences of LGBT individuals, who have persistently advocated for their rights and visibility, frequently at the expense of their personal safety. Therefore, incorporating this history into this chapter assists in giving the context of the daily experiences of LGBT individuals globally.

Finally, the study concentrated on black self-identified lesbian youth because it intended to give voice to the stories of LGBT youth and to assist in acknowledging their identities. I was aware of the challenges of conducting a study related to a sensitive and complex phenomenon such as sexuality. This study is therefore important as it sought to establish the links between race, gender, class and sexuality in a context of an evolving post-apartheid.

1.2.1 Experiences of LGBT people globally

Globally, LGBT people are a minority who are continually faced with many social ills. Their negative experiences and victimisation have grown alarmingly, particularly in those countries where the rights of homosexuals and gender minorities are limited or non-existent (Carroll & Mendos, 2016). Though countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States have made significant changes in laws toward equality for LGBT people (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019; Browne & Nash, 2014; Zivi, 2014), countries like Nigeria, Uganda and Senegal have officially introduced anti-LGBT campaigns, where homosexuality is viewed as illegal and punishable. As a result, research reveals that LGBT people experience discrimination and marginalisation in all spheres of their lives, involving acts of victimisation, derogatory names, verbal slurs and sometimes

incidents of physical assault (Earle et al., 2021; Francis, 2017; Boonzaier & Zway, 2015; Bhana, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2006; Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2002;). The relevant literature reveals that their lives are scarred and the scarring they experience does not come only from poverty (where applicable), powerlessness or invisibility, but also from the experiences of active and hostile discrimination (Lyonga, 2014; Giannou & Ioakimidis, 2020; Gray. 2013; Yamashita,

Gomez, Dombroski, 2017). At times, it is revealed that the intention to expose LGBT people to these acts of physical violence is to 'correct' the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity (Reddy, 2002).

Furthermore, this discrimination does not only violate their human rights, such as human dignity, rights to privacy and limiting the rights to sexual orientation, but also impairs their sense of belonging, self-worth, self-identity, personal safety and freedom (Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002). This is exacerbated in the cases where LGBT people are rejected by friends, families and within communities they live in. The discrimination is also perpetuated by pressures from the community, through cultural and religious beliefs, to have relationships with or get married to the opposite sex (Makhaye, 2019).

The evidence of homophobic activities worldwide reveals that the rights of LGBT people continue to be one of the contested issues around the world, with several countries continuing to be highly homophobic. These countries hold the belief that homosexuality is a violation of gender and moral norms (Buyantueva, 2018; Malamba, 2012; Kondakov, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Nyanzi, 2013). The knowledge about the rise in intolerance comes from the increasing reports of bad experiences, intolerance and sexual violence directed to LGBT people globally (Schoellkopf, 2012). The picture painted by the literature is that the enactment and enforcement of national laws prohibiting homosexuality in certain countries served as a tool by which LGBT people are discriminated against for failing to conform to the patriarchal and hetero-normative constructs (Bartone, 2017).

1.2.2 Experiences of LGBT people in the South African context

In South Africa, the rebirth of democracy was supposed to bring hope to all citizens, particularly those who were marginalised, envisioning a country free from the shackles of discrimination, prejudice and intolerance (Brooks et al., 2018; Baboolal-Frank & Bekker, 2020; Butler et al., 2003). Despite the constitution viewed as one of the most progressive and liberal constitutions worldwide that is applauded for providing and protecting the rights of LGBT people against discrimination, South African LGBT people are still experiencing homophobic attacks because their sexual orientation differs from accepted social

norms (Duby et al., 2018; Judge & Nel, 2008), and homosexuality remains stigmatised. The discrimination and restrictive legislation directed towards LGBT people have left them vulnerable and exposed to different kinds of dangers. Bhana (2012) views the homophobic crimes experienced by LGBT people in South Africa as a dark cloud that taints

the South African progressive democracy. Stories from LGBT individuals highlight lives lived in rejection, marginalisation and in loneliness, which have become the reflection of their lived realities.

1.2.3 Consequences of homophobia in society

Homophobia is viewed as a form of oppression to those who are marginalised (Sanchez, 2022). It is used as a tool to oppress and dominate and to keep a specific social order. The literature has shown that homophobia in every form is destructive for society, most particularly to LGBT people (James et al., 2016; Mortimer, Powell & Sandy, 2019; Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011; Walters et al., 2013). LGBT people are exposed to a range of sexual and physical violence in their lives that is diverse in nature and across a range of different contexts and leaves them fearful. Violence directed towards LGBT people is motivated by hate crimes amongst families and community members, who fail to support LGBT people. These family members and the communities should be the ones giving support and acceptance, but they tend to become sources of rejection and isolation (Makhaye, 2019). The marginalising and discriminating of LGBT people provides adequate evidence of how homophobia affects and leads to continuous violations of their rights, freedom, dignity and their opportunity to pursue personal and professional goals freely (Sanchez, 2022; Lyonga, 2021; D'Augelli, 1992).

Though many countries worldwide have been progressive in developing laws that protect the freedom of and give equality to LGBT people, the rights of the LGBT people continue to be silenced by homophobic stereotypes (Sanchez, 2022). It is evident that the results of homophobia include a sense of vulnerability amongst LGBT people, particularly women and girls. Their experiences are complex and challenging and require complex negotiations of their sexual identities (Makhaye, 2019). Consequently, the experiences of LGBT people have negative effects on their lives. These people are painfully juxtaposed between fear of invisibility, anxiety and the cultural estrangement within society (Mortimer, Powell & Sandy, 2019). As a result, LGBT people are denied recognition as citizens. Not only does this prejudice contribute to discriminatory and hostile experiences, but the non-acceptance within their social platform also causes a significant number of LGBT people to experience continual social ostracism based on their sexual identities,

in every sphere of their lives.

1.2.4 The schooling experiences of LGBT learners globally

Universally, the condition for LGBTLGB learners in schools is hostile (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2013). Research have identified schools as generally unsafe and unsupportive to LGBT learners worldwide. Although schools are mainly viewed as places where every learner's character and identity are supported (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015), LGBT learners have reported experiencing discrimination and marginalisation within school that is mostly based on their sexual orientation. Not only have schools been identified as dangerous sites, where LGBT learners are exposed to bullying, victimisation, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination and abuse (Okanlawon, 2020; Okanlawon, 2017; Woodford et al., 2012), they have also been viewed as places that cause LGBT learners pain, suffering, and fear that can consequently harm their physical, emotional and academic achievement (Okanlawon, 2020; Okanlawon, 2017). LGBT learners experience such violence and discrimination both inside and outside their schooling environments and face increased risk from schoolmates, teachers and non-teaching staff. For LGBT learners, the prejudice and marginalisation they experience within the school environment is reinforced by gendered stereotyping and labelling that further disadvantage them (Miller, 2015, 2016; Scotland, 2018; Wyss, 2004).

Furthermore, research shows consistently that schools are repressive environments for sexual and gender minority youth (Allen, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2011) and have been regularly characterised by the heteronormativity which is the societal assumption that privileges heterosexuality, implying that other sexual orientations and gender identities are inferior Marchia and Sommer, (2019). In DePalma and Atkinson (2010) view, heteronormativity forms part of the LGBT learners' daily school life. However, schools are also places where sexuality and gender are policed (DePalma 2011). The challenging schooling experiences of LGBT learners globally negatively impact their lives as they sometimes drop out of school or try to commit suicide as because of increased verbal abuse, being uncomfortable or unsafe within the school environment. These experiences become significant as individuals suffer and result in serious consequences for their schooling processes.

1.2.5 The schooling experiences of LGBT learners in South African context

In South Africa, studies undertaken yielded information regarding challenges faced by LGBT learners in schools (Francis & Monakali, 2021; De Beer, 2020); Francis, 2017; Bhana, 2015; Bhana 2013; Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Msibi, 2012). The above-mentioned studies note evidence of homophobia and the accounts of the oppressive nature of schooling experiences for LGBT learners in South African schools, who are more likely to be ridiculed and

dehumanised than their heterosexual peers (Allen, 2019). This discrimination generally goes unnoticed within schools. These studies highlight that, amongst others, LGBT learners face widespread homophobic harassment, victimisation and ill-treatment in schools, which are gendered in nature. LGBT learners are exposed to discrimination and harassment, with much of the homophobic activities taking place within the presence of teachers (Schneider & Demito, 2008). For example, within the South African context, Bhana (2014) highlights the reality that in South African schools, homophobia and heterosexuality is dominating and LGBT learners' rights continue to be challenged and compromised, since their sexuality is regarded as taboo and inappropriate by teachers and school management.

Bhana (2012) notes:

The heinous attacks against gays and lesbians provide teachers with a crucial opportunity to open dialogue and critique about the meaning of sexual equality; the ways in which violence is engendered; and the connection between schooling and the responsibilities of learners to the development of South Africa's democracy (p. 307).

As Bhana (2012) explains, schools have an obligation as social spaces to establish a good foundation for the development of learners. The failure of schools to put in place safe measures through its policies to protect all learners and the ignoring of school violence, victimisation and harassment of LGBT learners compromises the quality of education for all learners. The disjuncture between the country's constitution and its implementation and what people experience in real life reveals that those South African learners who identify differently will continue to be victims in an educational setting, a place that should be for gaining knowledge instead of enforcing exclusion.

Also, Brown (2020) speaks of the transformative potential of intergroup dialogue in teacher education that can assist to address and integrate LGBT issues. He mentions how the conventional teacher education programmes frequently fail to address the difficulties of sexual and gender diversity within the schooling system,

resulting in educators being unprepared to serve LGBT students. He proposes that educators should participate in meaningful discussions regarding identity, privilege, and oppression of the LGBT students by incorporating this dialogue, thereby cultivating a more profound comprehension and empathy for the experiences of LGBT communities. Brown (2020) further advises that educators need to be provided with

the knowledge and abilities required to establish inclusive and affirming educational environments for all students through this methodology.

What is evident from Bhana (2012) and Brown's (2020) work is that the schooling experiences of LGBT learners in the South African context are not in line with the South African Constitution. Schools within this context have become sites of power and control that put LGBT learners at a high risk for poor academic achievements and other challenges because of their exposure to harassment, exclusion rejection and feelings of isolation because of their sexual identity (Junior, 2012). The acute pain experienced by LGBT learners is the result of the gendered patriarchal cultures that still exist in South Africa. This situation reflects the homophobic tendencies, violence and discrimination that have become normative and accepted in South African society (Bhana, 2012; Nel & Judge, 2008; Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Muholi, 2004). The teachers carry with them attitudes that continue to stir and spread homophobic behaviours and homophobic attitudes in schools (Johnson, 2014).

Equally, the study conducted by Taylor and Peter (2011) confirmed that the teachers were unwilling to interfere and challenge homophobia within the school setting, because of their own negative attitudes towards homosexuality. The reluctance to support LGBT learners also arose from the anxiety over the consequences they might face if they openly support LGBT learners (Ngcobo, 2021). The teachers become apprehensive about their job security, over-criticism from their colleagues and whether they would be supported by management if they give support to these learners. Bhana (2014) criticises the teachers' actions and points out that they are ignorant about the role they need to play and the importance of intervening in issues of homophobic attitudes directed towards LGBT learners.

1.2.6 Colonial and cultural understandings in South Africa

Colonisation brought significant and traumatic events in the history of black people. This period resulted in exploitation, enslavement and extermination of humankind (Bertolt, 2019). Throughout this period, colonisers controlled and

regulated any kind of non-heterosexual relations (Mamba, 2020) and policed black people's sexual dimensions. For example, the Immorality Act of 1957 criminalised both interracial relationships and homosexuality (Spira, Chad & Schneeweis, 2015, p. 8).

In South Africa, during colonisation, patriarchy was found everywhere in and among all ethnic groups. Culture became a way of life, inherited from generation to generation, from one leader to the next by modelling and teaching the young people about the expected way of life to uphold the values and morals. Culture became key in shaping the attitudes of a society and was used to draw clear "lines between what is considered a norm and deviant for that particular cultural group" (Mamba, 2020, p. 24). As a result of a patriarchal society, black women and girls specifically suffered a triple oppression in terms of gender, race and class position (Mamba, 2020; Sithole, 2019). Their sexuality was controlled and regulated due to the strong patriarchal structures that existed amongst the people, resulting in black women being assigned to a lower status. They experienced inequalities and discrimination because of their gender (Mudau & Obadire, 2017).

The anti-sodomy laws introduced by European colonisers in the colonies prior to the establishment of South Africa as a union were copied into the legislation then passed and enforced the criminalisation of homosexuality in South Africa (Bertolt, 2018). In many communities in South Africa, leaders adhered to strong cultures beliefs discriminated against homosexuality. This resulted in LGBT people within the community being "considered as deviant, demonic and colonized by western spirits" (Mamba, 2020, p. 32). South African leaders such as the late King Zwelithini Zulu and the former South African president, Jacob Zuma, openly displayed their intolerance towards LGBT people by presenting condemning statements against them. Their actions consequently revealed that leaders were not willing to

protect and advocate for LGBT rights (Nkoli, 1995). Black lesbian women and LGBT people have been considered second-class citizens (Beetar, 2017). They find enjoying their constitutional rights or engaging in intimate partnerships very difficult because of the traditional and cultural spaces in which they find themselves, where patriarchal structures are very pervasive (Beetar, 2017; Hoad, 2005; Van Zyl, 2009).

1.2.7 Legislation on sexuality in South Africa

For many years South Africa was subjected to rigid restrictions on cultural issues and argument on matters of sex and sexuality. This was because the apartheid government heavily censored issues of sex and sexuality and legitimised repressive policing that excluded public any talk about sex (Posel, 2020). The apartheid system had legislation that upheld segregationist policies that regulated and prohibited interracial relationships (Ngcobo, 2021) with the intention to reinforce and criminalise homosexuality. According to Posel (2004), the policing

of sexuality was the ultimate goal of apartheid as a project to preserve the 'white purity as a race', whilst controlling the black people's fertility.

The Immorality Act of 1957 was amended, and it further restricted any relationships amongst people of different races and illegalised only homosexuality (Klausen, 2022). It was during this period that the LGBT rights groups took the LGBT struggle into the wider South African community. In 1988, Simon Nkoli, an anti-apartheid activist established the first of its kind, the mass-based black gay and lesbian organisation named Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW). The main objective was to guarantee a non-racist, non-discriminatory, and non-sexist democratic future in South Africa. In 1990, during the First Gay and Lesbian pride March in Johannesburg he declared and stressed that homophobia and racism were to be fought together, since they were inseparable battles (Klausen, 2022).

The pronouncement of South Africa's first interim democratic constitution in 1993 highlighted strides that were made to replace the unjust laws that were passed during the apartheid period. This interim constitution aimed to end the brutal and discriminatory legal system enacted during apartheid (Endoh, 2015). In 1996, South Africa became the first African country through its Constitution to afford equal legal rights and to protect all its citizens who engage in same-sex sexual relationships. This was a noticeable advancement made to recognise sexual minority rights as stipulated in the Constitution, from an oppressive system to the one that afford democratic rights to all South African citizens (Christiansen, 2016). Furthermore, South Africa was applauded and admired for being the first country globally that had a bill of rights and constitution that guaranteed equality for its citizens based on their sexual orientation. "Over the last two decades, the Constitutional Court of South Africa has decriminalised same-sex relationships, required equal treatment of same-sex life partners in immigration and government benefits law, and affirmed the fundamental validity of same-sex relationships, including recognition of full marriage equality" (Christiansen, 2016, p.567).

1.3 Problem statement and research questions

Globally, there has been a significant shift made in recognising the human rights of (LGBT) people that have previously been unrecognised. Some countries have given freedom and the protection of the rights of LGBTLGB people to have relationships and become accepted and more

visible within social structures, yet homophobia has remained the key challenge that is evident with regards to the experiences of LGBT people. Though several countries are protecting the rights of LGBT people, over 70 countries have put laws that oppose and criminalise homosexuality or to arrest people who identify as LGBT (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Some of these countries have made homosexuality punishable by death. For example, in Yemen, Sudan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, LGBT people get the death penalty for practising homosexuality (Bruce-Jones & Itabohary, 2011, p. 10). This happens despite many countries' pledges to oppose violence, criminalisation and discrimination against the LGBT people. Globally, there seems to be continued homophobia and discrimination directed towards LGBT people and this has negatively impacted their lives.

South Africa is the first African country, that through its constitution, guaranteed numerous fundamental rights and equality for its citizens based on their sexual orientation. Despite being perceived as a progressive democratic country, South African LGBT people continue to be subjected to marginalisation, discrimination and stigma within their communities. In this country LGBT sexualities have largely been shaped by silence and secrecy, oppression and repression. Also, there has been increasing numerous accounts of people that have been killed, raped, sexually and verbally assaulted, because of their sexual orientation. For example, in 2008, Eudy Simelane, (the first woman to live openly as a lesbian in Kwa-Thema township), was robbed, stabbed twelve times and gang raped; her naked body was then hauled to a stream to die (ABC News, 2019). Likewise, in February 2006, Zoliswa Nkonyane (a young girl) was brutally murdered by a group of people because she was a lesbian. She died from abdominal wounds caused by being raped (Mkhize et al., 2020; Sanger, 2010).

Further, the stabbing and killing of a 23-year-old Lindokuhle Cele, on the 6th of February 2020, raised concerns about the rampant homophobia within the KwaZulu-Natal township (SAHRC, 2020). Lindokuhle was a gay rights activist and musician, who was stabbed 21 times and killed in front of spectators at an uMlazi butchery. His murder is understood to be motivated by homophobia, the homophobic action and his senseless killing cut his lifespan short because of his sexual identity. What is evident about the gruesome killings mentioned above is

that they all took place in South Africa, within township contexts and they were all classified as hate crimes. These senseless killings of LGBT people suggest that LGBT people in South Africa are not afforded an opportunity to openly exercise their constitutional rights without fear or prejudice.

Regarding women and girls, the dominant apartheid system in South Africa legitimated violence against women and girls by disempowering and implementing reregulating methods that subordinated their status, not only in public and political spaces, but socially, privately and within structures to control them (Onyebadi & Mbuyuza-Memani, 2020; Snodgrass, 2017; Moffet, 2006). The system reminded women of their subordinate status that permeated not just public and political spaces, but also private and domestic spaces (Britton, 2006; Moffett, 2006). The racialised sexual subordination under the apartheid period and the violence directed to women seemed to have increased the figures to levels extremely high “for gender-based violence for a country not at war” (Moffett, 2006, p. 129).

Within the South African context, incidents of hate crime, sexual violence and rape directed towards lesbian women and girls have increased. Black lesbian woman and girls have found themselves highly vulnerable because of their gender and sexual orientation (Matebeni, 2013). A study by Matebeni (2009) that explored the lives of black self-identified lesbian women and how their sexual identities affected their sexuality and the decisions they make around sex (p. 100), revealed that LGBT people found experiences are discriminatory and engaging in intimate partnerships very difficult because of the traditional and cultural spaces in which they find themselves. As a result, the past 29 years has been challenging for LGBT people, with more than 45 lesbians, who have been murdered for openly expressing their sexual identities and more than 11 lesbians reporting to be raped weekly (Koraan & Geduld, 2015). Homophobia has become the main stumbling block for the black LGBT people. They have been discriminated and “punished” for not conforming to normative ideals of gender identities.

Furthermore, in South Africa policies such as South African Schools Act No. 84, 1996, School Governance, section 27 and Inclusive Education Policy put in place in schools give the right to education to every learner; despite this, schools continue to be repressive environments for sexual and gender minority youth (Allen, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2014; Nadal et al., 2011). These spaces have been characterised by

heteronormativity which forms part of the LGBT youth's daily schooling life (Francis, 2021; Reimers, 2020; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010) resulting in the policing of sexuality and gender (DePalma 2011). Within this context, LGBT people, and youth in particular, experience exclusion and homophobic attacks (Denison et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021; Munro et al., 2019; Bhana, 2015; Bhana 2013; Morrissey, 2013) with youth more likely to be ridiculed and dehumanised than their heterosexual peers (Allen, 2019). In most instances, their discrimination mostly goes overlooked. While it is an

obligation of every stakeholder within the schooling system to abide by the constitution and SASA by providing education and supporting every learner, LGBT learners continue to experience negative attitudes which create barriers to the goal of the Constitution.

Recently, there has been growing body of research undertaken on the experiences of LGBT youth. Some studies have focused on either gay or lesbian youth, with other scholars often combining both gay and lesbian participants (Francis, 2021; Marnell et al., 2021; Reygan & Henderson, 2019; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017; Msibi, 2013; Pakade, 2013; Francis & Msibi, 2011;). There have been few studies conducted in the South African context that document the lived experienced of black self-identified lesbian youth of school-going age in township and rural contexts. Thus, this thesis gives a detailed report on the experiences of the lesbian youth as a group of learners whose voices are marginalised for identifying as LGBT within their communities.

Although discrimination and violence are frequent obstacles for LGBT people in South Africa, there are also instances of positive experiences that highlight progress and acceptance. Reddy, Sandfort, and Rispel (2009) assert that South Africa's progressive legal framework, which encompasses the constitutional protection of LGBT rights and the legalisation of same-sex marriage, establishes a basis for positive experiences. Furthermore, there are a variety of community groups and civil society organisations that are actively involved in the promotion and protection of LGBT rights, in so doing, they are establishing secure environments and cultivating a sense of solidarity (Francis et al., 2019). Additionally, research has demonstrated that LGBT people in more liberal and urban regions report higher levels of acceptance and support from their peers and families, which contributes to enhance their well-being (McLean & Ngcobo, 2020). Supportive policies and inclusive communities in South Africa have had a positive impact on some of the lives of LGBT people, as evidenced by these positive experiences.

The study aims to explore how young black self-identified lesbian school-going youth in township and rural contexts construct and navigate their sexual identities within their immediate environments, such as homes, schools and in communities. Similarly, there is

a need to have a study that is going to prioritise issues of gender, race, age and class in the context of sexual diversity. What is evident with the participants in this study is that their lives have developed within contexts of gender, race and class inequalities that have involved the regulation of

women's and girls' sexuality as forms of patriarchal control and oppression (Collins, 2004; Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015).

1.4 The rationale for the study

My interest in conducting the study is firstly motivated by the fact that I was employed as an educator in a co-educational public school in an all-black township setting for 13 years. Therefore, I spent and continued to spend most of my time with teenagers within the schooling environment. This widened my understanding of the challenges these teenage girls went through daily, and homophobia was one such challenge. Furthermore, I witnessed black girls being victimised, humiliated and some deciding to drop out of school prior to the completion of their schooling because of the humiliation and the victimisation that they faced in school. Therefore, I became interested in finding out how these black self-identified lesbian youth experience their lives in school and in the communities.

Secondly, my Honours and Masters studies have been instrumental in opening my eyes into the recurring social problem of intolerance, violence and continued homophobia towards LGBT people that occurs in South African educational institutions. For me, it became clear that these biases against same sex identifying people continue to manifest themselves in many different forms, regardless of these individuals' constitutional rights. Despite calls from various organisations to South Africans to afford homosexual citizens the rights to express their sexual identities, homophobia continues to marginalise LGBT people. This intolerance has occurred in societal and institutional settings and particularly in schools. What happens in schools does not exist in isolation from what happens in communities where the learners come from, and schools are spaces where homophobia is reproduced and perpetuated all the time (Ngcobo, 2021; Francis, 2017; Bhana, 2014).

For many learners, being a teenager is challenging and comes with a lot of uncertainty, as they try to discover many aspects of who they are, transitioning and finding the sense of belonging in the world (Zibane, 2017). Research indicates that lesbian learners frequently encounter increased levels of homophobic

bullying and harassment in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Fransis & Kjaran, 2020; Letsoalo et al., 2020; Govender et al., 2019). This unfortunate treatment can result in negative effects on both academic achievement and mental well-being, which may manifest as reduced academic performance and higher rates of absenteeism. Therefore, my greatest concern is that these young girls drop out of school prematurely not because they want to, but because their constitutional rights have been violated. Their dropping out of school prematurely becomes a hindrance as education is central in their development as it prepares them for the world of work and for life in general (Modiba, 2025; Magwentshu et al., 2019). I therefore argue that it is important to have a study that explores how these youth experience their sexualities under repressive conditions.

This is important because same-sex desire has a history of being relegated to private spaces, resulting in these youth not being able to claim their interests in public spaces, especially in schools. While the study does not intend to compare rural and township settings with suburban settings; however, the emphasis on the former is driven by recent research that has demonstrated that homophobia remains prevalent in both rural and township contexts in South Africa (Maake, 2023; Mtuse, 2021, & Ngidi et al., 2020). Significant challenges that contribute to the isolation and vulnerability of LGBT individuals in these regions are frequently encountered (Maake, 2023; Mtuse, 2021). These include increased rates of homophobic violence, social ostracism, and an inability to access supportive services and secure spaces, all of which exacerbate their marginalisation and reinforce negative experiences

Also, the study does not aim to compare rural and township settings with suburban settings, however, the focus on the former areas is motivated by research that reveal that in both these contexts homophobia is rife, and LGBT people are constantly confronted with a variety of challenges, that result in vulnerability to isolation (Letsoalo et al., 2020; Francis, 2017; Tucker, 2014) . However, there is evidence that homophobia does not manifest as strongly in suburban and central city areas as in rural and township settings. According to Tucker (2010), within the township, there are diverse ways of understanding and accepting same-sex desire and identities. However, in rural settings in particular, heterosexuality is promoted through culture and traditions and is treated as compulsory, whereas homosexuality is ridiculed and viewed as an unlawful way of expressing desire (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Mitchell & Smith, 2003).

From the above discussion, it is evident that the constitutional rights of youth within schooling setting are infringed upon. This study therefore seeks to highlight the lives of black South African rural and township youth who identify themselves as lesbian. The study seeks to answer the question as to what the experiences of these black South African self-identified lesbian youth in rural and township areas are, and the reasons for such experiences, and further to unpack different ways in which they construct and negotiate their sexual identities. The issue of identity becomes crucial because several scholars have indicated that identities are not simply “free-floating” but are constrained by access to resources,

and by social structures, such as the school, the family, the community and the state, which all have formal and informal regulatory practices (Connell, 1987; Youdell, 2005). This study therefore intends to address key issues that are currently absent from the literature. It responds to the following **key research questions**:

1. What are the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts, and why do they have these experiences?
2. How do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities?
3. Why do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities in the ways they do?

1.5 Research objectives

As with any other research undertaking, I had established objectives that were pertinent to the research problem that I had previously discussed in this chapter. The objectives are provided below for the sake of clarity. In relation to the research questions, the objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu- Natal (KZN) township and rural contexts, as well as reasons for such experiences.
2. To explore the various ways in which these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities.
3. To explore the reasons for the adopted sexual identity constructions and negotiations by the black self-identified lesbian youth.

1.6 Key features of the context

The study was located within the township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal is situated in the south-east of South Africa. In 2020, KZN had a population of over 11,5 million people (Stats SA, 2020). This province has the second largest population in South Africa. The principal language is IsiZulu followed by English, IsiXhosa and Afrikaans. Approximately 54% of its population of KwaZulu-Natal live in rural areas, while 46% live in urban areas (Lehohla, 2004). KwaZulu-Natal is well known as the birthplace of many prominent distinguished figures in Southern Africa, such as

Mangosuthu Buthelezi, one of the most popular Zulu leaders, a political figure and a tribal leader in South Africa. It was also home to the Zulu Monarch, Zwelithini Zulu, who was the reigning King of the Zulu nation from 1968 until 12 March 2020, who had very strong beliefs in tradition and polygamy.

It is home to Misuzulu Sinqobile kaZwelithini Zulu, the reigning King of the Zulu nation. He is the third oldest surviving son of King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu Zulu and his wife, Queen Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu. The KwaZulu-Natal province is generally perceived by South Africans who do not have traditional notions to be conservative (Msibi, 2012). This has partially to do with the traditional notions of identity that are still intact. These traditional and cultural roles are viewed as fundamental contributory factors to the ways in which people construct and perform their sexual identities.

The location and the focus of this study was deliberate given the contradictory messages that circulate on matters around gender and sexuality in this province. In these localities, there have been reports from the media of homophobic utterances, including from the traditional leaders of the province. Part of this was evidence of no understanding from such people about homophobia since research on same-sex issues tends to be located in capitals or cities and not so much in rural and townships settings (Matebeni, 2013).

Research has revealed that people who engage in non-heterosexual relationships within this province have been ostracised and harmed, and some have even died (Leach, 2018). Further, class differences are structural in nature and are perpetuated through race, which means that black lesbian women and girls in poor and rural neighbourhoods are exposed to dangerous environments (Mkhize, et al., 2012). In this province, patriarchy is deeply rooted and firmly engraved itself in society and this contributes mostly to the sexual violence that is directed towards LGBT people. What happens within the community translates to other institutions in society. This has resulted in South African schools being very aggressive and hostile environments for those learners who engage in same-sex relationships.

The motivation above gives a greater understanding why these contexts were chosen as sites for the study that sought to explore the experiences of lesbian youth in township and rural contexts, because in most traditional societies same-sexual orientations are not tolerated. Thus, these lesbian youth end up being exposed to unwanted sexual hostility and mistreatment committed by their

teachers, schoolmates and school staff.

Further, South Africa still has deep rooted Christian beliefs with high morality values, coupled with some form of traditional African beliefs, more importantly among black South African rural and township residents (Msibi, 2012). As Msibi (2012) explains, these constructions of

morality and nationhood are founded on religious assumptions as well as traditional African practices. Both Christianity and traditional African beliefs have been viewed as opposing factors to same-sex relationships. Research has questioned whether such practices are in fact truly traditional or were modified through colonialism.

1.7 Significance of the study

The contributions made by this study are scholarly. The study sought to answer the question as to how these black South African rural and township self-identified school-going youth construct their sexualities and how they experience schooling. Firstly, the argument I maintained throughout this study is that while there is a thriving body of knowledge on the experiences of lesbian youth internationally, the same cannot be said for South Africa. This study responded to the paucity of the research in sexuality education and that particularly added the rural and township perspective to research literature on the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. This study allowed the insider voices of the lived experiences of the lesbian youth to be heard and shared by those who will find the participants' experiences useful in their lives. Consequently, the study contributes to the body of literature that focuses on the realities of black lesbian youth and how they construct and negotiate their sexual identities.

In addition, the study has prioritised race, since struggles that black LGBT people, particularly women and girls face are different struggles to those of the white LGBT with regards to their sexuality. Also, the lives of black lesbian women and girls are invisible, mostly in rural and township settings. Therefore, being black and a girl seems to have automatically come with expectations that participants need to live their lives in a particular way.

Furthermore, the study is significant for education as it seeks to establish the links between gender race, age and sexuality in a context of an evolving, post-apartheid South Africa. Therefore, this research is needed to outline LGBT youth's school experiences thoroughly in rural and township South African settings and the potential role of optimism and resiliency in their daily lives.

The study may assist teachers and schoolmates in understanding, embracing and changing their perceptions about lesbian learners in schools. Additionally, the study may help both the teachers and fellow schoolmates to deepen their understanding of differences and sexuality without being

prejudiced. As a result, the positive attitudes may contribute to changing the ways in which teachers and other learners view lesbian learners in schools, thus creating conducive teaching and learning environments.

Although the non-teaching staff may not interact daily with lesbian learners, some of them take part in the disciplinary meetings that openly discriminate against these learners. These results may encourage them to influence how the decisions to discipline lesbian learners are taken. By doing so, they may be in support of inclusive education and advocating for social justice.

For parents, this study may assist in providing them with information on how to support and accept their children, irrespective of their sexual identity. It may also assist the parents on child-rearing and in acknowledging there is nothing wrong with being different. This may be helpful in the creating safe spaces within families that may allow lesbian youth to talk freely and openly with their parents and this may assist in how they navigate their sexuality within and outside home.

Similarly, policy makers and curriculum planners may use this study as a reference when developing materials to be used in schools. This may inform the design of policies that speak to issues of sexuality in schools and monitor the implementation. The developed policies and curriculum may cater for the needs of all learners, equally. They may have to conduct workshops and seminars that might equip all the stakeholders with policy issues and dissemination of inclusive curriculum.

Lastly, for researchers, this study may be used for future studies as a point of reference.

1.8 Short synopsis of the theoretical framework

This study was informed by queer theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality. This theory was appropriate because it gave me a framework to analyse how gender and sexuality work in this study and within different contexts. In a study that explored the lived experiences of lesbian youth, queer theory seemed “more inclusive and empowering when analysing the experiences of the LGBT youth” (Meyer, 2007, p. 25). Queer theory offered an opportunity to question the heterosexual moral order that silences and regulates non-normative

sexualities (Vavrus, 2009). Given that the study was about sexuality, and it intended to explore the numerous complexities participants must go through when constructing their sexual identities, thorough consideration was key when choosing the framework. Using queer theory

was relevant as its key tenet is to challenge traditional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, the binaries and language that support them (Meyer, 2007). Therefore, it assisted in understanding that the participants' sexual identities cannot be seen as singular, fixed or normal and that being male or female, man or woman are social construct and products of how individuals have been brought up.

In addition, since queer theorists believe that sexuality is a complex array of codes and forces (Quilty, 2017), using this theory seemed relevant in understanding that the binary distinctions of the participants were inadequate to describe their sexual identities (Mayo, 2013). For this reason, I did not aim to categorise their sexual identities, and did not understand them as biological reality, but instead I thought of their sexuality as something that is fluid across the whole continuum. I simply adopted the ways in which they referred to themselves. Also, this theory was able to assist me in conveying the voices and experiences of the participants, who were suppressed in all spheres of their lives.

The theory of intersectionality was the second theory I used in this study. This theory suggests that human experiences are shaped by multiple social positions that cannot be understood in isolation. It focuses on relationality, social context, power relations, and social justice, making it a critical tool for analysing complex social dynamics (Carbado et al., 2013; Davis, 2008). I used this theory because I intended to analyse how identities, social and cultural roles and categories intertwine to produce multiple levels of oppression. This theory did not only assist me in understanding how the social order of things operated within the participants spaces, but it also assisted them with how they exercised their agency within their given social structures (Brewer, Conrad, & King, 2002). This theory helped me to look at gender race, class and age as “interlocking systems of oppression” (Meyer, 2007). Therefore, when analysing data, I understood why there were interconnections and interdependencies between what happened in the participants' lives and the social systems. I realised how difficult it was for me to pry one structure apart and conclude that it was the most or the least oppressive for the participants. Intersectionality made me aware that the sources of oppression for the lesbian youth were interconnected or explicitly identifiable.

Their experiences were located at a social location of multiple identities.

1.9 Methodological approach

The study was in the interpretive paradigm and used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of the black self-identified lesbian youth. Research within the interpretivist paradigm values multiple interpretations and it “enables the diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world through different contexts and cultures” (Pham, 2018, p.3). This

paradigm does not aim to predict what people will do - rather, its aim is to describe and understand how people make sense of their worlds, and how they make meaning of their actions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Additionally, it allowed me to elicit and examine the participants' thoughts, perceptions, prejudices, perspectives, feelings, and to arrive at conclusions by understanding the meaning they made about their experiences, not what I assumed to be the meaning (Neuman, 2006).

Given the fact that the study was concerned with exploring the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth of school going age and the accounts of their lives, as informed by their social, cultural and personal experiences, a qualitative approach was employed to generate data of a textual and verbal nature. This approach is used when in-depth views about phenomena are required (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The methodology of narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study in addressing issues of complexity and cultural and human centredness, because of its capacity to record and retell those events that have had crucial influences on these young people (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Participants in this study used their narratives to express their world views and experiences, and to provide an account of their identity and agency.

Apart from in-depth interviews, photo voice and personal documents (diaries) were used to generate data with 12 lesbian youth of school going age in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. After the data generating process using these tools, data was analysed using thematic analysis. This analysis was used because it offered flexibility during the process of coding and developing themes when analysing. It was used also because of the active role of the researcher in these processes, and the opportunity it offers for the greater flexibility that they offer to the qualitative researcher. Furthermore, thematic analysis afforded an opportunity to identify themes that emerged as crucial in answering my study's research questions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

1.10 Ethical considerations in the study

The nature of the study was sensitive because of the complexity of the experiences

that young people have. Further, because the study aimed at addressing controversial issues of sexual identities, I needed to reflect on ethical issues and to address them thoughtfully. Firstly, I applied for and was granted full ethical clearance to conduct the study by the University of

KwaZulu-Natal. Secondly, I ensured full consent was granted by parents, caregivers and legal guardians. Thirdly, I asked participants to take part in the study and to give consent also and they gave assent. Lastly, because of the sensitivity of the study, and how in reality I had to deal with a major ethical challenge that will be reported fully in Chapter Four.

During the first session, participants were informed that their participation would be strictly voluntary. Should they wish to withdraw from the research at any given time, they had the right to do so without any negative consequences. They were also informed that they were to take part in the study and all identifying information was to remain anonymous. Further to that, all information shared during the in-depth interviews, photo discussions and from diaries would be treated with strict confidence. Given that this study is about the lived experiences of lesbian youth, and it valued the stories of young people, it is crucial to note that during the process the issues became more complex. As will be reported, other ethical issues arose that will be explored fully in Chapter Four.

1.11 Scope and limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. It primarily focused on the self-identified lesbian youth of school-going age in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. This study sampled 12 participants, which is a small sample size. The main purpose was to get detailed qualitative information and, therefore, the sample size is suitable for the methodology used. However, the study cannot be generalised; it recognises that because of the rather small sample size, the findings cannot be generalised to include all South African black self-identifying lesbian youth.

The youth that did not participate in this study may have different narratives. For example, some of the youth with negative experiences might have participated while those whose experiences are positive might not, or vice versa. Thus, the data may reflect both positive and negative experiences of the youth and do not cover all the LGBT youth in KwaZulu-Natal schools

1.12 Chapter divisions

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth and unpack various ways in which the youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities.

This study is presented in eight chapters. In this chapter, I have introduced the study, gave background, problem statement, research questions and objectives. The chapter also identified the aim of the study, outlined the context, the theoretical framework, methodology, and the ethical issues to be considered. The remainder of this thesis is structured in terms of the following chapters:

Chapter Two presents a broad analysis of literature that gives understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The chapter also presents the current state on the existing state of affairs, internationally and locally in relation to LGBT people. It further gives a comprehensive analysis of this scholarship on the experiences of queer youth in schools. The chapter also reports on the history of intersectionality and the context of marginalised identities.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the theoretical framework that informs the study. The chapter opens with a discussion of the definition of queer theory, how it emerged and how it is used. The second section discusses the contestations of queer theory. The third provides a critical discussion of the feminist theory of intersectionality. This section discusses interconnections and fluidity that exist when the issues of race, gender and sexuality are studied. Both theories assisted when analysing the data in this study.

Chapter Four discusses the research design and methodology that underpins this study. It outlines the premises of interpretivist qualitative research, and the methods used to gather data, including sampling, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, validity, and trustworthiness.

In Chapter Five, I present the narratives of black self-identified lesbian youth that were gathered through interviews, photovoice and diaries. This chapter gives an overview of experiences faced by the participants and reveals the extent to which they experience unfair discrimination and marginalisation based on their sexual orientation. Each participant's detailed experiences are captured. This data generated using different tools helped to provide an answer to the research questions.

Chapter Six addresses the extent to which the aims of study were achieved by presenting a summary of the findings. This includes a detailed discussion with respect to relevant literature

that is either in support of or contests the findings. This chapter further reviews the findings in relation to the theoretical framework as the lens used when analysing the data.

Chapter Seven presents a detailed reflexive discussion on my journey as a researcher in this study. Given the sensitivity of the study and the challenges I encountered during the process, reflexivity was important because, as a researcher, I was also subject to my own perspectives and personality which might have influenced the study. There were numerous chances that my biases could have affected the study, from the process of data gathering tools, to collecting the data, analysing it and during the writing up process.

In Chapter Eight, I offer a summary of the findings, outline the contribution of the study and give relevant recommendations. The final conclusions are drawn from the study.

1.13 Chapter conclusion

Chapter One presented the background, problem statement and the objectives and key research questions of the study. It has also provided the rationale for the study. In this chapter, I have further introduced the theoretical framework and the research design and methodology. I concluded this chapter by giving an outline of the structure and the division of each chapter.

The next chapter presents a review of the literature related to the question posed in this study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of the background of the study, the problem statement, motivation, and the research questions that were to be investigated in this study. The purpose of the second chapter is to highlight and bring to light the thoughts of various scholars in relation to the experiences of LGBT people. This is accomplished by presenting literature from around the world, from the continent, and from specific regions. I also present a review of the literature in this chapter, which is an attempt to answer the questions that posed in this research.

In this study, literature reviewed draw from studies that were conducted on LGBT people in general, with a particular emphasis on young people who are of school-going age and their daily experiences. Although there is a growing body of knowledge on homophobia in South African schools, this research has focused on the experiences of both male and female students (Bhana, 2012; Francis & Msibi, 2011). Due to the lack of literature, this review concentrates solely on the literature that discusses the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbians who are of school-going age and who live in townships and rural settings. As a result, I reviewed literature that has been published on the experiences of black lesbians from South Africa, that from other continents, as well as those that have been conducted on lesbian and gay people. Thereafter, the chapter draw attention to the gaps that are present in the existing literature on

the experiences of black lesbian youth. As a result of the multifaceted nature of my research, the primary objective of my literature review is to divide each of these layers: context, race, gender, youth experiences, and sexuality.

I start off this chapter by defining four key concepts that were utilised throughout the research and during the review of the relevant literature. These are key terms: lesbian, homosexuality, heterosexuality, and homophobia. Afterward, I examine international, continental and locally. Lastly, I will discuss the important ideas that arose from the literature that was examined.

2.2 Defining the terms lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, and homophobic

The purpose of this study requires that these key concepts be defined, as doing so helps to clarify how these terms are used throughout the study. Therefore, it is essential that these concepts be defined.

2.2.1 Heterosexuality

Heterosexuality is a sexual orientation characterised by enduring emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to individuals of a different gender. This orientation involves forming intimate relationships with those whose gender differs from one's own. (Marchia & Sommer, 2019; Savi-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013. From the perspective of Greenberg (1988) and Røthing and Svendsen (2010) heterosexuality is a concept that is perceived to be referring to a condition that is more superior and more "natural" than homosexuality. In Jackson (2006) view, the term "heterosexuality" is defined as "a gender relationship, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources" (p. 107). Jackson's argument is that heterosexuality is not only "a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality," but it is also "instrumental in revealing the interconnections that exist amongst sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life" (Jackson, 2006, p. 110). Throughout history, societal and cultural norms have placed a significant emphasis on heterosexuality as presumed sexual orientation (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). This has led to the perception that heterosexuality is solely defined by sexual expression or that it is viewed as normative or expected orientation. According to the findings of this investigation, I consider the term to be one of the sexual orientations that any person can identify with. This research acknowledges and respects the wide range of sexual

orientations which include heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and other orientations. In the context of this study, every sexual orientation is considered to be valid and represents a variety of emotional, romantic, and sexual experiences for people who identify with that particular orientation. Based on this, the research does not only contribute to the development of a society that is more accepting and equitable, but it also encourages inclusiveness and understanding of all sexual orientations.

2.2.2 Homosexuality

Kitzinger (1987), Janssen (2021) and Lane (2021) define the term "homosexuality" as a social construct designed to identify, restrict, and regulate specific types of sexual behaviours. This definition contrasts with same-sex sexual relationships which are considered to be social problems at times. Prior to the early 1960s individuals who were homosexuals were seen as suffering from mental disorder (Tati, 2009). This would lead to treatment being provided for those individuals. However, it was not until the late 1960s that the term homosexuality began to gain popularity in the literary world, specifically in relation to sexual minorities. According to Herek et al. (1991) and Tirpude et al. (2023), the term is ambiguous and is generally assumed to refer to men (gay) which means that it does not have any meaning for women (lesbians). Furthermore, the term continues to highlight negative stereotypes because of the 'historical association that homosexuality has with pathology and criminal behaviour' (Ngcobo, 2021; Strommen, 2020). Additionally, Friedman (1990) draws attention to the fact that the terms gay and lesbian are the ones that are most used in everyday life as opposed to the term homosexuality. The term can also be used to refer to something that involves sexual feelings or attractions but does not involve sexual behaviour (Ngcobo, 2021; Lane, 2021; Strommen, 2020). Alternatively, it can refer to something that involves either emotional or sexual involvement, or both.

Stollznaw (2021) notes that the term has become less common and should be avoided. He warns that in the past, it had a medical connotation that pathologised same-sex attraction as a disease, defect, disorder, or mental illness which was considered to be harmful to society. Stollznaw further notes that the term has become less popular. As a result, the term has been utilised by religious and cultural organisations to discriminate against LGBT individuals, Amoah and Gyasi (2016) also advise against using it.

There is no denying the fact that certain religious and cultural organisations have throughout history made use of their beliefs to discriminate against and marginalise LGBT individuals.

Moreover, according to Balkin, Watts, and Ali (2014), various religious and cultural traditions have historically held different perspectives regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. There have been numerous interpretations and teachings within the traditions that were used to justify discrimination and prejudice against people who identify as LGBT individuals. Since then, the term “homosexual” has become part of the dominant sexuality discourse in present-day South Africa, including the human rights documents" (Jagasser, 2015; Sigamoney & Epprecht, 2013, p.88). Considering this, the term is only used in this investigation for the purpose of preserving the discourse that is present in literature without altering it in any way to conform to the objectives of the study.

2.2.3 Lesbian

Lesbian is a term that originated from the name of the island of Lesbos which is located in Greece. From the perspective of Koran and Guduld (2015) and Soares et al., (2024), the term "lesbian" is used to describe a female, woman, or girl who experiences sexual attraction to other females, women, or girls. Blank (2011) point out that the term "lesbian" is used to refer to individuals who identify as female and are attracted romantically, erotically or emotionally orientated perspective to other individuals who identify as female. To connect with other people who have had experiences and identities that are comparable to their own, lesbian women, for instance, engage in relationships with people of the same sexual orientation and identify with the lesbian community. The term is sometimes considered to be Eurocentric in nature, and it does not necessarily represent the identities of African Americans and other ethnic groups that are not belonging to the European-speaking continent (Matsick & Rubin, 2018). Individual people who engage in same- sex relationships from a variety of ethnic groups, including African Americans, embrace the use of the term "lesbian" as an identity. This is true even though the word is perceived to be Eurocentric. The term "lesbian" is used in this study because according to Blank (2011), in its modern language the term is a symbol of female homosexuality. It can be a term of identification, a reference to a particular sexual practice, or a sign of an affectionate, social, or political association.

Further, it is crucial to highlight that, even though this research is founded on fluidity and the myriads of ways in which sexual identity can be experienced, it makes use of the term "lesbian." The use of this term is not for the purpose of categorising, but rather for the purpose of making the research more understandable. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that language is constantly changing, and that different communities and individuals may

have varying preferences when it comes to terminology. Utilising terms that are not only inclusive but also respectful, that acknowledge the wide variety of identities and experiences that exist within the LGBT community is absolutely necessary. In this research endeavour it was of utmost significance to pay attention to and honour the self-identifications and preferences of the individuals who were being investigated. It was through this action that I was able to recognise that the individuals in question were females who are attracted to other females and identify as lesbians. It was essential to establish a setting that was conducive to all parties involved that respected their identities and gave participants the opportunity to express their own sexual orientation in a manner that was comfortable for them.

Similarly, the adoption of this term in the context of this research makes it possible for the participants to feel at ease regarding their identities, their strengths and weaknesses (Matebeni, 2011). The participants were able to provide themselves with the autonomy to self-identify based on their own understanding and feelings by using the term "lesbian" to describe their own experiences and attractions. Furthermore, the utilisation of this term helps in connecting participants accounts with those of other learners who are like them, who are unable to break their silences and share their stories, which might enable them to live their lives in an open and honest manner.

2.2.4 Homophobia

The term "homophobia" is widely used, but there is no universally accepted definition of what exactly constitutes homophobia (Regan (2023). Allen (2019) and Regan (2023) state that the term has been regarded as ambiguous and conveys a variety of semantic connotations. According to Herek (2004), the term "homophobia" was initially coined by American psychologists in the 1960s and early 1970s to describe the fear that heterosexual people have that other people might perceive them to be individuals who are homosexuals. As stated by Weinberg (1972), Williamson (2000), and Junior (2012), homophobia can be seen in the form of negative and fearful actions, negative attitudes towards homosexual individuals, or the display of negative attitudes regarding homosexuality. According to Regan, (2023) and Lyonga (2021) and (2014), homophobia continue to be used exclusively when referring to men thereby excluding lesbians from the definition of the term. In a similar vein, Kimmel (2003) suggests that the term "homophobia" refers to a perceived sense of masculinity that idealises the stereotypical gender roles that are prevalent in society.

Recently, homophobia has been used as a chosen signifier for a wide range of negative attitudes directed towards homosexual people (Giametta & Havkin, 2021; Lyonga, 2021; Bender, 2016). This represents a significant shift from the past. As Herek. (1990) point out, homophobia is connected to acts of violence and its primary mode of operation is to "...render homosexuality invisible and when this fails, by trivialising, repressing, or stigmatising it" (p. 316). Homophobia is a form of prejudice that is deeply rooted in both society and the state where lesbian people, for example, are viewed as a threat to public order and a cultural imposition taken from unethical Western societies (Ungar, 2000). Richmond and McKenna (1998) describe homophobia as being based on the personal, social and cultural beliefs of heterosexual individuals towards homosexual people. In addition, Shannon and Smith (2019) and Ronner (2005) note that homophobic behaviours can be readily apparent, including but not limited to harassment, violence, verbal abuse, and even corrective rape. The concept of homophobia has been widely utilised and developed in the field of research; however, it has also been the subject of debate on several different fronts, including the problem of its inconsistency and the manner in which it is interpreted by a great number of academics. On the other hand, there are academics who consider the term to be emancipatory, while others criticise it for "being a double-edged sword" because it portrays negative attitudes towards homosexuality as a clinical illness, and in doing so, it portrays homophobes as victims rather than victimisers (Lyonga, 2021, p.1666).

It is important to note that queer theoretical framework and intersectional theory were integrated in this study so that these theories could help in the interpretation of the reviewed literature (Gambino, 2020). This led to a more comprehensive understanding of literature and social phenomena (Chan & Howard, 2018). First, queer theory's focus on deconstructing norms complements intersectionality's emphasis on the interconnectedness of social identities and power structures. This combination allowed for a deeper analysis of how identities such as race, gender, and sexuality intersect and influence each other, providing a richer context for interpreting texts and social interactions (Gambino, 2020; Chan & Howard, 2018; Rahman, 2010). Applying these frameworks revealed hidden gender relations and challenged heteronormative perspectives (Thomsen & Finley, 2019). Using this method not only enriched the interpretation of literature but also highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives in understanding historical and cultural contexts (Gambino, 2020; Thomsen & Finley, 2019; Chan & Howard, 2018; Rahman, 2010).

2.3 Experiences of LGBT people: an international overview

There is a significant amount of variation in the experiences of LGBT people all over the world, which is largely attributable to the country, culture, laws, and attitudes of society in which they reside. While there have been some advancements made in certain regions of the world regarding the recognition and protection of the rights of LGBT people, many individuals continue to face a variety of obstacles and discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported that more than seventy countries have passed laws that criminalise homosexuality. These laws put millions of people at risk of being arrested, imprisoned, and even executed in some instances (Ferguson, 2022; Arimoro, 2021; Leckey, 2020; UNHCR, 2010; Wright & Smith, 2013). People who identify as LGBT have been subjected

to violence in most extreme cases, including hate crimes and targeted attacks. Additionally, some individuals have been subjected to social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion at the hands of their families and neighbours. The statement made by the United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) (UNHRC) that "All human beings, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, are entitled to enjoy the protection of international human rights law..." (p. 4) is not taken into consideration in this situation. Studies have shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people are more likely to be victims of violence because of their sexual orientation (Ngcobo, 2021; Francis et al., 2019, 2017). In contrast to heterosexual people, these individuals are subjected to violence against them because of their sexual orientation (Hurst, 2023; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Makhaye, 2019).

While anti-discrimination laws have been approved in many of these countries, in some Western countries LGBT people continue to face persistent discrimination and human rights violation based on their sexual orientation, disregarding the call of the United Nations Human Rights Constitution (Ngcobo, 2021; MacArthur, 2015) about the protection of the rights of all people. According to Harrison and Michelson (2017) and Kasa (2024), attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people (LGBT) and their acceptance have undergone significant changes over the course of the past few years in the United States of America (Lyonga, 2021; Marnell et al., 2021). These changes include increased recognition of the rights and dignity of LGBT people, advancements in legal protections and growing societal acceptance. Nevertheless, this advancement is not a linear process and there has also been a pushback from some conservative and right-wing organisations and individuals who are opposed to the rights of LGBT people (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019). It should come as no surprise that the backlash has manifested itself in a variety of ways, including the promotion of discriminatory policies based on religious or moral beliefs, the challenge to anti-discrimination laws and the efforts to roll back legal protections (Hurst, 2023; Ngcobo, 2021).

In addition, the literature draws attention to the rise in the number of homophobic assaults and acts of violence committed against lesbian young people. As an illustration, Robison (2010) conducted a study on black lesbian youth in Detroit and the findings revealed that black lesbian youth have managed to persevere through a great deal of adversity and difficulty throughout their lives. Because of their sexual orientation, they were subjected to different forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and abandonment by their families. The investigation revealed that they were subjected to social exclusion, as well as being judged

and assaulted by individuals whom they knew very well. According to Robinson (2010),

children and adolescents who identify as LGBT were subjected to discrimination and stigma, which had a detrimental effect on their lives.

From a similar perspective, Jamaica has been regarded as one of the most homophobic countries in the world (Chunnu, 2020; Smith, 2018; Booth, 2018). It is a place where young people who identify as LGBT have been subjected to hostility and tragic disparities which sometimes result in immediate arrest or charge (Smith, 2018). The strong influence of conservative religious beliefs in Jamaica, particularly with regard to the interpretations of Christianity is one of the factors that contributes to the country's homophobic attitudes. This is one of the reasons why Jamaicans have negative attitudes towards homosexuality. It is important to note that traditional gender roles and expectations play a part in the formation of societal attitudes towards homosexuality (Chunnu, 2020; Smith, 2018; Booth, 2018).

Furthermore, countries such as Britain and Canada have too taken steps towards the equality of LGBT people (Nash & Browne, 2021; Ghosh, 2020; Browne & Nash, 2014; Zivi, 2014). However, when it comes to Russia, LGBT people are not accepted by society, despite the fact that same-sex relationships are legal (Ghosh, 2020; Beyrer, 2014). According to Buyantueva (2018), homophobia in this country is characterised by the suppression of the rights of LGBT individuals. This suppression is constructed and founded on a political rationale that portrays individuals who find themselves in relationships with people of the same sexual orientation as adversaries of the nation. The negative public view of LGBT people in Russia has had an impact on the development and acceptance of their rights. This is because there has been an increase in anti-LGBT sentiments and discriminatory attitudes in recent years. In this particular circumstance, there are a number of factors that contribute to it. According to Agadjanian (2017) and Stoeckl (2016), Russia has a social and political climate that is conservative. This climate is influenced by traditional values and the dominant role that the Russian Orthodox Church plays with the Russian people. The rejection of same-sex relationships towards LGBT people has been influenced politically and socially (Nash & Browne, 2021; Ghosh, 2020; Buyantueva, 2018). This rejection is a result of "traditional values" and the expansion of the Orthodox Church.

In contrast to the developed countries of the West, the authorities in Russia are a part of the community that harasses and intimidates individuals who come out in support of LGBT rights. For example, in a demonstration that was held in Samara after 2014 on the International Day of Solidarity with LGBT youth, it was observed that the police and the authorities were the ones who pursued the participants who were involved in the demonstration and they cited a

variety of reasons for their actions (Mackinnon, 2016). By using laws to justify, target, and persecute LGBT people, the Russian government effectively restricted and suppressed the rights of persons who identify as LGBT. This is clearly confirmed by the action taken by the police which demonstrated how the Russian government implemented legislation.

Furthermore, the traditional, cultural, and religious norms in Russia have increased the vulnerability of minority groups, particularly LGBT people, whose rights are consistently violated. Kondakov (2021) and Buyantueva (2018) mention that these values are utilised by authorities in order to discriminate against and disregard LGBT individuals. Furthermore, these values are applied to brutality as a form of punishment that excludes individuals from participation in Russian society. Moreover, the government openly endorses such brutality that is carried out. As a result of bureaucratic challenges such as changes in the law, public intolerance, and violence, LGBT people in Russia find themselves in environments that are hostile and repressive, according to the literature (Kondakov, 2021; Buyantueva, 2018). Due to the way in which LGBT people are treated in Russia, there have been significant barriers placed in the way of the realisation of their sexuality and the rights that they are entitled to. For this reason, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people have continued to be subjected to widespread discrimination, violence, and marginalisation. Hate crimes committed against LGBT people regularly go unpunished and are underreported.

Even though there is evidence that progress has been made in many countries to advance the rights and well-being of LGBT people worldwide, there are also significant challenges and inequalities that need to be addressed with regard to the provision of support, the combating of homophobia and the elimination of discrimination against LGBT people's sexuality. Literature reveals that the experiences of LGBT people around the world are vastly different from one another and this necessitates additional interventions from relevant structures in order to guarantee that all LGBT individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, are able to live a life free from prejudice, violence, and discrimination.

2.4 Experiences of LGBT people: an African overview

Homosexuality is still criminalised, stigmatised, and believed to be un-African as well as a Western deviance and intrusion in most African countries, despite some

countries having made strides towards shifting away from the stringent beliefs about homosexuality and begun to address the outdated laws directed against LGBT people (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021)). Since the African continent is not a unified entity, the prevalence of LGBT exclusion in African countries varies from country to country due to the fact that there are a variety of cultural, social, religious, and legal factors (Gloppen & Rakner, 2020; Tabengwa & Waites, 2020; Amusan et al., 2019; Mwakasungula, 2013; Cheney, 2012). Mkhize and Maharaj (2021) Nyanzi (2013) and Malamba (2012) all point to the fact that cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs are frequently the driving force behind the negative attitude towards homosexuality that exists in many African societies (Gloppen & Rakner, 2020; Tabengwa & Waites, 2020). Other than that, there is a significant amount of diversity within these African countries, with many countries having different laws that criminalise relationships between people of the same gender. There are some of the laws that are remnants of legislation that was passed during the colonial period. In some of these African nations, engaging in relationships with people of the same gender can result in severe punishments, such as imprisonment or even the death penalty. In the countries in question, homosexuality is considered to be immoral, unnatural, or a threat to the norms and values that are held by society.

Despite the hostility that exists in today's society, there is a significant amount of evidence that same-sex relationships have been accepted for a long time (Obamwonyi, 2016). For instance, prior to the colonisation of Zimbabwe, the Khoisan people left behind rock paintings that demonstrated the existence of homosexuality. Cave paintings in Guruve, Zimbabwe, include examples of both erotic and non-erotic depictions of same-sex relationships (Obamwonyi, 2016). Harare was also the location where images of two men engaging in anal sex and having intimate encounters were discovered (Epredcht, 2013).

According to Nyanzi (2013), the literature demonstrates that LGBT people in Uganda have been subjected to exceptionally high levels of violence, harassment, and persecution. As a consequence of this, the nation has garnered attention from around the world due to the harsh stance it takes on homosexuality and the way it treats people who identify as LGBT (Chase, 2022; Browne, 2019; Ní Mhaoileoin, 2019). According to the United Nations Human Rights (2011), the Anti-Homosexuality Act was enacted in 2014 by the president of Uganda instituted severe punishments for individuals who participated in activities that were of the same sexual orientation as well as those who promoted homosexuality. Despite that this law was eventually overturned by the Constitutional Court on procedural grounds, the ways in which it affected the

lives of LGBT people continued to have a negative impact. In spite of this, the repeal of the law that was passed in 2014 did not

help the LGBTQ people in Uganda. The Ugandan legislature and the President recently enacted one of the most severe anti-gay laws, which is known as the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023. This law makes it a criminal offence to identify as a member of the LGBTQ community and also imposes the death penalty and life imprisonment on anyone who is found guilty of harbouring homosexuality (CNN News 18, 2023). A significant number of individuals, and the Human Rights Commission perceive the passing of this law a continuation of the violation of LGBTQ people in Uganda.

Cameroon is yet another African nation that has demonstrated intolerance towards individuals who are involved in relationships with people of the same gender. According to the findings of a study that was conducted by Kalamar et al. (2011) with men who have sex with other men, Cameroonians have demonstrated that they believe homosexuality to be something that originated in Western countries and that they consider it to be "un-Cameroon" for a man to engage in activities of this nature (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021, p. 57). In November 2011, a court in Cameroon handed down a sentence of five years in prison to three men who were been found guilty of homosexuality. This was a direct consequence of the discrimination that was directed towards homosexual people.

Ghana, like other African countries celebrated democracy that granted rights to all individuals. However, President John Mills also passed laws and policies in which he requested the imposition of more severe and stringent punishments for homosexual acts and for individuals who permitted homosexuality. According to Nyanzi (2013), his homophobic statements were widely disseminated throughout the nation. He also stated that homosexuality was in opposition to the values of the nation and that he would not tolerate or legalise the practice of homosexuality. Based on the literature review, it has been determined that LGBT people who reside in this continent continue to be subjected to extremely high levels of discrimination and stigmatisation, and marginalisation within their communities. Their day-to-day social lives are made more difficult by the fact that they are subjected to suppression, which means that LGBT people are constantly required to negotiate their identities, fight against oppression and confront stereotypes (Marnell et al., 2021).

Another event that made headlines in the media in 2009 was the decision to hand down a fourteen-year sentence to a gay couple from Malawi. The reason for this decision was that the couple's relationship was deemed to involve lustful sexual behaviour (Nyanzi, 2013). The fact that homosexuality is one of the most contentious issues in Malawi was brought to light by this

incident. Despite that the United Nations and other human rights organisations declared that all laws and policies that discriminate against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation and considered to be violations of human rights should be decriminalised, this is the situation that has arisen. The sentence was handed down to the couple, this demonstrated that international and many African countries around the world, including Malawi, continue to uphold laws that are discriminatory towards relationships between people of the same gender (Malamba, 2012). In response to the arrest, government officials, religious leaders and traditional leaders issued additional condemnations of same- sex relationships. They declared that homosexuality was contrary to both the culture of Malawi and the will of God (Malamba, 2012).

One thing that LGBT communities on a national, continental, and international scale have in common is that they are subjected to an insult to their dignity as a consequence of their membership in a marginalised group. In addition to this, is the denial of the complete moral citizenship of LGBT people within the society. This is because LGBT people identify differently, which in turn is detrimental to their dignity and sense of self-worth. (Giannou & Ioakimidis, 2020; Yamashita et al., 2017; Lyonga, 2014; Grey. 2013;) Literature and history on the experience of LGBT people have shown that the scarring and their challenges do not come from poverty or powerlessness, but rather from their invisibility. This has been proved by the fact that the scarring and challenges are not caused by poverty or powerlessness.

The body of literature examined sheds light on a complicated connection between sexual identities, homophobia, and sexual violence, particularly for individuals who identify as LGBT (Giannou & Ioakimidis, 2020; Yamashita, Gomez, & Dombroski, 2017; Lyonga, 2014; Grey. 2013). According to the literature, homophobia remains one of the most contentious issues in the world. Not only Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Malawi, Uganda, and Ghana are among the African nations that are highly homophobic and hold the belief that homosexuality is a moral issue, but a number of other African nations are also highly homophobic. As a result of leaders and government officials who fuel homophobia, hostile environments that promote acts of violence against people suspected of being members of the LGBT community have been created and encouraged (Giannou & Ioakimidis, 2020). As a result, LGBT people are at risk of targeted violence, discrimination, physical attacks, and even murder. For the purpose of promoting human rights, protecting vulnerable communities, and challenging the structural and systemic discrimination and violence that LGBT people face in African countries, I argue that the situation for LGBT people in African countries highlights the urgent need for advocacy, legal

reforms, and international support.

2.5 How colonialism reshaped sexuality in Africa

According to Kaoma (2016), the majority of Africans hold the belief that homosexuality is not authentically African, despite the fact that there is evidence that same-sex relationships existed in the African continent through history. Not only that, but many African societies have had nuanced and complex views of sexuality that encompassed aspects of spirituality, procreation, gender roles, and social norms (Helle-Valle, 2004). This is because of the diverse traditions that have been passed down through the generations. Sexuality in the context of Africa was understood to be a complicated and diverse topic with perspectives varying greatly across the various regions, ethnic groups and religions (Helle-Valle, 2004). This was because the continent is vast and upholds a variety of cultures, traditions, and belief systems. To add insult to injury, sexuality was frequently regarded as a natural and essential component of life and the way it was expressed was influenced by cultural practices, rites of passage, and the values of the community.

Certain sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions that deviate from traditional norms were marginalised and stigmatised because of the European powers' exertion of control over African countries and the imposition of Western values and cultural norms. This led to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of these individuals. Within the framework of this system, women were also excluded from the labour market. Furthermore, Helle-Valle (2004) and Kaoma (2016) highlight the ways in which colonisation, the influence of Western cultural norms and the introduction of the religious right have had significant impacts on the perspectives that Africans have.

Also, same-sex desire and gender non-normativity have been around for a long time all over the African continent (Epprecht, 2004; Reygan, 2016). However, arguments based on religion and culture influence have been used on a regular basis to deny the rights of sexual and gender minorities. One example of this is the ongoing argument that homosexuality is not Christian and is not African (Bhana et al., 2007). As an illustration, Lamb (1982) asserts that homosexuality was not even a concept in Africa and argues that the continent is exclusively heterosexual. According to Nkosi and Masson (2017), there have been disagreements in Africa regarding the acceptance of homosexuality within the context of the Christian religion. Also, religion and culture are important socialising factors that seem to explain why homosexuality is rejected, despite the majority of religious teachings being based on the idea that people ought to respect one another. In fact, the majority of religions have a tendency to label

homosexuality as unnatural or impure (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; McGee, 2016). Blevins and Irungu (2017) state that throughout history, religious teachings have incorporated specific moral frameworks into the discussion of sexuality, which has resulted in the condemnation of homosexuality. Many churches in Africa, particularly those that are influenced by conservative interpretations of religious texts consider homosexuality to be in conflict with their religious teachings and cultural values. This is despite the fact that perspectives on homosexuality vary within religious communities across African countries. As a consequence of this, these establishments endorse the criminalisation and stigmatisation of relationships between people of the same-sex as well as non-heterosexual expressions of personal sexuality. Furthermore, according to Human Rights Monitor (2001), patriarchal attitudes that were founded on Christianity served to strengthen the traditional customs that assisted men in exercising control over the sexuality of women. By way of illustration, Kambarami (2006) investigated the relationship between femininity, sexuality and culture among Shona people in Zimbabwe. The findings of this investigation revealed patriarchal practices that Shona men engaged in with the intention of controlling the sexuality of women. It is still the case that many of the laws and attitudes that were established during this time period continue to play a significant role in the formation of negative attitudes towards sexuality (Kambarami, 2006).

One more thing to take into consideration is the group of people who converted to Christianity and were executed in Uganda in the late 19th century for refusing to renounce their faith. These individuals are known as the Ugandan Martyrs. According to Boamah (2019), this is a problem that disproves the notion that homosexuality was either unknown or non-existent in African societies prior to the introduction of Western influences. For the most part, their refusal to renounce Christianity was the driving force behind their martyrdom and the circumstances surrounding their deaths were primarily religious in nature. It would appear that the sexual activities of the King of Uganda were a primary contributor to the persecution of these individuals. Within the historical context of Uganda and the Christian missionary activity that took place within the country, the story of the Ugandan Martyrs is significant.

Additionally, churches in Zimbabwe condemned homosexuality and referred to it as "unAfrican." (van Heerden, 2019). They considered it to be an example of Western cultural influence and deemed it to be an unacceptable practice. Labelling homosexuality as "unAfrican" is a complicated issue that needs to be addressed. It reflects the intersection of cultural, religious, and societal factors

that shape perceptions of sexuality and gender identity within these African societies (Schnabel et al., 2022; Khumalo et al., 2020). Specifically, it reflects the intersection of these concepts. Even though there are no clear regulations and rules in place within churches regarding homosexuality, and even though some churches do not condemn homosexuality, it is essential to acknowledge that there are a variety of understandings and experiences of homosexuality that existed across the African continent. Relationships between people of the same gender have been documented in a variety of historical, cultural, and indigenous contextual settings in Africa.

In South Africa, Christianity was imposed by the government of apartheid (Anderson, 2020; Seekings, 2020; Makofane, 2019). This was accomplished by introducing the specific system as a form of Christian doctrine. The Bible was used to implement and legitimise the apartheid ideology, which ultimately led to many laws in South Africa favouring Christianity (Seekings, 2020; Makofane, 2019; Farisani, 2014). As is the case in other African nations, the complexities of the issue of homosexuality within the context of religious discourse in South Africa are multifaceted. Religion, cultural values, personal interpretations, and the recognition of human rights and equality all need to be brought into harmony with one another in order to achieve this delicate balance. Many people in South Africa do not believe that it is possible to negotiate or defy South African culture (DePalma & Francis, 2014). This sentiment stems from the common perception that South African culture is a social institution that cannot be questioned (Kelly, 2019; Musavengane & Leonard, 2019; van Der Wath, 2019). The majority of South Africans adhere to conservative values and uphold religious and cultural moral beliefs that are consistent with certain religious and cultural associations that, on occasion, do not endorse homosexuality. According to certain interpretations of religious texts, certain religious teachings hold the belief that homosexuality is a sinful and immoral sexual orientation (Wilkins et al., 2022; Fahs & Swank, 2021). The origin of these beliefs is frequently found in conservative religious perspectives, which hold that heterosexual relationships are the only form of intimate partnership that is considered acceptable (Zaharin, 2022; Hammack et al., 2019). These kinds of perspectives are a significant factor in the marginalisation, discrimination, and stigmatisation of LGBT people within religious communities and in society as a whole. As a consequence of this, any issues that refer to sexuality and homophobia continue to depend on moral argument with a significant number of people who are members of the church (Zaharin, 2022; Ngcobo, 2021). As a consequence of this, homophobia has persisted and is still being actively propagated in religious discourses and religious settings in South Africa, regardless of the legal

construction of homosexuality (Ngcobo, 2021).

South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa that has constitutional protections for LGBT rights, making it a standout among African nations (Francis & McEwen, 2024; Heller, 2019) . The South African Constitution, which was

ratified in 1996, made it clear that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was prohibited. The establishment of this legal framework served as a foundation for the advancement of LGBT rights and had an impact on the attitudes of society towards homosexuality (Lyonga, 2021; Amusan, 2019; Knauer, 2019). On the other hand, despite the developments in the law, members of the LGBT community continue to face harassment and victimisation on a daily basis in certain areas of South Africa. The traditional cultures of Africa, the traditional gender roles, the family structures, and the cultural practices all had an impact on the attitudes of society towards homosexuality (Amusan et al., 2019; Knauer, 2019). Due to the prevalence of these cultural norms and beliefs, heterosexual relationships, marriage and procreation are frequently given precedence over homosexuality (Amusan, et al., 2019). When it comes down to it, people who identify as LGBT have a difficult time reconciling their sexual orientation with the expectations that are still prevalent in traditional cultures. For instance, in 2006, Jacob Zuma, the former President of South Africa made a statement that was directed against LGBT people. In this statement, he declared that same-sex marriage was ungodly, which revealed the intolerance he has as a statesman towards homosexual people (Bertolt, 2019;). Jacob Zuma was quoted as saying that he believed that same-sex marriage was a shame to the nation and to God. He further stated that when he was growing up, no gay person would have stood in front of him because he would have knocked them out (Bertolt, 2019; Ngcobo, 2021). Zuma's views on sexuality were conservative and revealed that he was opposed to relationships between people of the same-sex.

The literature reviewed on the topics of culture and religious understanding of sexuality in South Africa acknowledges highlights that certain religious and cultural beliefs contribute to environments that is hostile and unwelcoming to LGBT people. Certain interpretations of religious texts, religious teachings in South Africa and other parts of the world consider homosexuality as a source of sin or a violation of morality. Both within religious communities and in society, there seemed to be beliefs contribute to the negative attitudes and discrimination that are directed towards LGBT people. It appeared that certain cultural norms and traditions in South Africa gave traditional gender roles, heteronormativity and procreation a higher priority than other aspects of society. There is evidence in the literature that suggests that these cultural values have played a significant role in the difficulties that

LGBT people have faced in terms of acceptance and understanding. It is evident that cultural beliefs when combined with prejudices by the society result in hostility and marginalisation which has negative impact on the well-being of LGBT individuals.

2.6 Experiences of LGBT people: A South African perspective

Although heterosexuality was seen as dominant and considered to be the norm in precolonial Africa, culture and tradition in South Africa tolerated a variety of sexualities and gender relations among the people prior to the colonialisation period (Epprecht, 2021; Bertolt, 2019; Gomes da Costa Santos & Waites, 2019). This was the case even though heterosexuality was considered to be the norm. Literature reveals that in the 1950s same-sex marriages were common in the mines and one of the married couples was called “boy wife”, whereby men engaged in relationships with other men. These men would then perform all the wifely duties for them, though the couples generally did not engage in anal sex; instead, these couples placed each other’s genitals between the thighs (Mamba, 2020; Adam, 2019).

The challenges and realities that were brought about by colonialism had a significant impact on LGBT people. According to Tallie (2019), the period in which colonial rule was in effect in South Africa was the time when the history and the rules governing sexuality were altered. To further enforce racial segregation, European colonisers controlled and regulated any kind of non-heterosexual relationship that occurred during this time period (Mamba, 2020). When the Nationalist Party came to power in 1945, they enacted a system of legislation that supported segregationist policies and white supremacy against black South Africans (Mamba, 2020). This system of legislation mandated that non-white South Africans were required to live in separate areas and use separate public facilities from white people for a period of more than four decades (Clark & Worger, 2013). For example, the Group Areas Act of 1950, the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1952 and the Immorality Act of 1950 were all passed by the Nationalist Party, which was in power in South Africa during the apartheid period (Ngcobo, 2021; Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi, 2015; Clark & Worger, 2013). These laws were all designed to punish black South Africans. According to Spira et al., (2015), the Immorality Act of 1957 “made it illegal to engage in homosexuality as well as to have relationships with people of different races” (p. 8). This

legislation was utilised by the Nationalist Party government in order to justify the arrests, harassment, and discrimination that were committed against LGBT individuals. In South Africa, homosexuality became highly stigmatised which led to the existence of homophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices that became widespread (Lyonga, 2021; Gomes da Costa Santos & Waites, 2022; Falkof, 2019). These attitudes and practices were maintained by societal norms, religious beliefs, and laws that criminalised relationships between people of the same-sex (Lyonga, 2021; Gomes da Costa Santos & Waites, 2022).

The first interim democratic constitution of South Africa was ratified in 1993. The constitution's primary objective was to overturn and replace many unjust laws that had been enacted in order to support the apartheid government system. (Malatja, 2022) The purpose of this was to address issues that were associated with the harsh and discriminatory legal system that existed during the apartheid era. In 1996, the new constitution of South Africa was approved, and all the country's citizens made the transition from an oppressive apartheid system to a democratic nation (Christiansen, 2016). The fact that South Africa was the first nation in the world to acknowledge the rights of individuals and to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation was a source of admiration for the country. Even though South African laws acknowledged full citizenship of individuals regardless of their sexual orientation, there was an increase in the number of violent crimes committed against LGBT people (Ojilere, 2024; Gaitho, 2021; Nyeck et al., 2019), (as will be discussed further on in this chapter). According to Potgieter and Reygan (2012), the argument is that their right to choose their sexuality are still not fully recognised by their fellow citizens. It is clear that this is the case because, more than thirty years after same-sex sexuality was decriminalised, certain South African leaders, such as the late King Zwelithini Zulu and the former president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, have been vocal about their hatred towards people who are not heterosexual. They openly expressed homophobic insults that are harmful to the lives of those individuals who engage in same-sex relationships (Mamba, 2020).

As this troubling situation persists in democratic South Africa and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals continue to face discrimination and marginalisation in every aspect of their lives. They continue to be vulnerable and face challenges, as evidenced by the literature that has been reviewed which makes it clear that their fellow South Africans do not acknowledge them as having the right to full citizenship. Both Potgieter and Reygan (2012) point out that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people continue to be marginalised as a group, despite the existence of legal instruments that are

intended to grant them full citizenship rights. As a result of the two prominent Zulu leaders' homophobic remarks and slurs, it is clear that their views and beliefs were spread among the people they lead in society, which resulted in hatred directed towards LGBT individuals. Misconstructions and misunderstandings of sexuality have led to the development of negative connotations associated with non-heterosexuality, which in turn has led to the occurrence of hate crimes and the exclusion of LGBT people from society ((Ngcobo, 2021; Mamba, 2020).

2.7 Gender, race and sexuality in South Africa: the historical context

The history of colonisation by European powers in South Africa had a significant impact on the marginalisation of a variety of identities in South Africa (Majee & Ress, 2020; Dladla, 2020; Strauss, 2019). Similarly, apartheid, a system of state-enforced racial segregation and discrimination implemented by the National Party government in 1948, institutionalised marginalisation and oppression of non-white communities, such as Black Africans, Coloureds, and Indians, through the enforcement of discriminatory laws and political policies (Majee & Ress, 2020; Dladla, 2020). During this period, there was a continuous fight for equality and justice for people of African descent in general, women and LGBT populations. For a variety of reasons, including but not limited to race, gender, social class, sexual orientation and others were subjected to various forms of discrimination and marginalisation (Madrigal-Borloz, 2021; Camminga, 2019; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019).

The status of women and girls in South Africa and the way they live their lives have been relegated to subordinate positions throughout the course of the country's history (Diko, 2023; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022; Parpart, 2019). In this country, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid has a significant impact on the status of women and girls. According to Sideris (1998), the patriarchal nature of society contributed to several difficulties and inequalities that were experienced by women, regardless of their race. During this period, women were subjected to laws and policies that were oppressive, such as restrictions on land ownership, access to education, and employment opportunities (Diko, 2023; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022). Within the framework of the patriarchal system, power and authority were primarily held by men and women, regardless of their race were frequently relegated to subordinate roles and given fewer opportunities (Diko, 2023; Dery, 2022; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022)). There were obstacles that prevented them from gaining access to leadership roles, particularly in fields that were dominated by men, such as politics, business, and institutional employment (Diko, 2023). In

Salo (2007) view, this has resulted in the perpetuation of gender inequalities and the restriction of women's influence over policies and resources (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019). The reviewed literature evidenced that patriarchal norms and

power imbalances within South African gender politics contributed to a culture of violence against women, which negatively impacted their safety, well-being and ability to fully participate in societal issues.

The policies of apartheid further exacerbated gender inequalities where black women faced intersecting forms of oppression based on their race, gender, and class (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023; Diko, 2023; Idahosa & Mkhize, 2021; George, 2020; Britton, 2006; Moffett, 2006; McEwan, 2003). As a result, these policies contributed to more severe gender inequality. Beetar (2017) and Diko (2023) mention that black women held the lowest position in this social hierarchy compared to other white women. They had to contend with institutional racism, which hampered their ability to advance socially, economically, and politically. According to Beetar (2017), Hoad (2005) and Van Zyl (2009), women continued to be the most disadvantaged and were maintained in positions of vulnerability throughout their existence. It appears that white supremacy, racial divide and patriarchy were strong determinants for the marginalisation and high exposed of black women to violence as a result of colonialism and apartheid, as well as why they were excluded from dominant accounts of history. In Beetar (2017) and Moffett (2006) view, gender hierarchy is still in

place today, and women's sexualities are regulated using sexual violence and marginalisation. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms are imposed on black women which restrict their agency and further perpetuates gender inequality (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2023; Diko, 2023; Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019). Even though they are subjected to discrimination and violence on the basis of their gender, they still bear the responsibility of providing care for their families, frequently with limited resources and support (Diko, 2023).

In addition, literature sheds light on the intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation that black lesbians experience on account of their race, gender, and sexual orientation (Matabeni, 2013). Their marginalisation within society has been compounded by the fact that they are subjected to racism, sexism and homophobia (Sparrow, 2019). The argument put forth by Stromquist (2014) is that patriarchy which is prevalent throughout South Africa and among all ethnic groups has resulted in black women being the ones who are subjected to a triple form of oppression. This includes being oppressed because of their gender, race and social class. In South Africa, there is still a perception that lesbian women are citizens of a lower social class (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020; Govender et al., 2019; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Beetar, 2017). Not only do lesbian black women from poor neighbourhoods who live in poverty find themselves in dangerous spaces, but they also become more vulnerable to sexual violence, discrimination, and homophobic attacks than lesbians who have access to resources, security, and mobility (Marnell et al., 2021; Ngidi, 2020; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Mkhize et al., 2012). Consequently, lesbian black women find themselves in the position of having to negotiate their identities as a consequence of the systematic and violent patriarchy that had shaped the lives of South African women within their marginalised communities (Marnell et al., 2021; Ngidi, 2020; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Goba, 2018).

Even though the Constitution of South Africa does not discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation and protects the rights of all of its citizens, the experiences of LGBT people suggest that they are continually stigmatised and face discrimination and death because of their sexual orientation that differs from the social norms that are generally accepted (Maake, 2023; Diko, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Duby et al., 2018; Judge & Nel, 2008).

One instance that illustrates the ways in which lesbian black women are subjected to social exclusion and violence as a result of their sexual orientation is the incident that took place in Cape Town in June of 2012. According to News24 (2012), Phumeza Nkolozi, who openly identified as a lesbian was brutally murdered by a gunman wearing a balaclava in front of her mother and her niece, who was six years old. The incident took place in Mau, which is located in Nyanga. The perpetrators of the crime fled into the darkness of the night, leaving the young woman to die because of the three bullet wounds she sustained. The people who murdered her were never discovered and no suspect was ever apprehended in connection with her murder. Another heinous incident took place in Cape Town, at Driftsands Khayelitsha, in December of 2016. A group of eleven men victimised and dragged away a gender activist named Noluvo Swelindavo, who was 22 years old and identified as a lesbian. Her lifeless body was found near the N2 highway the next day with a gunshot wound (News24, 2016).

Additionally, in May of 2017, two girlfriends, Bongeka Phungula, who was 28 years old and Popi Qwabe, who was 24 years old, both of whom had moved to Soweto from KwaZulu-Natal, went missing. A few days after they had been reported missing, their bodies were discovered in a different location. Every one of these women had been sexually assaulted prior to their deaths. Despite that a suspect was taken into custody, the National Prosecution Authority (NPA) stated that evidence surrounding the murders of the victims was insufficient to establish a connection between the suspect and the murders.

A glimpse into the daily lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in South Africa can be seen in these few incidents. This picture reveal that LGBT people continue to be subjected to high levels of homophobic violence, harassment, and victimisation a result of their sexual orientation. According to Craig, et al., (2014) these individuals live in social environments with sexuality that is difficult to navigate. Taking into consideration the occurrences that have been mentioned, it is evident that LGBT people frequently face prejudice, discrimination and rejection from their communities because hate crimes and acts of violence continue to be tragically common as their experiences.

2.8 LGBT youth and schooling: silencing and policing of sexuality

There is evidence in the literature that homophobia has a significant influence on the experiences of LGBT people all over the world, particularly the experiences of lesbian youth

(Luvo, 2021; Ngidi et al., 2020; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). According to Luvo, (2021), Ngidi et al. (2020) and McDermott et al. (2008), homophobia in certain circumstances might increase the rates of self-destructive behaviours and suicidal thoughts in LGBT youth. In the research carried by McDermott et al. (2008) in the United Kingdom investigating the relationships between sexual identities and self-destructive behaviours in young people who identify as LGBT. The findings highlighted that there were high rates of suicide and alcohol abuse among the young people who identified as LGBT. According to McDermott et al. (2008), discriminatory environments produced an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, which had negative impact on the safety of the young people within their communities and made it exceedingly challenging for them to navigate their sexual identities. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts indicated that the fear of rejection, isolation and exclusion caused by societal attitudes had a significant impact on the extent to which LGBT young people can freely enjoy their sexuality.

Second, there is evidence in the literature that suggests that the sexuality of LGBT youth is silenced and policed within the context of the school (Epps et al., 2023; McBride, 2021; Formby & Donovan, 2020; Francis et al., 2019). Within these context, the sexual identities of LGBT young people are repressed, controlled, and restricted (Okanlawon, 2021; Francis et al., 2019). It appeared that societal norms were the ones to determine what is considered acceptable and "normal" in terms of sexuality within educational institutions. The mentality that prevailed within the school environments gave the impression that heterosexuality is the default and the only sexual orientation that is expected of their students (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Block, 2019). This viewpoint lends credence to the notion that any deviation from the norms of heterosexuality may be considered abnormal or deviant (Okanlawon, 2021).

2.9 LGBT youth and schooling worldwide

Schools have continued to be the most important socialising agents (King, 2023; Ruck et al., 2021; Byrd & Ahn, 2020; Lawler, 2020; Lever, 2020; Saldana, 2013). This is because one of the primary roles of schools has been to reinforce understanding within societies by teaching children about their culture, beliefs, values and norms (King, 2023; Ruck et al., 2021; Byrd & Ahn, 2020). As a result, children acquire different kinds of knowledge. Schools, in their capacity as socialising agents, impart social values concerning gender to students (Lever, 2020). However, schools can also serve as agents in situations where sexual violence is present and can be perpetuated indefinitely (Byrd & Ahn, 2020; Rue et al., 2014). Therefore, schools are significant institutions that serve to legitimise and validate normative practices, images, and social constructions of gender using a multitude of practices. These practices include school routines, the wearing of school uniforms, policies and methods of teaching and the curriculum that is taught (Francis & Monakali, 2021; Sykes 2011). As a result of all of this, there is evidence that a significant number of LGBT youth who are enrolled in schools have experienced sexual violence before they turn 18 years old (Blake et al., 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2014; Jina & Thomas, 2013; Mahlangu et al., 2014; Meinck et al., 2014; Ybarra, et al., 2013). This is the case within the context of the school setting.

Research also identifies universities and schools around the world as dangerous places where LGBT learners and students are subjected to bullying, victimisation, exclusion and other forms of discrimination and abuse (Okanlawon, 2021; Okanlawon, 2020; Okanlawon, 2017; Woodford et al., 2012). These experiences cause them to experience pain, suffering and fear which can consequently have a negative impact on their physical, emotional, and academic achievement (Okanlawon, 2021; Okanlawon, 2020; Okanlawon, 2017). Learners who identify as LGBT are subjected to physical violence, marginalisation, and harassment both within and outside of their educational environments. As a result of this, LGBT learners are at a greater risk of being bullied by classmates, teachers and staff members who are not teaching. The prejudice and marginalisation that LGBT youth experience within the context of the school environment is exacerbated by gendered stereotyping and labelling that place them at a disadvantage (Miller, 2015, 2016; Scotland, 2018; Wyss, 2004).

The literature about the experiences of LGBT learners in schools highlights consistent repressive environments for sexual and gender minority youth (Marraccini et al., 2022; Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2021; McBride, 2021; Allen, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2011). Furthermore, schools have been consistently characterised by the heteronormativity that is a part of the LGBT youth's daily school life (Johnson, 2024; Francis, 2021; McBride, 2021; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Furthermore, schools have demonstrated a tendency to police

sexuality and gender (Tomsen & Mason, 2024; MacAulay et al., 2022; Hoskin, 2020; DePalma 2011).

A comparative study conducted by Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw (2016) on the educational experiences of LGBT students in the United States and Israel that included socio-cultural and educational contexts of students from both countries. Findings revealed that

LGBT youth from both countries were subjected to homophobic remarks and utterances within their school environments. The students had also been victims of bullying and victimisation. In spite of the fact that there has been progress made in terms of LGBT rights and acceptance in the United States, there are still pockets of homophobia and discrimination that manifest within school environments (Scott, 2024; Barnard et al., 2023). This is the reason why the youth have had negative schooling experiences. On the other hand, in Israel the social and cultural landscape regarding LGBT issues was more accepting and inclusive which resulted in a more positive school experience for LGBT youth (Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw, 2016). In a similar vein, research conducted within different contexts by Formby (2015) and Gusp (2012) discovered that LGBT youth are subjected to homophobic bullying and harassment in secondary schools and colleges located in the United Kingdom (UK).

Generally, there have been advancements made in the understanding of bullying behaviour within Irish schools; however, there is a significant lack of knowledge regarding bullying that is homophobic (O'Higgins Norman, 2020; Doyle, 2019; Zotti et al., 2019). A study was conducted in Ireland to investigate the views and perspectives of 123 young people who identified as LGBT and were enrolled in secondary school. The findings revealed that LGBT students in Ireland were subjected to numerous forms of bullying and harassment in their day-to-day lives, this including name-calling and teasing (Doyle, 2019). It is possible that these kinds of behaviours might have a significant and detrimental effect on the academic performance of these students. Even though it was exploratory in nature, the study suggests that LGBT population is one that is "at risk" of being bullied in school (Zotti et al., 2019). The results of the study indicate that discrimination against LGBT students in educational settings continues to be a problem in Ireland, despite the country having been progressive in terms of societal attitudes and legal protections for LGBT individuals (Bailey, 2020). This demonstrates the prevalence nature of homophobic attitudes and behaviours are still which results in a hostile school environment for a significant number of members of the LGBT community.

The negative experiences of LGBT students, who are oppressed within school premises have been confirmed by studies conducted in the United States of America, United Kingdom, and Thailand (Kurian, 2020; Agbeko, 2017). Some of these LGBT students skipped school in order to avoid being harassed. The students report that they are bullied, harassed and mocked (Kurian, 2020). Agbeko (2017) brought attention to the fact that each of these students not only experienced fear and anxiety within the confines of the school environment, but they were also rejected at home.

Within the African schooling context, literature has exposed homophobia as problematic within schools and universities in Nigeria (Alimi et al., 2017; Bucknor-Arighede & Omotoso, 2015; Mapayi et al., 2016; Okanlawon, 2017, 2019; Sekoni et al., 2016) resulting in sexual violence, homophobic violence, rejection, exclusion and many other forms of discrimination that are rife (Balogun, 2017; Alimi et al., 2017; Okanlawon, 2017). Okanlawon (2021) notes that marginalisation, exclusion, and discrimination of LGBT youth in Nigerian schools create a barrier to the goal in the national policy for inclusive education, which aims to achieve an equitable and socially just schooling environment for every learner in Nigeria. This policy seeks to guarantee that all students in Nigeria have access to education that is inclusive.

A study conducted in Accra Metropolis in Ghana that looked at the prevalence of homosexual practices among Ghanaian youth and the prejudice against LGBT youth. The results highlighted that heterosexuality was the predominant form of sexual orientation and generally accepted as a normal form of sexual orientation (Alimi et al., 2017; Okanlawon, 2017). This was due to the fact that Ghana, along with a great number of other African nations possesses deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs that have significant impact on attitudes towards homosexuality (Atuguba, 2019). Further, traditional cultural norms and particular interpretations of religious teachings contributed to the development of negative attitudes and stigmatisation regarding relationships between people of the same gender (Dreier et al., 2020). This resulted in an increase in the prevalence of homophobic attitudes, sexual prejudice, and marginalisation against homosexuality. According to Agbeko (2017), the Ghanaian society despises homosexuality, and it is not tolerated within the communities. The Ghanaian people perceive homosexuality as an orientation that has the potential to cause damage to the country's culture, values and moral standards.

In addition, the criminalisation of homosexuality does not only contribute to the marginalisation of LGBT people, but reinforces prejudices that are already present in society. This fosters an atmosphere of fear and discrimination which contributes to the continued existence of homophobia (Badgett, et al., 2019; Wieringa, 2019). A British citizen named John Macleod, who was 63 years old at the time was deported from Ghana due to the discovery and dissemination of photographs depicting him engaging in homosexual behaviour. This individual's case is an example of homophobic behaviour. According to Wieringa (2019) and Agbeko (2017), the Ghanaian response clarified that homosexual activity is still considered as illegal. As in other African countries, Kenyan LGBT youth have also been subjected to high levels of homophobia. This has led to the division of communities and resulted in crimes committed against LGBT youth, such as rape, honour killings, and arranged marriages. These crimes were committed solely for the purpose of maintaining the appearance of heteronormativity within the community (Langat et al., 2020).

The reviewed literature reveals that the schooling experiences of LGBT youth are negative and marginalising in nature. Homophobic violence, bullying, harassment and discrimination are prevalent issues that LGBT youth face in many parts of the world. Although many countries have made strides to create more conducive and inclusive schooling environments, the literature confirms that these experiences for LGBT youth are negative and marginalising. This may lead to feelings of shame, self-doubt negative self-image, and as social isolation, exclusion

from peer groups, and limited participation in school activities. This may

result in limited participation in school activities. It is the primary responsibility of educational institutions to establish secure and encouraging environments in which students, regardless of whether they identify as homosexual or not are able to freely express their sexuality without the fear of being judged or punished. Teachers ought to play a pivotal role in providing support for LGBT students and should discuss homosexuality rather than avoiding it because they believe it to be embarrassing. By doing so, they might be able to effectively manage homophobia within their respective classes.

2.9.1 The experiences of LGBT youth in South African schools

Social norms are informal rules and social expectations that are held in common by a group of people (Arias, 2015; Marcus & Harper, 2015). These norms can influence attitudes and behaviours about sexuality. Arias (2015) and Marcus and Harper (2015) define gender norms as social norms that explicitly relate to gender differences. Furthermore, gender norms are a form of discrimination. As young people mature, they are exposed to these and the most susceptible individuals are adolescent girls, who are the ones who subjected to most pressure. In the context of South Africa, homophobia is one of the components of socialisation that manifests itself as prejudice against homosexuality and is a phenomenon that occurs all over the world (Herek, 2010). In South Africa, homophobia is characterised by discrimination, marginalisation, and, to a significant extent, the killing of individuals who are considered to be homosexuals. This is similar to the situation in other African countries.

Junior (2012) states that oppressive environments in schools have their origins in structural systems and policies that are not accommodating to diversity. This includes sexualities that are not consistent with the dominant male or female gender binary. Whilst countries such as Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Malawi, Uganda and Ghana blatantly remain homophobic, South Africa has been progressive in its Constitution by legalising same-sex relationships and prohibiting any forms of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation (Currier & Migraine-George, 2017; Judge, Manion & de Waal 2008), but the experience of LGBT people in schools has not changed. It is possible to make the case that the persistent presence of social issues pertaining

to race, class, gender, and sexuality within the South African education system continues to have repercussions for the construction of sexuality for individuals who identify as LGBT.

Francis (2021, 2019, 2017), Francis and Reygan (2016), McArthur (2015), Bhana, 2014, 2012) and Msibi (2012) are some of the authors who have contributed to the growing body of literature that has been published in recent years about the victimisation and exclusion of LGBT youth who attend school. The literature reviewed makes it clear that South African schools are spaces that are heterosexist and that give preference to heterosexuality (Francis & Kuhl, 2022; Francis, 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Francis, 2019; Francis et al., 2019; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). As a result, LGBT youths are given the impression that they are excluded and become vulnerable. What is even more unsettling is the fact that literature provides evidence that prejudice and discrimination are results of attitudes and behaviours of schoolmates, teachers and school administrators (Francis, 2017; Francis & Reygan, 2016; McArthur, 2015; Bhana, 2014; Bhana, 2012). Nel and Judge (2011) and Msibi (2012) conducted research on the experiences of gay and lesbian youth within schools and the findings of these studies indicated that these young people do not have access to the rights that come with citizenship.

As was mentioned earlier, the educational experiences of LGBT young people do not comply with the South African Constitution, that ensures that all South African citizens are entitled to freedom and human rights (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Francis, 2019; Francis et al., 2019). Nel and Judge (2008) point out that homophobic forms of violence are endemic part of the South African landscape for people who identify as LGBT. Junior (2012) argues that schools are places of power and control that put LGBT students at a high risk for poor academic achievements and other challenges. This is because LGBT students are more likely to be subjected to harassment, rejection, and feelings of isolation because of their sexuality. Using a role play on homosexuality as the research process, Junior (2012) conducted a study in the province of Gauteng on a selected group of twenty adolescents. The study revealed high levels of homophobia and the pervasiveness of discrimination that was motivated by hate speech and victimisation against LGBT youth.

Even though schools are considered to be places where support, care, and assistance are provided, this is not the case when it comes to the lives of LGBT youth (Daniels et al., 2019; Francis, 2019; Jones, 2019; Reygan, 2019). This is because LGBT youth continue to face

discrimination and violence (Mayeza, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2020; Mkhize et al., 2020; Govender et al., 2019; Nyeck et al., 2019; 2019; Bhana, 2014; 2012; Francis, 2017; Francis & Reygan, 2016; Langa, 2015; McArthur, 2015). There has been

an increase in homophobic violence, has negative impact on the well-being of sexual and gender minority learners. The literature sheds additional light that young people who identify as LGBT have been subjected to discrimination in ways that are distinct from those that their heterosexual peers have encountered (Luvo, 2021; Nyeck, 2019; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). When LGBT young people attend schools that are homophobic, it is time that is both confusing and troubling for them because this is when they attempt to discover who they are and where they belong in the world (Luvo, 2021). Since LGBT youth spend a considerable amount of time in schools, their classmates, teachers, and non-teaching staff should strive to assist in the resolution of this uncertainty.

There is evidence that young people who identify as LGBT are constantly subjected to discrimination and harassment, with the majority of homophobic activities taking place during school hours in the presence of teachers (Ngcobo, 2021; Allen, 2020; Apostolidou, 2020; Munro et al, 2019; Schneider & Demito, 2008). Taking South African context as an example, Bhana (2014) draws attention to the fact that homophobia and heterosexual dominance are pervasive in South African schools. She highlights how the rights of LGBT students are continuously contested and compromised because their sexuality is considered taboo and inappropriate by teachers and school management. This creates problems if homophobia is not recognised or discussed in the policies of the schools. Further, the study done by Mosert et al., (2015) found that teachers shared a common opinion and agreed that LGBT learners should not be treated the same way as heterosexual learners. The findings mentioned above revealed the negative attitudes of teachers who stated that it was not important for schools to have policies on homosexuality that seek to protect LGBT learners. These findings exposed negative attitude of the teachers lack of enthusiasm in matters concerning the school policies. The scarcity of designed policies that address issues of bullying and discrimination in schools demonstrated the existence of indirectly homophobic attitudes intolerance within the school setting.

Several other studies, including those conducted by Potgieter and Reygan (2012) and Francis (2012) have brought to our attention the fact that after leaving their universities, teachers enter classroom still holding traditional, conservative and discriminatory ideas. These ideas are

influenced by religion, culture, societal norms, and gender stereotypes. In Johnson (2014) view, teachers exhibit attitudes that continue to stir up and spread homophobic behaviours and negative attitudes in schools. Equally, the research that was carried out by Taylor and Peter (2011) confirmed that the teachers were unwilling to intervene and challenge homophobia within the school setting. This was because they also had had negative attitudes towards LGBT students. In addition, educators exhibited reluctance to intervene and challenge homophobia in schools because they were concerned about the consequences they might face if they show support for LGBT students (Ngcobo, 2021). The concern was about the stability of their employment, given the criticism they received from coworkers and question of whether or not they would receive support from the school management. Bhana (2014) criticised the actions of the teachers and pointed out that they are ignorant about the role they need to play and the significance of intervening in issues of homophobic bullying directed towards LGBT youth.

The reviewed literature firstly, highlights severe suffering that LGBT young people go through within the educational system (Mayeza, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2021; Mkhize & Maharaj, 2020; Mkhize et al., 2020; Allen, 2020; Apostolidou, 2020; Munro et al, 2019). This is primarily due to the gendered patriarchal cultures that are prevalent in South Africa. According to Bhana (2012), Nel and Judge (2008), Matebeni (2013), Morrissey (2013) and Muholi (2004), this situation is a reflection of homophobic violence and discrimination that has become the norm and accepted in South African society. Secondly, like in many other societies that have deeply ingrained gendered and patriarchal cultures that uphold traditional gender roles, power dynamics, these cultural norms perpetuate rigid notions of masculinity and femininity, leaving little room for gender diversity for LGBT learners (Francis, 2017; Francis and Reygan, 2016; Langa, 2015; McArthur, 2015; Bhana, 2014; Bhana, 2012). As a consequence of this, patriarchal culture generates an unwelcoming atmosphere for LGBT young people, who are subjected to discrimination within the educational context (Jackson et al., 2023; De Beer, 2020 Du Toit, 2019). Thirdly, the negative experiences that LGBT students have had in schools bring to light the necessity of safe and inclusive schooling spaces and the need to challenge patriarchal norms and attitudes. Schools can do this by implementing policies that support gender diversity, acceptance and protection against discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation. In order to avoid underestimating the significance of the roles that teachers play or the attitudes that they have, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge both of these aspects. The ability to exert a significant amount of influence, to construct environments that are welcoming to LGBT

people and to intervene in situations where anti-LGBT discrimination takes place are all capabilities that teachers possess (Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Schneider & Demito, 2008). Lastly, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive transformation within South African educational institutions with the objective of dismantling gendered patriarchal cultures and establishing environments that are welcoming to LGBT students. This has the potential to play a significant role in South African schools, not only in ensuring the health and success of LGBT students in their educational pursuits, but in determining whether or not they are successful.

2.9.2 Limitations of existing literature

The reviewed literature indicates that in recent years there has been increase of work that investigates sexuality within the context of South Africa, particularly in relation to educational institutions. Most of the research that has been carried out concentrated on the experiences of LGBT women, men, and young people. This work included the experiences of LGBT people who are white and come from middle-class backgrounds as if these people might have the same experiences as LGBT people who come from working-class backgrounds and are black. These studies focused on LGBT issues in general, with little attention paid to black self-identified lesbian youth of school-going age (De Palma & Francis, 2013; Msibi, 2012; Muholi, 2004; Potgieter, 2007). Though a significant portion of the work has been helpful, the majority of this work concentrated on LGBT issues taking place in many different spaces. In addition, reviewed literature exposed paucity of studies that have been conducted to investigate the lived experiences of these black youth who self-identify as being of school-going age. Therefore, this study seek to close this gap by exploring the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth and the ways in which they navigate these daily experiences.

Even though this phenomenon is gradually emerging and becoming visible in South Africa, there is a dearth of empirical research that investigates the intersection of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation within the context of townships and rural areas. The findings of this study will be contributing to the provision of narratives that will provide readers with specific experiences that have been experienced by specific individuals. Because of this, the LGBT youth and their experiences will be silenced if such work is not undertaken which will result in the silencing of these individuals. The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth attending secondary schools in township and rural contexts. This is in response to the lack of previous research that investigates the experiences of black lesbian youth and the silences that exist within black lesbian communities. It is an attempt to provide

narratives that showcase the lives of these young people who are marginalised within the society. Since local research indicates that LGBT youth continue to have negative experiences in schools as a result of their sexual identities (Bhana, 2014; Msibi, 2012), the focus of the study is on black youth who self-identify as being LGBT.

2.10 In-depth analysis and summary of the reviewed literature

As a first point of interest, it is clear from the literature reviewed that homosexuality is still considered a taboo topic all over the world. The literature evidenced that people who identify as LGBT continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in many aspects of their lives. Even in countries like South Africa with powerful and progressive democratic constitution which decriminalised homosexuality, the literature demonstrates a high level of homophobia. The examined literature further reported instances of sexual violence and discrimination against LGBT people, which evidenced that South African society continues to hold attitudes that are unfavourable and unacceptable regarding homosexuality. It appeared that these attitudes have their origins in potentially harmful and restricting freedom for individuals whose sexual identity is different. Moreover, there was an abundance of evidence from the published works that demonstrated a lack of tolerance for individuals who identify as LGBT, policing and rendering of their sexuality as invisible.

Secondly, the literature revealed lack of legal protection in many parts of the world, which lead to laws and policies that continue to discriminate against people who identify as LGBT. Not only do these laws violate the fundamental human rights of LGBT people, but they create an environment that is fraught with fear and persecution for those who identify differently. In conclusion, literature exposed that criminalisation of relationships between people of the same-sex restricts their freedom of expression and association, which in turn contributes to the sustained existence of homophobia. It is because of these negative experiences that they are unable to achieve equal rights. Thirdly, it was evident from the literature that homophobia is widespread crisis and is standard in most educational institutions. Despite the findings from literature, it has not been possible to locate literature that has focused on the experiences of black youth who identify as lesbian and of school-going age living in rural and township contexts. The inability to locate literature that focusses on these experiences revealed that there is a significant lack of studies that concentrate specifically on the phenomenon that is being researched. Equally, studies that were available presented homophobia as something that is fairly common and considered to be the norm for LGBT people.

It is crucial to note that sex and gender are often used interchangeably in this study as if they mean the same, however, these two represent distinct concepts. Sex is defined as a biological attribute that distinguishing male, female and intersex individuals, including hormones and reproductive anatomy (Cirillo et al., 2020), whereas gender encompasses the roles, behaviours and identities that societies attribute to individuals based on their perceived sex (Lindqvist et al., 2021; Fausto-Sterling, 2019)). This includes societal norms and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity (Cirillo, et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand the interplay between sex and gender, as used in the study they are able to influence participants' personal identity, social interactions and access to resources and opportunities.

As I come to the end of this chapter, it is vital to emphasise that although this study is situated within the same broad field as a great number of other studies on homosexuality, it has its own particular focus, which is to investigate the experiences of black youth who identify as lesbian. The purpose of the literature was to examine a wide range of perspectives, experiences and attitudes regarding homosexuality around the world, with a particular emphasis on South African educational institutions. Through the examination of the relevant literature, one gained an understanding of the intricate dynamics that exist between various institutions in South Africa, including families, schools, and churches, in relation to homosexuality. This highlights the fact that there is a need for ongoing dialogue, education and advocacy to combat discrimination, promote understanding and create environments that are safer and more inclusive for LGBT youth in society.

2.11 Chapter conclusion

Within the scope of this chapter, I conducted a comprehensive literature review that centred on studies conducted on a global, continental, and local scale that pertain to the experiences of LGBT individuals and those of young people who are attending school. When viewed from a global perspective, the experiences shed light on the pervasive and ongoing nature of homophobia in society. People who identify as LGBT are targeted not because of the actions they have committed, based on who they are and their sexual orientation. A further examination was of the schooling experiences of lesbian youth and the ways in which their sexuality is suppressed and controlled within the context of the school environment. Additionally, the chapter went into detail regarding the influence that culture and Christianity have on sexuality

and how oppressive these beliefs are when it comes to homosexuality. It is impossible to disentangle these factors from the inequalities and homophobic violence that continue to engulf people who identify as LGBT in South Africa (Ngcobo, 2021). In addition, the chapter ended by examining the limitations of the existing literature and the ways in which the scarcity of such study is essential for the continuation of work and the production of knowledge on sexuality.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the theoretical framework, queer theory, and feminist theory of intersectionality, which are concepts that I have selected to serve as lenses for the purpose of scaffolding my research experience. When it comes to validating and shaping the quality and breadth of an analytical inquiry (Maxwell, 2012), both these theories are extremely important. Also, when it comes to defining the phenomenon that is being investigated, these theories are helpful. To give one example, Maxwell (2012) states that theories "help to focus attention on specific events or activities that are relevant for the research" (p. 11). This is an example of how theories "illuminate the data set." It is for this reason that this chapter provides an overview of the obvious connection that exists between the theory and the phenomenon that is being investigated.

CHAPTER THREE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter Two, I reviewed international and local literature related to the experiences of lesbian youth and the evidence on how they are located in spaces of marginalisation. The review revealed that lesbian girls face a range of unique challenges such as discrimination, bullying, and social isolation within the school setting that deserve attention and support from people around them.

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework of this study, which explored the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal. In particular, the study explored how these youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities. Ideologically, a theoretical framework always assists with the lens for studying a phenomenon. According to Cresswell (2014), a theoretical lens or perspective in qualitative research offers an overall orientation to the types of questions to be asked in the research, the ways in which the data is to be collected, analysed and how it can assist in helping with answering the research questions. Analysis in this thesis was informed by two feminist theories: queer theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality. These theories were used as analytical lenses to understand the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth. They provided a series of explanations that were tested in this study. Both queer theory and intersectionality assisted in locating identity within and external to the individuals (Britzman, 2003; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), subsequently giving a holistic approach to understanding the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth. Utilising these two “lenses” was instrumental in the study, since both these theories are concerned with understanding the complexities of identity and directly oppose essentialist notions of identities which fix individuals in linear ways and put them in categories (Kirsh, 2000; Kirsh, 2006; Msibi, 2012). These theories are discussed in detail below.

3.2 History of queer theory

A theoretical framework comprises of theories developed by expert researchers in a particular field to explain phenomena, draw connections and make predictions in research, which supports the individual researcher's work, displaying that the work is grounded in recognised ideas (Yamauchi, 2017). It therefore serves as a roadmap for researchers, guiding their inquiry and providing a framework for understanding and interpreting their findings in the context of existing knowledge and theories. Swanson (2013) also affirms theoretical framework as "the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study" (p. 122). Also, the framework provides the foundation for the researcher's data analysis and interpretation of results.

This study focuses on exploring the experiences of the black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal. From the reviewed literature chapter, it is confirmed that the participants' experiences are discriminatory and involved complex negotiations of their sexual identities within numerous social structures of oppression in their immediate environments. Therefore, using the theoretical framework that assisted in the understanding and the interpretation of findings was crucial. Hence, the utilisation of queer and intersectionality theories in exploring how the youth construct and negotiate their identities and the reasons they give for that

Teresa de Lauretis introduced the term "queer theory" in 1989 at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she addressed the distinctions between "Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" (Hogan & Hudson, 1998). It was subsequently refined in response to the work of Michel Foucault, a social constructionist. This theory was developed in the early 1990s as a critical response to conventional notions of sexuality and gender. It has emerged as a significant framework in the disciplines of literary theory, cultural studies, and gender studies. Queer theory challenges the conventional, normative views of sexuality and gender, providing a perspective through which to critique the power and identity structures that influence society. It does so by questioning and critiquing the social and cultural systems that enforce heteronormativity, as well as by attempting to understand and investigate the experiences of marginalised individuals, including LGBT individuals. The intentional process of reclaiming the term "queer" in a positive manner in queer theory involved the transformation of a historically derogatory slur against LGBT individuals into an inclusive umbrella term. This

term is rooted in a political philosophy that is partially derived from a decision to confront discrimination and to establish a collective identity that is based on being marginalised because one's sexuality, rather than merely identifying based on one's gender and the object of one's affection (Jogose, 1996; Rhoads, 1994, 1997). The term has been used to protest or at least obscure clear-cut notions of sexual identity, as well as a shorthand for the lengthy phrases, lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered, despite its negative historical connotation (D' Augelli, 1989; Rose, 1990) (Warner, 1993).

Doty (1993) defines the term "queer" as "a quality associated with any expression that can be identified as contra-, non-, or anti-straight, and which serves not to identify individuals as much as to identify forms of communication and the positions that inform that expression." (p. xv). 'Queer' is defined against the 'normal' or normalising in each instance, regardless of whether it is used as a noun, adjective, or verb. Queer is a verb or adjective that transcends communities, subjectivities, and identities. Consequently, the term was employed as an adjective in this investigation. It primarily focusses on the deconstruction of binaries such as male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual, as well as the analysis of the initial construction of inequalities by these categories (Dilley, 1999).

3.2.1 Debates about queer theory

The emergence of queer theory also signified a shift in the way LGBT individuals were viewed. Kirsch (2006) asserts that queer theory established novel rationales for treating sexuality and gender as autonomous subjects, rather than as extras of homosexual and lesbian studies or general cultural theory (p. 16). The deconstruction of approaches and the categories that have been developed is a favoured approach in queer theory (Kirsh, 2006, 2000; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000). Consequently, it was beneficial in comprehending the intricacies of sexuality among research participants. Valocchi (2005) posits that categories establish inequalities that confer authority on specific individuals, particularly those who "do not conform neatly to their normative alignments" (p. 753). Queer theory is primarily concerned with the destabilisation and critique of heterosexuality by emphasising sexual diversity, highlighting gender specifics, and framing sexuality as institutional rather than personal. It is influenced by the philosophies of the homosexual liberation movement and certain aspects of lesbian feminism.

In an effort to challenge and transform oppressive systems, queer theory is associated with social and political activism. This theory's primary objective is to challenge any aspect of social phenomena that has the potential to divide them into normative and deviant categories, particularly in the context of sexual activities and identities (Harris, 2016). Queer theorists regard sexuality as a universal social condition that must be addressed by all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. The political agency and activism of the 1980s is the foundation of this theory. The main aim of this work is to establish sexuality as a central concern and a critical category through which other social, political, and cultural phenomena can be comprehended (Edgar & Sedgwick 1999, p. 321). Its primary purpose is rooted in advocating for LGBT rights, challenging discriminatory practices and policies, and inform and contribute to social change by highlighting the experiences and perspectives of marginalised individuals. Queer theory is not a solitary or systematic conceptual or methodological framework; rather, it is a collection of intellectual engagements with the relationships between sex, gender, and sexual desire (Edelman, 2005).

Additionally, this theory's advancement challenges the binary perspective on sexualities (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016) and encourages the recognition and comprehension of a more intricate reality in which individuals exist (Giesecking, 2013). Queer theory is particularly pertinent due to its establishment of the legitimacy of sexual identities that are not heterosexual (Martos et al., 2017). By accentuating the performativity and fluidity of gender and sexuality, it challenges the notion of fixed and stable identities (Butler, 1990). This theory investigates the way in which individuals actively negotiate and construct their identities and desires within social and cultural contexts. Queer theory is employed to challenge and facilitate a transition from queer stereotypes, which privilege individuals who identify as cisgender and heterosexual and marginalise those in the LGBTQI community (Lee & Kanji, 2017). This is achieved by challenging the traditional, historical, heteronormative approaches to sexuality (Allen, 2018, p. 79). Additionally, this theory seeks to deviate from rigid concepts of identification that establish individuals' sexuality according to their sexual behaviours or a perceived or constructed gender identity (Msibi, 2012).

3.2.2 How will the application of queer theory assist in the study?

In this study I used queer theory firstly because the focus of the study was on a group of people whose sexuality has been marginalised and discriminated against. While my study is rooted in the fluid and multiple ways in which sexual identity is experienced, I maintain the use of the category 'lesbian' as mainly for intelligibility. In this study the term 'lesbian' is used because it is widely used by most people within the research environments and is common in the communities where the participants met. The intention was not to categorise lesbian youth but to assist people in comprehending fully. Secondly, the use of the term was because of how the youth in schools refer to themselves. Since the participants use the term 'lesbian', I followed that without seeing it as a fixed category. There could be a possibility that there are other young girls in this study, who are gender-fluid in some ways, but who reject the categorisation as lesbian. Hence, the term is used simply because it is a term available to the youth in this study that can capture something about their lives. However, the term 'lesbian' is not necessarily that well understood in the communities, in reality, as many people seem to think it is about a girl who wants to become a boy. It is a contested concept.

Queer theory was used because it offered a critical lens through which to examine and understand the complexities of sexuality of participants in this study. First, using queer theory was because it rejects labels and categories (Kirsh, 2000), therefore it has an ability not to essentialise identification, since it takes a radically anti-essentialist position that gender and sexualities are what people do, perform and enact rather than something they naturally have. Secondly, queer theory was used to challenge and enable a shift from stereotypes that privilege those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual and marginalise people in the LGBTQI community (Lee & Kanji, 2017), by questioning the traditional, historical, heteronormative approaches to sexuality (Allen, 2018, p. 79).

Queer theory has been closely tied to activism and social justice movements. It provides a theoretical basis for challenging oppressive systems and advocating for LGBT rights and equality. Choosing queer theory as a lens to better understand the youth's experiences seemed crucial, since queer theory can expose social inequality. Utilising this theory in this study, therefore assisted in bringing necessary insight and understanding of the ways in which black self-identified lesbian youth experience, construct and negotiate their sexual

identities in schooling contexts that are known to be repressive. Understanding therefore that “queer studies are more than researching homosexual lives and whether those lives were lived on the margins or in the forefront of public conversation and consciousness” (Dilley, 1999, p. 462) is key in this study, because the comprehension of what the experiences of the lesbian youth are will assist me to grasp why the participants in this study are treated differently, why they are seen to be “not normal”. Using queer theory in this study is not merely about finding out the stories of the lesbian youth, or their schooling experiences and the positions they are given in their communities, but it is about fundamentally questioning the values, presumptions and viewpoints of their marginalisation which mostly go unquestioned. Lastly, this theory was appropriate, since it creates an opportunity to critique and expose the social, cultural, and political mechanisms that perpetuate discrimination within such spaces and guides efforts toward social change and inclusivity.

The use of queer theory also recognises the complexity of identification within the participants in this study. In this case, the lived experiences and stories told in this study are of black youth who self-identify as lesbian. as a result, queer theory was used because it prioritises the experiences and perspectives of marginalised people, particularly LGBT individuals. Using queer theory as a lens for data analysis assisted in prioritizing the voices of the lesbian youth in this study, who are often overlooked and silenced. It helped to uncover and strengthen their narratives and experiences, contributing to more inclusive and representative research findings. Therefore, this theory provided a platform for their unheard narratives and fostered social recognition and validation for the lesbian youth. In this study, the lived experience of identifying as lesbians can be contextualised through the intersection of race, gender, age and sexual identities, instead of taking a focus on a distinct identity as black self-identifying lesbian youth. By using queer theory as a lens to analyse data, I was able to critically engage with many assumptions about LGBT people, uncovered power dynamics, embraced the participants’ fluid and complex sexual identities and gave an opportunity to centre their marginalised voices, consequently contributing to social change efforts.

Using queer theory as a framework in this study provided a comprehensive infusion of lesbian youth issues, under the umbrella of multiculturalism (Tierney, 1997), therefore allowing the rethinking of traditional concepts and definitions such as identity, gender, and sexuality. Queer

theory aims to challenge the status quo, which is responsible for continuing the prejudice and heterosexism that is perpetuated in many social systems; Tierney (1997) also explains that this theory is influenced by a social reform movement that seeks to break down traditional ideas of what is viewed as normal and what is deviant by showing the queer in what is thought of as normal and the normal in what is seen as queer. Queer theory, therefore, is concerned about questioning how people know and do not know about things both normal and queer. From this viewpoint, the use of queer theory was to deconstruct the meaning of abnormality in relation to the norm and examine “how institutions control and legitimize certain discourses” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 62) about the sexual identities of the participants in this study.

Initially, I employed queer theory in this study since it was centred on individuals whose sexuality has been marginalised and discriminated against. I maintain the use of the term "lesbian" primarily for the purpose of intelligibility, even though my research is based on the fluid and multifaceted experiences of sexual identity. The term "lesbian" is employed in this study due to its widespread use in the research environments and in the communities where the participants met. The purpose was not to categorise lesbian youth, but rather to aid individuals in gaining a comprehensive understanding. Subsequently, the expression was employed due to the way students address themselves in educational institutions. I adopted the term "lesbian" as it was employed by the participants, without regard for it as a fixed category. It is possible that there are additional young females in this study who are gender-fluid in certain respects but who reject the label of lesbian. Thus, the term is employed solely because it is a term that is accessible to the youth in this study and can express a certain aspect of their existence. Nevertheless, the term "lesbian" is not always well understood in the communities, as many individuals appear to believe that it pertains to a female who aspires to become a boy. It is a disputed concept.

The complexities of sexuality of the participants in this study were examined and comprehended through the critical lens of queer theory. Initially, queer theory was employed due to its rejection of labels and categories (Kirsh, 2000). Thus, it has the capacity to avoid essentialising identification, as it adopts a radically anti-essentialist stance that gender and sexuality are embodied, performed, and enacted by individuals, rather than inherent qualities. Secondly, queer theory was employed to challenge and facilitate a transition from stereotypes that favour individuals who identify as cisgender and heterosexual and marginalise those in the

LGBTQI community (Lee & Kanji, 2017). This was achieved by challenging the traditional, historical, heteronormative approaches to sexuality (Allen, 2018, p. 79).

Activist and social justice movements have been inextricably linked to queer theory. It establishes a theoretical foundation for the promotion of LGBT rights and equality and the challenge of oppressive systems. It appeared essential to employ queer theory as a lens to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the youth's experiences, as queer theory has the capacity to reveal social inequality. This study was able to provide the necessary insight and understanding of the ways in which black self-identified lesbian youth experience, construct, and negotiate their sexual identities in educational contexts that are known to be repressive by utilising this theory. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend that "queer studies are more than researching homosexual lives and whether those lives were lived on the margins or in the forefront of public conversation and consciousness" (Dilley, 1999) in this study. This is because understanding the experiences of lesbian youth will enable me to comprehend why the participants in this study are treated differently and why they are perceived as "not normal."

The application of queer theory in this study is not merely a means of eliciting the narratives of lesbian youth, their educational experiences, and the roles they are assigned in their communities. Rather, it is a means of fundamentally challenging the values, presumptions, and perspectives that contribute to their marginalisation, which are predominantly unquestioned. Finally, this theory was appropriate because it provides an opportunity to critique and expose the social, cultural, and political mechanisms that perpetuate discrimination within such spaces, as well as to guide efforts towards social change and inclusivity.

The complexity of identification among the participants in this study is also acknowledged through the application of queer theory. In this instance, the lived experiences and narratives recounted in this study pertain to black adolescents who identify as lesbians. Consequently, queer theory was implemented due to its emphasis on the experiences and viewpoints of marginalised individuals, particularly LGBT individuals. This study prioritised the voices of the lesbian youth, who are frequently disregarded and suppressed, by employing queer theory as a lens for data analysis. It facilitated the discovery and reinforcement of their narratives and experiences, thereby enhancing the inclusiveness and representativeness of the research

findings. So, this theory facilitated the social recognition and validation of the lesbian youth and provided a platform for their silent narratives. In this investigation, the lived experience of identifying as lesbians can be contextualised by examining the intersection of race, gender, age, and sexual identities, rather than concentrating on a specific identity as a black self-identifying lesbian youth. I was able to critically engage with numerous assumptions about LGBT individuals, uncover power dynamics, embrace the participants' fluid and complex sexual identities, and provide an opportunity to centre their marginalised voices by using queer theory as a lens to analyse data. Thus, I was able to contribute to social change projects.

The utilisation of queer theory as a framework in this study enabled the re-evaluation of conventional concepts and definitions, including identity, gender, and sexuality, with respect to lesbian youth issues, all within the context of multiculturalism (Tierney, 1997). The objective of queer theory is to challenge the status quo, which is responsible for the perpetuation of prejudice and heterosexism in numerous social systems. Tierney (1997) also explains that this theory is influenced by a social reform movement that aims to challenge traditional notions of what is considered normal and deviant by demonstrating the queer in what is perceived as normal and the normal in what is perceived as queer. Queer theory, therefore, is inquisitive about the way individuals are aware of and unaware of both normal and queer phenomena. In this regard, the application of queer theory was to deconstruct the concept of deviance in relation to the norm and to investigate "how institutions control and legitimise certain discourses" (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 62) regarding the sexual identities of the participants in this study.

3.2.3 Deliberations and criticisms of queer theory

Although queer theory has made a substantial contribution to a variety of humanities and social sciences disciplines, it has been criticised by numerous scholars. Sociologists have made a variety of critiques of queer theory (Edwards, 1998; Green, 2002; Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1997; Walters, 1996). Gamson (1994) has criticised queer theory for its narrow and predominant focus on literary texts, as well as its neglect of the institutional and material contexts of discursive power (Seidman, 1997). Despite this, queer theory has been traditionally associated with literary analysis and textual interpretation. Queer theory may disregard or neglect other significant areas of social life and cultural production where gender and sexuality are at play by primarily concentrating on literary texts, according to the critique. This could

lead to a failure to address issues and experiences that transcend the boundaries of literature, such as politics, activism, popular culture, or the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Glick, 2000; Green, 2002). Scholars and theorists have also emphasised the constraints of exclusively relying on textual analysis in queer theory and have advocated for more comprehensive engagements with other forms of cultural production and social contexts. Queer theory, therefore, illustrates that constructionism is a reciprocal relationship and that identities are descriptive and fluid rather than prescriptive (Dilley, 1999).

Another critique is issued by individuals who identify as standpoint theorists. They advocate against the "lumping" of identities and warn of the potential for the erasure of individual identity, as homosexual and lesbian individuals have distinct life experiences. These theorists contend that queer theory has a propensity to historical invoking and aligning the term "queer" exclusively with boy contexts (gay) and the concept of "gayness," while entirely disregarding the fact that "queer" has a female history (lesbian). Morris (2000) also contends that individuals who are classified as "gay" do not share common experiences, even among themselves. Numerous queer theorists sought to restrict the discourse to the examination of gay male and lesbian genders and sexualities exclusively, thereby reducing queer to an identity category, the ontological and epistemological extensions of identity categories, or the umbrella descriptors that queer theory is attempting to challenge, as Giffney (2004) observes. Critics contend that queer theory may become excessively disassociated from real-world activism and the fight for LGBT rights and social change. They contend that it is imperative to establish a connection between theoretical discussions and practical endeavours to combat societal inequality and discrimination.

Kirsch (2006) challenges the individualistic orientation of queer theory, despite acknowledging that the concept of identity is fluid and remains the most significant strength of the field. Critics contend that queer theory, despite its objective to challenge normative categories and binaries, continues to rely on and perpetuate specific normative assumptions. They argue that the emphasis on non-conformity can inadvertently establish new norms, which could potentially exclude individuals who do not conform to the specified definition of queerness. They also contend that the rigidity of social structure may restrict the individual's agency in oppressive contexts. In the opinion of critics, queer theory has disregarded the usefulness of the disciplines that it relied on, such as political economy, for analysing exploitation and inclusion, despite

the fact that the development of gay and lesbian studies was influenced by the new social movements of the 1960s (Kirsch, 2006). Kirsch (2006) contends that the beliefs of queer theory are closely reminiscent of the characteristics of late capitalism that it purports to reject. He also argues that the approaches and methods of queer theory are unlikely to result in social change. In addition, Kirsch (2006) contends that the posture is restricted to the formulation of categories of behaviour and belief, even though these constructs are dynamic and evolving. It places the individual subject in the position of internalising thoughts and emotions without the benefit of peer feedback. I contend that queer theory is employed in this study because it provides a critical framework for challenging and deconstructing normative assumptions about the sexuality of the participants, although these arguments may be pertinent. It also facilitated the examination of the binary understanding of gender and heteronormative assumptions that frequently exclude or marginalise non-heterosexual identities. Queer theory contributed to the development of more inclusive and diverse perspectives on the experiences of the participants by challenging and destabilising these norms. This is consistent with Foucault's contention that knowledge is not a fixed or objective entity but rather is generated within historical and social contexts (Foucault, 1990). He emphasised the connection between power and knowledge, arguing that power structures influence and determine the validity of knowledge in a particular society. Therefore, the experiences of the participants are not merely a reflection of an objective reality, but rather a result of the social and cultural processes that are present in their immediate environment.

3.3 History of intersectionality theory

Towards the end of the 1980s and the commencement of the 1990s, Crenshaw developed intersectional theory in the United States. From the experiences and struggles of black women, this theory is substantively derived. Crenshaw applied it to investigate and comprehend the way courts interpreted the experiences of black women (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The experiences of black women in the United States, according to Crenshaw, were discriminatory and multifaceted in terms of race, class, and gender. The interconnections and interdependence of race with other categories between white and black women, as well as their distinct experiences of sex discrimination, were identified by Crenshaw (1989). In doing this she provided a metaphor of crossroads (intersection) to describe the study of how structures of domination marginalise black women. According to Crenshaw (1989), the structures of

domination included race, gender, and class. Metaphorically, she used intersecting roads to describe and explain how structures of domination interlock to produce black women's experiences of marginality. For example, one road could be labelled as “race”, the other could be “age”, and another road could be “class”. These roads then produce more than one form of oppression as they connect at the intersection. To support the above, Crenshaw (1989; 1991) argued that, where roads intersect, there is a double, triple, multiple, and many layered blankets of oppression. For example, as a learner, when identities of being a female (sex), girl (gender), black (race) and young (age) intersect, they produce multiple experiences of privilege and marginalisation. This means that the lesbian youths’ marginal experiences could be of sexism while privileged experiences could be related to gender, race, or age among others. Notably, the aforementioned examples highlight that individuals, particularly women deal with multiple forms of oppression that inform their complex experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Therefore, intersectionality rejects the preconceived notion of race, gender, ethnicity, and class as distinct and essentialist categories.

3.3.1 Theory of intersectionality: Its Nature

Valentine (2007, p. 15) posits that an intersectional approach is essential for comprehending "how one category is utilised to distinguish another in particular contexts and how specific identities are either foregrounded or rendered salient at specific moments." Black feminist scholars acknowledged the significance of recognising the interconnections between various forms of identity, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and sexuality, in the preservation of oppressive systems, as stated by Collins (2000) and Ludvig (2006). Intersectionality has the capacity to increase our awareness of the intricacies and contradictory nature of the world that surrounds us, such as the ability to see difference within difference (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008). In the perspective of Crenshaw et al. (1991; 1995), the social construction of individuals' identities has always intersected as a united entity that enables one to perceive the broader relationship between individuals. Intersectionality also acknowledges that there is no singular identity in terms of being a woman, homosexual, lesbian, black, or able-bodied. Therefore, the metaphor of a crossroads significantly influences intersectionality, as it suggests that the development of unique experiences in response to diverse identities may be either similar or dissimilar (Collins, 2019; González & Collins, 2019).

Within this theory, identity is centred on the subject and the subject's performance of identity across time, place, and space. According to Scraton and Watson's (1998) research on Asian

women, it is crucial to "consider the construction of power relations, their practical manifestation, and the manner in which individuals respond to and negotiate these relations"

when examining difference (p. 8). Similarly, Youdell (2006, 2005, 2000) emphasises the fluidity of identification and further contends that identities are most effectively comprehended as constellations. According to Scraton and Watson (1998), the complex and evolving nature of identities can be seen by the centralisation and examination of the differentiated and heterogeneous lived experiences of black women, rather than the stable and unchanging nature of identities.

Because of the aforementioned reasons, this study employs the intersectionality theory to comprehend the experiences of lesbian youth, the manner in which they negotiate their sexual identities, and the ways in which these intersect to influence their daily experiences of privilege or marginality (Collins, 1991).

3.3.1 Debates about intersectionality

While intersectionality theory has been valuable in the work of social justice, the theory has received its criticisms. Marxist scholars have questioned the theoretical capacity of intersectionality when dealing with individuals who occupy several social positions and those that somehow have privileged identities to address issues of these particular subclasses. These scholars argue that intersectionality theory tends to essentialise identities by categorising individuals into fixed and distinct groups based on social categories such as race, gender, and class. They suggest that this oversimplification can overlook the diverse and fluid nature of individual experiences and identities. According to Salem (2018) intersectionality is a weak concept used when one claims to attend to diversity while covertly silencing the reality of the racist and classist inequalities that continue to exist amongst women. Intersectionality is seen as dividing the very same groups of people it wants to empower. Critics argue that intersectionality theory can essentialise the experiences of marginalised groups, potentially homogenising their experiences and overlooking intra-group differences and complexities and boundlessness of differences that exist in the social world (Ludvig, 2006). Nash (2008) asserts that intersectionality must move from Crenshaw's metaphor of crossroads and start focusing on categories themselves and the broader scale of hierarchy and power. Nash further argues that intersectionality relies heavily on black women as a starting point, thus silencing other identity oppressions (Nash, 2008). In addition, Warin (2017) adds that, while Crenshaw was the first to coin the term 'intersectionality', she was not the first scholar to study black women's

multiple oppressions. The critics highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the diversity of experiences within and across marginalised groups of people in the communities.

Intersectionality theory has been beneficial in the pursuit of social justice; however, it has been subject to significant criticism. Marxist scholars have questioned the theoretical capacity of intersectionality in the context of individuals who occupy multiple social positions and those who possess privileged identities to address the issues related to these specific subclasses (Nash, 2008; Roberto, 2021; Van't Land, 2020). According to these scholars, intersectionality theory tends to overemphasise identities by classifying individuals into fixed and distinct groups based on social categories such as race, gender, and class. Nash (2008) and other scholars contend that this emphasis on identity can occasionally result in an essentialist perspective on social categories, which could potentially obscure the contextual and fluid nature of identities. This may lead to a fragmented comprehension of social inequality, which could potentially impede efforts to effectively address systemic issues. This may result in the diverse and fluid character of individual experiences and identities being overlooked by oversimplification, they suggest. Salem (2018) contends that intersectionality is a weak concept that is employed to conceal the racist and classist inequalities that persist among women while claiming to address diversity.

Critics have also noted that intersectionality lacks distinct theoretical boundaries, which makes it challenging to ascertain the precise scope of the framework. The issue of ambiguity in the theoretical and methodological application of intersectionality is underscored by Davis (2008), who observes that its broad and inclusive nature can result in uncertainty. A cohesive quantity of intersectional research can be impeded by this lack of clarity. The interpretation of intersectionality is that it divides the very categories of individuals it seeks to empower. Critics contend that intersectionality theory has the potential to homogenise the experiences of marginalised groups, thereby neglecting the existence of intra-group differences, complexities, and unbounded differences in the social world (Ludvig, 2006). According to Nash (2008), intersectionality must shift its focus from Crenshaw's metaphor of crossroads to the categories themselves and the broader scope of hierarchy and power. In addition, Nash contends that intersectionality is significantly reliant on black women as a foundation, which in turn silences other identity oppressions (Nash, 2008). In addition, Warin (2017) notes that Crenshaw was the first to introduce the term "intersectionality," but she was not the first scholar to investigate the multiple oppressions experienced by black women. Critics underscore the necessity of a

nuanced comprehension of the diversity of experiences within and across marginalised groups of individuals in the communities.

The objective of intersectionality theory is to reveal the various forms of oppression that individuals encounter without fragmenting those experiences to accommodate multiple differences (Crenshaw 1989). As a result, intersectionality is a valuable framework for understanding complexity due to its solid, critical, and multifaceted investigation (Collins, 2019). In this manner, intersectionality allows a study to investigate the multiple intersecting identities of individuals that determine their distinctive experiences in specific contexts (Collins, 2019). So, I am using this theory while I am aware of its critics. I adopted intersectionality, hoping that through its lens I will understand the intersectional dynamics of the experiences of the lesbian youth in this study. I am seeking to understand how they construct and navigate their sexual identities and the meaning they give to these identities. Intersectionality theory became an appropriate lens that enabled me to unpack and understand the complexities of the sexual identities of the participants in this study.

3.3.2 How will the application of intersectionality theory assist in the study?

I employed intersectionality as an analytical tool to acknowledge the multiple identities of participants in this study and the ways in which these identities lead to varying experiences of advantage or disadvantage, as this study is centred on unpacking the fluid and multifaceted constructs of identification. First, intersectionality was employed as a lens to analyse data when the researcher wished to observe the numerous ways in which inequalities interlock and their combined impact on outcomes (Codioli, McMasters & Cook, 2019). It is a theory that substantively draws from the notion that social categories, such as gender, race or ethnicity, and social background, which are primarily associated with inequality or power, are generally interconnected (Codioli, McMasters & Cook, 2019). Subsequently, the application of intersectionality theory will facilitate comprehension of the numerous and varying methods by which the marginalised youth in this investigation encounter their sexual identities.

Secondly, Valentine (2007) asserts that intersectionality aids in the recognition that difference is situated "not in the spaces between identities but in the spaces within." (2007, Valentine, p.12). Thus, the application of intersectionality in this study implies that the identities of the participants are not fixed, but rather are reliant upon their location and time, and the way they perceive or communicate with one another's construct is distinct from that of the other

individual or group. According to the intersectional perspective, the individual's beliefs and experiences regarding gender and identity are significantly influenced by their social identities. Third, intersectionality scholars contend that the investigation of identity and experience can be facilitated by the utilisation of multiple interconnected identities, including class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, as a critical analytical tool. In this study, I adopted intersectionality to investigate the diverse ways in which race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and gender have intersected to influence the participants' experiences on multiple levels. Tonono (2012) posits that one of the goals of intersectionality is to avoid viewing individuals in binary terms and instead to appreciate the multifaceted nature of human beings who often experience a combination of privilege and disadvantage as they navigate life.

According to Symington (2004), intersectionality assists in recognising the qualitatively distinct experiences of marginalisation that individuals have because of the multiple identities that they hold. Many people in South Africa are of the opinion that relationships between people of the same gender are not considered to be part of South African culture. To shed light on the ways in which these identities interact with one another to produce a multitude of disadvantages for certain groups, such as black women and girls who identify as lesbian, the theory of intersectionality is being utilised. Because it illustrated a multitude of disadvantages that give rise to negative experiences and marginalisation of lesbian youth, this study provided a space in which these identities were discussed in great detail.

The theory of intersectionality offers a lens that can be utilised to more fully understand the common processes of marginalisation and exclusion that are associated with the experiences of the young people who participated in this research. Although the participants' various experiences were the primary focus of this inquiry, intersectionality was utilised to gain an understanding of the effects that are compounded by having multiple identities (Emmet & Alant, 2006). Since the girls who participated in this research may be at a disadvantage in various aspects of their lives and at various stages of their experiences, the issue of the multiplicity of identities is considered to be a complicated one. In this chapter, I demonstrated both via the concept of intersectionality.

Given that intersectionality theorists want to change inequalities of power that result from gender inequalities, patriarchy and class exploitation, utilising intersectionality theory in this study, therefore, does not only give value in terms of overcoming historically based conceptual

gaps but provides an important conceptual tool in understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression. In this study, the concept of intersectionality was useful to developing an understanding of the numerous and contingent ways in which black youth who identify as lesbian experience their identities. Recognising how these multiple oppressive systems intersected and interacted to shape the experiences and social structures of the participants was made easier through the application of the concept of intersectionality. As a result, I now have an improved comprehension of the complexities and interconnections that exist between the various forms of privileges and marginalisation that were in play.

3.3.3 Deliberations and criticisms of intersectionality theory

While intersectionality provided a valuable lens for understanding the complexity of social identities and systemic oppression of the participants in this study, it also faces criticisms regarding its practical application, potential for divisiveness and epistemological limitations. First, critics argue that with intersectionality there is an overemphasis on identity divisions which can sometimes lead to fragmentation within social movements (Martin, 2024; Roth, 2021; Hopkins, 2019). The concern of emphasising differences is that intersectionality might overshadow common goals and shared experiences, potentially hindering unified efforts toward social justice (Pugach et al., 2019; Harris & Patton, 2018; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). This perspective suggests that prioritising specific identities could create a divisive atmosphere that detracts from collective action. Second, there is a view that the intricate nature of intersectionality poses challenges in practical application. The challenge lies with addressing the myriad combinations of intersecting identities which can be overwhelming, leading to difficulties in creating policies that effectively encompass all experiences (Kassam, 2024; Huang, 2024; Benkirane & Doucerain, 2022). This complexity may result in overcomplicating analyses and hinder actionable solutions. There are also scholars who have raised concerns about the co-optation of intersectionality within dominant frameworks, which might dilute intersectionality radical potential (Salskov, 2020; Thomas, 2020). According to Salskov (2020), Thomas (2020) and Carbado and Harris (2019), the mainstream adoption may lead to superficial applications, undermining intersectionality original intent to challenge systemic power structures. From a decolonial perspective, intersectionality has been critiqued for its origins within Western academic discourse, which may not fully account for non-Western epistemologies and experiences (Kapoor, 2024; Belle, 2020). This critique emphasises the need to consider indigenous knowledge systems and colonial histories in analyses of oppression and

identity.

3.3.4 Addressing tensions between queer theory and intersectionality

Tensions between these theories were addressed by embracing their methodological hybridity when both frameworks were combined for enriched analyses. For instance, the study applied queer theory's deconstruction of norms alongside intersectionality's attention to multiple identities and it provided a more comprehensive understanding of social dynamics. When analysing data I became contextual sensitive about both frameworks and I was aware when to apply each framework based on the research context. In instances where fluidity of identity was central, queer theory was more applicable. Conversely, when addressing systemic oppression that were linked to lesbian learners' specific identities, intersectionality offered valuable insights.

3.4 Chapter conclusion

The study focuses on exploring the experiences of black self-identified youth and why they experience them in the way they do. The focus is also on how they construct and negotiate their identities. In this chapter, I provided queer theory and feminist theory of intersectionality as frameworks that assisted in data analysis. In particular, queer theory was used for its emphasis on fluidity and the deconstruction of binaries, such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and class, whilst the feminist theory of intersectionality was used to expose how the multiple layers of oppression individuals experience intersect and also to address the compounding effects of racial and gender discrimination that promote vulnerability to an oppressed and exploited group, such as lesbian people. The chapter also presented how queer theory has been contested and how it has advanced over the years. These theories provided a lens for analysing the experiences of self-identifying lesbian youth and how they construct and negotiate these identities everyday within their immediate surroundings.

The next chapter outlines in detail the research design and methodology used to address the research questions, and the research methods used for gathering data in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE INQUIRY

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the theoretical framework, the queer theory and feminist theory of intersectionality as theories that provided analytical lenses through which I explored the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth. Utilising these theories assisted in offering a complete understating on how to frame the types of questions I would ask during the interviews, how data was to be collected, analysed and assisted in the guiding of the findings of the research.

Firstly, I begin the chapter with a declaration of my positioning about research paradigms. Secondly, I give a detailed discussion of the research design adopted to explore the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth. Thirdly, I discuss the narrative inquiry as the methodology that has guided the study. I adopted this methodology to thoroughly engage with the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth, as Clandinin (2013) asserts that narrative inquiry methodology is a study of experience, nothing more and nothing less. Lastly, research methods utilised within this methodology as well as a detailed discussion of the issues of trustworthiness and ethics are discussed. Given the sensitivity of the study, which includes working with a group of marginalised youth on issues of gender, class, race and age, queer theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality were appropriate analytical frameworks used to understand the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth. The complexity of the identification of the participants in the study is based on the treatment of LGBT people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, which is compounded by fixed conventions of exalted heterosexuality. Queer theory focuses on an inclusive approach that sees issues of sexual identity as constantly changing and not linear. So, queer theory assisted in understanding that the sexual identity of participants in this study is seen as fluid, multiple and not linear, positional, varying in time, space and context study (Hall, 1996). Also, queer theory will assist in the deconstruction of the 'lesbian' category and highlight how fluid and complex the issue of the sexual identity is for the participants. Consequently, this assisted in drawing attention to how the 'normalisation', rigidity and stagnancy (Moyo, 2013) of sexual

identity resulting in perpetuated homophobia that has negative effects on the lives of the participants in this study within the schooling context.

4.2 The research design

A research design is a theoretically grounded framework that explicitly describes how the study is conducted and indicates how empirical evidence for answering the research questions is collected and analysed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A research design becomes a plan that the researcher follows in collecting and analysing data that assists with answers to critical research questions.

4.2.1 Positioning of the inquiry

My experience of being a teacher has taught me several things about issues of sexuality and about myself within the schooling system. In Chapter One I gave a synoptic narrative of my experience as a teacher and the role I played in this position. The focus of the synoptic narrative is motivated by what I have witnessed of the social intolerance and homophobia that take place within our society, particularly what I observed and learnt about sexuality in the school I was teaching in. Since schools do not exist in vacuums, what exists in society will ultimately influence what occurs in schools. For the 14 years I spent in that school, what I witnessed and remembered is the disappointment, hurt and disbelief on the faces of all those learners that deem themselves to be lesbians.

I remember that there were many cases where I had to intervene when the school disciplinary committee or random teachers had to try and ‘discipline these learners’, sometimes harshly or in a dehumanising manner in front of every teacher in the staffroom. The reason for the discipline was always seen as dealing with those “naughty or dirty” learners that were “corrupting” other learners at school to manage or discourage their bad behaviour. On most occasions learners cried in full view of the teachers, and some did not perform well at the end of the year. At times the learners were made to bring their parents to school for disciplinary hearing, since being gay or lesbian is seen as a misconduct level four, and they did not fit the “criteria” of the school’s envisioned learner. The punishment sometimes went as far as some learners getting suspension for “misbehaving” within the school premises. Again, the learners were sometimes forced to change schools to find a new school where their sexuality was still a secret. When responding to such issues, I had been termed ‘*uthisha wezitabane*’ (a teacher who supports lesbians). However, I found this victimisation not helping my situation and that

of the lesbian learners because sometimes I was not always present to intervene on their behalf; as a result, some teachers continued to harass and victimised these learners on daily basis. I felt it was a victimisation because it was negative comments that were unjust that were directed to me each time the issue of lesbian learners was mentioned in the staffroom.

In the school I was an SMT member, an SGB secretary, and disciplinary committee member. I sat in most of the disciplinary meeting wearing any of the three caps, sometimes wearing all. Since I was speaking about how unconstitutional and unfair that learners would be disciplined based on their sexual identities, I noticed that I was not invited to these kinds of meetings, and I felt that this was done on purpose because I always wanted the school to follow policies when dealing with disciplinary issues. When I was side-lined in meetings and the name '*uthisha wezitabane*' started circulating, I knew that this whole issue was turning ugly. People started spreading malicious lies about me and my character. I was made to feel like I was doing the wrong thing and felt excluded from the SMT group and decision-making meetings. This was done repeatedly and when I reported the issue to the principal and was passed over for a promotional position, I knew I was victimised in part for speaking out about how the lesbian youth were treated. They intentionally wanted to frustrate me.

The above experience motivated and revealed to me that people have diverse worldviews whose perspectives can only be understood through listening to what they tell as their lived experiences. Living a lie is not something I want for my life, more importantly because as a teacher I aspire to inspire, develop and impact the community, most particularly the black girl child. Ignoring what I saw at my school every day would be imprisoning my thoughts and my freedom. My mental and emotional growth also depends on the choices I make every day. Life was very difficult for the gay and lesbian learners at my school; further, my being termed the supporter of lesbians ignited the fire within me to become the voice to the voiceless stories of this youth. The grave hurdles that gay and lesbian youth face daily in these surroundings directly affect my view on the role played by the school with regards to sexuality and sexual preferences of learners. Furthermore, the fact that during the hearing it was revealed that most of these learners were not supported by teachers and the parents motivated me to want to tell their stories through this research. My everyday experiences and constant interactions with the lesbian learners within the schooling environment assisted in the choice of the paradigm that represents my worldview. Many of these learners indicated that they did not have support from teachers or parents to avoid or stop the violence.

4.2.2 Epistemological underpinnings of the inquiry

The choice to adopt qualitative research methodology was partly motivated by what I had already witnessed in my school and my desire to gain new viewpoints on what I saw on daily basis, which I already knew and to gain more in-depth evidence on the experiences of lesbian learners in schools. I chose a qualitative research methodology because of its naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Jackman, 2022). The qualitative research process consists of interrelated broad activities, namely, epistemology, ontology, methodology, theory and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To begin with, as the researcher one needs to assume an epistemological positioning, which means the researcher begins with a set of frameworks, which in turn evokes a specific set of questions, that are attempted to be answered through “specific ways”, a methodology. Given the complexity of the lives that youth have and the fact that I am focusing on a controversial issue, the interpretive paradigm offers insights into how black self-identified lesbian youth experience school and how they negotiate their sexualities within their immediate communities. Describing their epistemological perspective, Goodson and Sikes (2001) state that “The social world is an interpreted world”, and that different interpreters who have had different life experiences are likely to make different interpretations that will, therefore, result in the description of different realities (p, 39). This view therefore helped to locate the whole study of all the 12 participants by considering their social, cultural and political contexts, since the interpretivist approach to research is underpinned by the idea that the way people behave is context bound. Hence, the way of knowing is the one that aims to predict and allow people to make meaning of their own world within their context and have multiple realities. Epistemologically, this bears an anti-positivist orientation which positions knowledge and understanding as emanating from the experiences of actors in social contexts (Chikoko, 2015; Merriam, 2009). Since this inquiry explored the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth, the assumption was that their experiences might be discriminatory in nature and be reinforced by what happened in their immediate environments and various contexts in which they have immersed themselves, including their schools. This is in line with Morgan’s (1980) suggestion that interpretivists believe that the social reality of individuals is the product of both subjective and inter-subjective experiences. Therefore, this paradigm assisted in trying to help me understand the participants’ experiences as happening from within their surroundings.

Researchers argue that the ontological stance of narrative inquiry depends on the continuity of experience (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). In this regard, a person's experience in this methodology is perceived as constantly changing because it is believed that both people and contexts in which the interactions take place change (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013). This idea of experience as continually evolving is further explained by Clandinin (2006), who asserts that "experiences grow out from experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p.46). Since stories change over time, experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth therefore are constructed through the stories that one tells oneself and that others tell (Chikoko, 2018). Researchers attain this knowledge and understanding through listening, observing, living alongside another, writing and interpreting texts (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin, 2006, 2013).

When exploring experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth, I held the assumption that how they behaved and acted were influenced by numerous contexts in which they had immersed themselves, including their immediate communities and families (Blose, 2018). One of the tenets of interpretivist paradigm is to understand the real world of the first-person (subjective experience). In this regard, using the qualitative interpretive approach, the aim was to understand the subjective lived experiences of participants and interpret these to give them meaning (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), interpretive research is concerned with understanding the participants' social world. These researchers view multiple interpretations as equally important and view these as created, not found. This implies that the meanings from the participants' experiences would be determined by the social context and constructed from interaction between human beings. Morgan (1980) supports this statement by indicating that social reality in the interpretivist paradigm is the product of both the subjective and inter-subjective experiences of the researched individuals. Interpretivists value multiple interpretations as a way of providing important insights into my phenomenon, in this case through the retelling of youths' stories. Within the narrative inquiry, stories as a phenomenon are perceived as life and representation of experience (Blose, 2018). Parallel to the above are sentiments echoed by Clandinin (2006), as she affirms that stories are all what we have, and without stories we don't have anything. So, the lived experiences of the black self-identified lesbian youth were perceived as storied phenomenon in this methodology (Clandinin, 2013). Therefore, this paradigm offered great opportunity that made it possible for me to get inside the participants' experiences and tried to understand them from their told

stories. Re-telling my participants' stories in this study was an exciting activity since it resonated well with the view that South Africans are good story tellers. Accordingly, participants willingly chose and shared their stories of lived experiences.

I managed to accomplish this process by moving back and forth during the gathering of data, I also negotiated my position as I tried to build rapport with my participants in understanding their experiences whilst trying to understand the fluidity of their everyday experiences as a researcher. The interpretivist paradigm does not aim to predict what people will do – rather, it aims to understand their particular actions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Therefore, I was able to understand the contexts in which the participants lived in and work. This assisted me in understanding how their historical and cultural settings might affect their experiences (Creswell, 2008). I was therefore able to arrive at the conclusion that I should understand them not just as individuals, but as people whose lives are continually in relation and operating within their social spaces (Clandinin, 2006). Context was very important as there was a need to see people within their setting to understand their world view. Given the fact that the inquiry is concerned with understanding black self-identified lesbian youth experiences and the accounts of their lives as informed by their social, cultural and personal experiences, a qualitative approach was employed to generate texts (data of a textual and verbal nature).

4.2.3 Qualitative Approach

An umbrella term given to an array of interpretive techniques that seek to find meaning to naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world is that of a qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009). This approach is used when in-depth views about a phenomenon are required. One of many ways of exploring social phenomena in qualitative research is analysing experiences of individuals' participants or groups. Given the nature of the study which sought to explore lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth and how they construct and negotiate their lives in oppressive situations, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate since it aims to collect verbal, textual, visual and observable data which provides in-depth understanding of actions and meanings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In qualitative studies meaning, perceptions, experiences and understandings of those involved in the activity or event being studied are examined (Adams & Smith, 2003; Paton, 2001). Therefore, this approach as a research design was appropriate in understanding, describing and explaining social phenomena

from the black self-identified lesbian youth, using various methods (Flick, 2007). In qualitative research design words rather than numbers are used (Creswell, 2008; Golafshani, 2003), as a result the adoption of the above-mentioned approach harmonised epistemologically and ontologically with the paradigmatic positioning of this inquiry, because lived experiences of individuals may only be explored qualitatively (Creswell, 2008), through the telling and re-telling of the participants' stories. Consequently, the approach that was deemed appropriate in telling lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth was a qualitative research design.

Studies within quantitative research tend to focus on causal determination, prediction, and generalisation of findings, whereas qualitative research rather seeks to illuminate, understand and extrapolate to similar situations (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative studies pay special attention to the context, and they generate data in the field, at the site where participants' experiences are the issue (Creswell, 2008). Parallel to this are sentiments echoed by Flicks (2007), who declares that qualitative researchers prioritise context and cases to understand issues under research. In using qualitative interpretive approach in this inquiry, the objective was to understand the subjective lived experiences of my participants and interpret them to give them meaning (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

My concern in this inquiry is to present detailed stories of young people about their lived experiences, therefore, a qualitative approach, which is premised on people's understandings of their world's view, was the most apt for the inquiry. This therefore suggests that meanings made by black self-identified lesbian youth would be determined by their social contexts and constructed from interactions between human beings (Chikoko, 2015). Linked to the qualitative approach will be a methodology that also seeks to present young people's lived experiences from their own perspectives: narrative inquiry. As stated by Punch (2008), methodology assists in positioning the researcher in the empirical world whereby research questions are connected to data raising questions that pertain to the choice of research design (Chikoko, 2015, p. 67).

4.2.3.1 Using narrative inquiry

My experiences as a teacher and a black woman were an impetus for this inquiry. In other words, my experiences of homophobia within a school setting were a strong motivation for this research, but I was also very aware of the constitutional and structural policy changes that took place in South Africa in 1996, which were supposed to impact positively on the lives of many disadvantaged South Africans. Homophobia has significant impact on the lives of LGBT people and there have certainly been many cases of how they have had to endure pain and, in some cases, died because they are seen by some members of the society as different. Schools, as governed by South African Schools Act (1996), have institutional policies in place and actions that have been taken into place to implement these policies, but to some extent these policies have failed. So, why do discrimination, victimisation, inequity and injustice still prevail in South Africa, particularly in institutions of learning? Why are the changes ushered in by the Bill of Rights (such as a right to human dignity and privacy) within the country not realised by minority people (and for the purpose of this research, black lesbian youth) within schools, in terms of acceptance of differences and equity? Why do gay and lesbian youth have to negotiate their sexuality as they engage with their day-to-day experiences?

I became interested in exploring the situation with lesbian learners and the right to learn in any school in South Africa. The unfair treatment of LGBT learners and the evidence of poor implementation of policies in South African schools and the infringement of the constitutional rights of the LGBT learners led to the development of my inquiry which addressed the following critical questions:

- ❖ What are the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts, and why do they have these experiences?
- ❖ How do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities?
- ❖ Why do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities in the ways they do?

Clandinin & Caine (2008) define narrative inquiry as both a phenomenon and a methodology. As a phenomenon, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding people's experiences and as a methodology it is, through narratives, inquiring into and studying individuals' lived experiences over time and in context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). In other words, the experiences of individuals are diverse and are shaped by a number of stories they tell about life. The significance of narrative inquiry methodology in this study emanated from the exploration of lived experiences, because this study explored the stories told by the black self-identified lesbian youth. Consequently, the narrative view of experience was adopted to explore numerous factors informing the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth.

4.2.3.2 Narrative inquiry as methodology

Narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology resonated with my study because it privileges experiences, in that researchers within this methodology collect or construct stories about their participants, in which the main goal is to study the narrative or the descriptions of the series of events recounted by a narrator (Sader, 2014, p.155). In addition to privileging experience, within narrative research a "study of narratives is temporal and contextual, and in constructing the narratives, researchers draw on numerous research methods" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within this methodology, participants choose which stories to tell the researcher (Clandinin, 2013), resulting in narrative inquiry being the most appropriate methodology since it is open and boundless (Mara, 2009). In this regard, narrative inquiry allowed me to engage with participants' lived experiences in an unconstrained manner and without restrictions (Mara, 2009).

Sader (2014) also explains that, using narrative inquiry as a process, the researcher, as narrator, presents a "story of stories" in respect of the narrative accounts of the research as process as well as the interpretations of participants' narrative interviews (p. 156). Narrative inquiry was utilised in this study because the inquiry sought to explore the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth attending school in township and rural contexts. This exploration of experiences of young people was through a "collaboration between me and the participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interactions with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a narrative inquiry, a researcher enters this matrix and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, re-living and retelling,

the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social (Sader, 2014, p. 156).

Narrative inquiry was also well suited for this study in addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experiences in teaching and learning environments (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry was deemed more suitable than other methodologies for this study because of its ability to address issues of complexity and cultural and human centeredness and because of its capacity to record and re-tell those events that have been of crucial influence on the young people. It was through narratives that the young people created and expressed their world views and provided models of their identity and agency. Another major difference of narrative inquiry from other methodologies is related to its open-ended, experiential and quest-like qualities (Conle, 2000), meaning people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. This is supported by Clandinin (2006), who asserts that people must be understood not only as individuals, since they are always in relation and always manoeuvre their lives within social contexts. Given that I wanted to understand how young people's experiences and identities are shaped by schooling cultures, and to understand how the patterns of their different stories can be related to their wider different contexts, I believed that narrative inquiry research offered a critical methodological approach that would answer complex questions about the ways in which black self-identified lesbian youth identify within the schooling contexts.

4.2.4 Bridging the gap

It is also important to point out that researchers are often influenced by several assumptions when conducting research. Like any other researchers, narrative inquiry researchers embrace the assumption that the story is one, if not the most crucial, of the units that accounts for human experience. Since the primary aim of narrative inquiry research is to allow researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness, utilising narrative inquiry assisted in embracing young people's narratives as both the method and phenomena of the study (Conle, 2000). This methodology begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories, therefore using narrative inquiry methodology adopted a particular view of experience as the phenomenon under study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This is affirmed by Clandinin (2006), who claims that people must be understood not only as individuals, because they are always in relation and always operate and shaped in social contexts. Clandinin (2013) further points out these factors such as cultural, familial, linguistic and institutional narratives.

What was also important was locating myself as a subject within the research so that I could be able to attach the participants' actions through an understanding of their narrative histories. A close rapport with participants was established. Clandinin (2013) claims that creating a conducive atmosphere and always having open spaces alongside participants is essential in narrative inquiry methodology, for this allows the inquirer an opportunity to have deeply close rapport with participants to understand the experiences of participants. I also established a relationship with my participants. Developing a strong relationship with my participants was not easy since some of them were told that I am a teacher. The teacher-learner relationship created boundaries at the beginning of each session. It was crucial that I bridged that gap by explaining that I came as a researcher, and I would expect them to use my first name when addressing me. They decided to add "Mama in front of my name, I guess it was because of the cultural issues and the uncomfortability of calling me by my first name. In the end, using the first name basis when referring to each other created a relationship that subsequently provided a platform for both me and the participants to share stories of lived lives easily. The established relationship was very significant in the study because narrative inquiry is people in relation, studying people in relation (Clandinin, 2013).

Since "our lives are embedded within larger narratives contextualised within a longer-term historical narrative" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19), my participants' experiences and stories could only be attached to their actions through an understanding of their narrative and history. According to Sader (2014), participants' actions should be viewed as a narrative sign and must be narratively interpreted before attaching any meaning to it. As Carr (1986) and White (1981) also have pointed out, historians have clearly indicated that narratives have an inherently temporal thread in how what happens to people's present situations is related to their experiences and directly points to their future.

4.3 The research context

The context from which the study was undertaken is highly relevant to the exploration of the lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth, hence it is crucial to make it clear. Studies within qualitative research are reliant on the context, as it gives the researcher's audience a full picture about who participated and about where and when the study was undertaken (Chong et al., 2011). The authors further state that the context provides experiences that help to give a better understanding of the participants' lives by providing the historical, geographical and cultural perspective.

The study was located within the township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, specifically, the townships were KwaMashu, Inanda, Ntuzuma Stanger and the rural areas were Umkomaas, Jozini, Umbumbulu, Molweni and KwaMaphumulo. KwaZulu-Natal province is known as the Kingdom of the Zulu and the melting pot of African, European and Indian cultures. It is mostly rural and is generally perceived to be conservative (Msibi, 2012). This has partially to do with the traditional notions of identity that is still very intact in this province. Cultural roles also continue to play an important role in the ways in which people construct and perform their identities, particularly sexual identities. Participants were black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in township and rural contexts. Rural contexts are often perceived as very conservative in comparison to urban contexts. There are recurring reports from the media of homophobic utterances on same-sex relationships in these localities. The location and the focus of this study is therefore deliberate given the contradictory messages that circulate on matters around gender and sexuality, in this province.

KwaZulu-Natal is the home to the Zulu Monarch, King Misuzulu Zulu. It has a population of approximately 11,3 million people. The province has the second largest population in South Africa after Gauteng province. The principal language is isiZulu followed by English and Afrikaans. Approximately 54% of its population of KwaZulu-Natal live in rural areas, while 46% live in urban areas (Lehohla, 2004). This province has the second largest population with a population of 11 384 722 million people in 2018 (Stats SA. 2018). KZN is classified as one of the poorest provinces in South Africa, with 54% of the population living in the rural areas. In terms of race, over 87% of residents are black African people. Nearly 7% of the population is Indian or Asian and the White constitute 4.1% and lastly, Coloured people 1.4%. In KZN, the major ethnic group are the Zulu people.

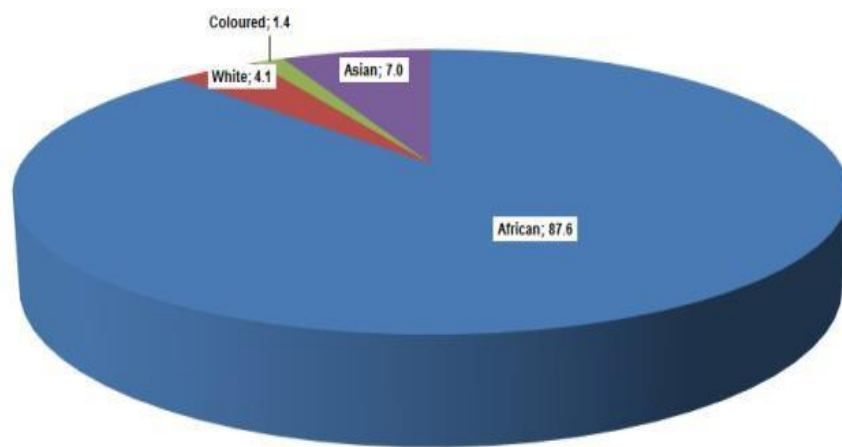


Figure 0-1 Racial composition, KwaZulu-Natal (Stats SA, 2018)

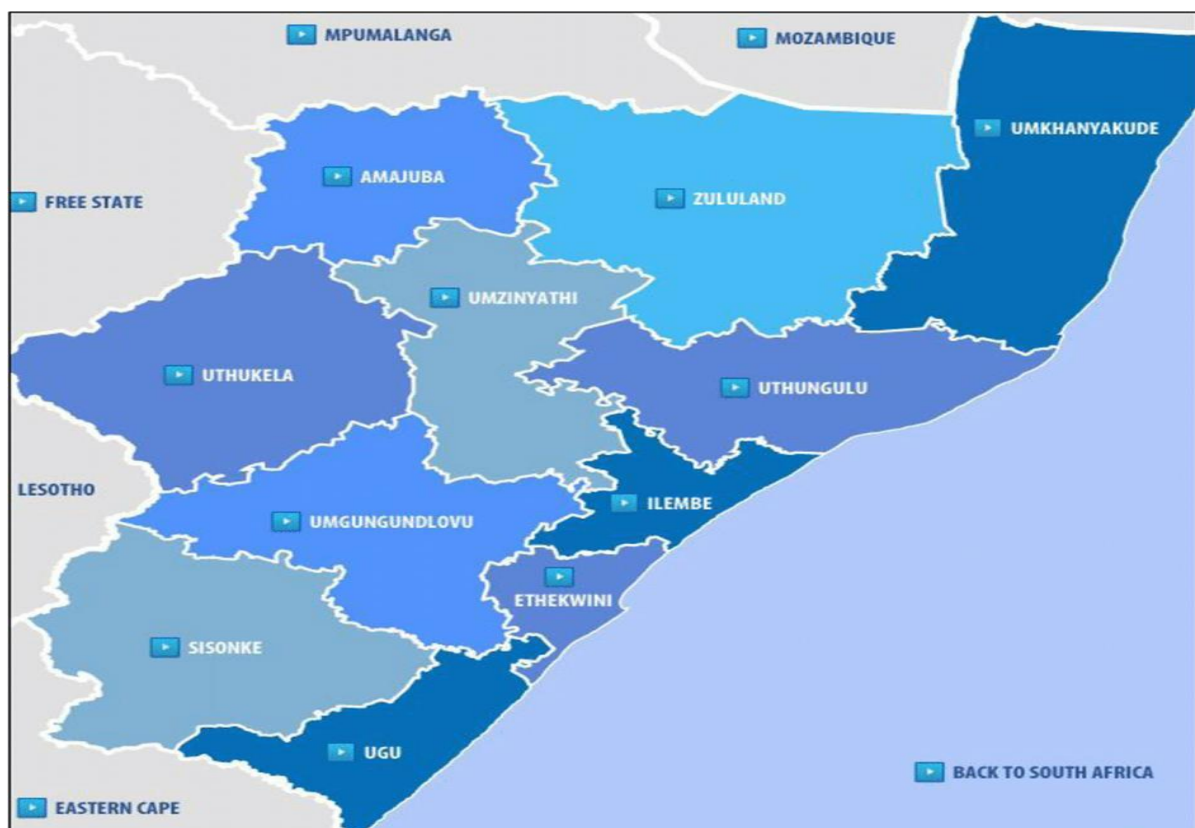


Figure 0-2 Map of KwaZulu-Natal

4.4 Selection of participants

This section explains the selection techniques and features of participants.

4.4.1 Underlying sampling techniques

One of the tenets of interpretivists is to understand the lived experiences from the point of view of those who live them (Schwandt, 1998). Similarly, self-identified lesbian youth were selected to participate in this study because no one other than could have provided relevant data of their lived experiences. Given that this study is a qualitative one and research in the qualitative studies is based commonly on non-probability and purposive sampling rather than probability or random sampling approach (Nieuwenhuis, 2010, p. 79), participants were purposively selected, meaning that clear criteria were established prior to the identification of participants. In purposive sampling, participants are selected for a particular purpose based on the researcher's judgement that the group represents diverse perspectives on the issue at hand (Briggs & Coleman, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The participants would have been self-identified as lesbians and should be black, studying in schools in rural or township contexts. Participants were selected without a particular criterion regarding their ages. The specific criteria were that they should be black, attending secondary school and self-identified as lesbian learners. The summarised biographical information of the participants clearly shows that age was not a critical principle in the selection of the participants. Participants ranges from 16 to 22 years of age. Also, since the focus was on stories or narratives of black self-identified lesbian youth, they were recognised to have stories to tell (Creswell, 2013) about themselves.

Also, it is important to highlight the use of the term 'self-identified' in this study. Participants involved would have been aware of their lesbian identity prior to the individual's selection to take part in the study. The focus of the study was to explore each participant about their lived experiences of being a lesbian. Participants in this study described themselves as having lesbian identities. This assisted in ensuring that I did not make any assumption as to a participant's sexual identity but rather I relied on the descriptions given by the girls.

Snowball sampling was utilised to identify participants. Snowball sampling is where the researcher works with a participant who tells them of a friend or colleague who might be prepared to participate in a study (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). As had been afore mentioned that snowball sampling was adopted as the sampling method, I had one individual participant who referred me to others. I knew of a learner that had self-identified as lesbian. This learner was from the township and was staying with her mother near the school

where I was teaching. I explained the purpose of the study and requested her to participate in it. This one individual participant assisted me in contacting potential participants by first obtaining their consent. She had met some of the participants from “The Gay Pride” celebration. One participant introduced the other. These participants came from different parts of KwaZulu-Natal. I obtained more

participants as I proceeded with the gathering of field texts (data). I also sought some other referrals from the other participants as I went along. That was how I got the first group of participants from township context. For the rural context, I contacted the LGBT groups that worked with youth in rural schools, and they helped me find an individual learner from a school they were working with, who is a self-identified lesbian, who was keen to participate in the study. This individual referred me to others who were interested in taking part in my research. I thereafter followed the same procedure as with the first group to contact participants when they agreed to participate in the study. I had initially planned to interview more than 16 participants, but I ended up with 12 participants. The justification for the final 12 participants was because the nature of narrative inquiry focuses on in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Therefore, a sample of 12 participants allowed me to engage deeply with each participant's story, facilitating comprehensive analysis without being overwhelmed by excessive data volume. Moreover, it was not easy to get participants that were from diverse locations, but it helped me to be specific at the initial stage when I was looking for participants. When I first met with the learner who introduced me to other interested participants, I explained that I was looking for individuals that were from the township and schooling in township schools. It was not easy to find participants because some would agree to meet up with me and cancel at the last minute. Likewise, with the individual learner from the rural location, I explained that participants were to be from the rural area and attending school in these locations.

Since the study is a narrative inquiry project and the issue explored a sensitive one, the focus on sampling was not on a big number of participants. The focus was on individuals' understanding and recollection of their experiences that had had a substantial impact on their lives; therefore, focus was on the number of sessions with participants, rather than a number of participants because narrative inquiry research is mostly concerned about how people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are by reconstructing their experiences in relationship both to the 'other' and to a social milieu (Clandinin, 2006). I was looking to have between ten to-fifteen black lesbian youth from township and rural contexts. I planned to have a balance between rural and township participants, i.e., in case I found 15 participants, eight participants were to be from rural contexts and another seven were from township contexts. I ended up interviewing 12 participants, six from each context. I did not plan to have six participants from townships and the other six from rural areas. Seeing that I was struggling to get participants because most potential participants cancelled at the last minute. After I had seen 11 participants

from the rural context, I made appointment to collect the consent form. Only six came and those were the ones I decided to work with.

Furthermore, a necessary criterion was that the selection of participants was based on their preparedness to participate in the study. I have already explained that the study was going to consume the participants' time as we were going to have more sessions of data gathering. Agreeing to take part showed that they were willing to participate and share their experiences with me. As this research inquiry focused on individuals whose sexuality is often rejected in society, it was of utmost importance that their involvement in the study was purely voluntary. It was explained that participants would be allowed to refuse and to ask questions during the process of interviewing as they deemed necessary. If at any given time they felt uncomfortable with the process during the inquiry, they would have had an option to discontinue the conversation and or to withdraw from the inquiry at any stage of the research if they felt uncomfortable. The process of entering into the midst of the participants and my life required the process of drawing attention to the importance of acknowledging the ongoing temporality of experience when it is understood narratively (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Another important point to explain was how I would negotiate my position as a 'straight' researcher engaging in queer work. On the positionality of the 'straight' researcher, Allen (2010) argues very clearly that the researcher's sexual identity has no effects on knowledge production when doing queer work. My position of being an "outsider also rendered fruitful results because my perception is that being an outsider made no difference. Allen (2010) also takes this view and perceives it as an advantage, since in this type of research participants might be more eager to recount their personal and intimate details to someone, they do not know rather than to an acquaintance.

I also see myself as a 'straight' researcher and this made me that worried that I might frown on the things that would be shared during the interviews, since I did not have close personal experience and information about the topic (other than the literature). This did not happen, and everything worked well; the process allowed the participants an opportunity to tell their stories without judgement on both sides. This situation then allowed for the most conducive and less fearful situation, therefore, resulting in positive responses from the participants. My position as a "straight" researcher therefore had no negative impact and researchers doing queer work have signalled that there is no relationship between shared sexual identity and knowledge production (Allen, 2010). Sexual identity is negotiated, fluid and flexible; to presume that my identity would have a direct relationship to the knowledge I would have produced would be detrimental. Firstly, I entered the participants' spaces while speaking also of different aspects of my identity. The

youth identified as lesbian, and I did not; our ages were not the same and the power of different positions I held might have had an effect on how they responded to my questions. Similarly, the overlapping authority of a researcher and authority of school ‘alliance’ as a teacher might have had a direct or indirect influence in the meaning given to their stories. Secondly, the study is about the experiences of human beings who are girls and black, and who have had experiences of discrimination in their lives and in their school environment. Our identities might have been connected and differed at different stages, but the relationship that developed between the participants and me was interdependent and enabled the knowledge produced through the study.

As I have aforementioned, I had anticipated that the process was going to be affected by numerous issues which in the end was not a concerning issue because in the end interviews moved towards the intended goal. Though in the first two sessions participants would be probed with questions that prompted them to respond, these two sessions for all the participants were the slowest with more silences and ‘umhs’. I understood because talking about sexuality was sensitive in nature and considered a very personal topic. I had a sense that participants felt uncomfortable and embarrassed discussing their sexual experiences, relationships and identities, particularly with a stranger. This was not an easy thing to do. I was patient and had hoped that the remaining sessions were going to be fruitful. Indeed, these sessions were more informative, and more questions were answered with long responses, not yeses and nos.

Chapter Seven draws on my experiences as a useful detail to what I heard and experienced from participants.

4.4.2 Brief introduction of participants

This biographical history of participants resulted from the narratives they gave on who they are. These histories are descriptions that merely portrayed who the participants were and had no effect in the process of data analysis. The main purpose of the biography is to introduce the participants who are in this study. Additionally, biographical histories offer a clear understanding of what motivated the participants to take part in this research and outline their contextual information within the study. When outlining the brief history of the participants, pseudonyms were utilised to safeguard their identity. Detailed information about who the participants are and their

stories are discussed in Chapter Five. The table below provides summarised biographical information of the 12 participants:

Pseudonym	Age	Context	Family	Grade
Bongiwe	19	Township	Grandmother, uncle & aunts	Grade 12
Balu	22	Township	Mother	Grade 12
Thembisile	16	Rural	Mother & father	Grade 11
Velile	17	Rural/ Township	Grandmother/ father & mother	Grade 12
Nomalanga	16	Rural	Grandmother & aunt	Grade 11
Phakamile	16	Rural	Grandmother & mother	Grade 11
Sthabile	17	Rural	Grandmother, aunt & uncles	Grade 11
Yazile	17	Township	Grandmother, uncle & mother	Grade 12
Sibusisiwe	17	Township	Grandmother, mother father & aunt	Grade 12
Mbali	17	Rural	Grandmother, mother & father	Grade 12
Zaba	18	Township	Mother & stepfather	Grade 12

Zoey	17	Rural	Mother father	&	Grade 11

Table 0.1 Biographical information of participants

The table above shows similarities and differences in the participants in terms of age, geographical origin, parental involvement and the educational level. While all participants were black and self-identified lesbian youth they differed in terms of their age, backgrounds, place of birth, parental involvement and grades in school. Additionally, the participants' ages were not important, but the fact that they were attending secondary school was key since they are in a better developmental stage at this point. Six of the participants were from the rural context and the other remaining six were from the township context, one of whom had been born in the rural area but had to move to the township at the very early stages of her childhood. Eight participants had been brought up by their grandmothers and mothers, three participants had both parental involvement and one participant was raised by her mother single-handedly. Participants' ages were between 16 years and 22 years with six participants aged 17 years of age. Seven participants were in grade 12 and the remaining five were doing grade 11.

Bongiwe...

Bongiwe is a 19-year-old girl who lives in the M-section of KwaMashu township in KwaZulu-Natal. She lived her early years with both her parents but after her mother passed away, together with her siblings, she was forced to live with her grandmother, uncles, aunts and her cousins. Bongiwe has six siblings and her eldest brother; a twin brother had passed away. She started school when she was six years old and currently attends a neighbouring high school in the township. The change in her life has come with a lot of uncertainty. Bongiwe's relationship with her sister is strained and she thinks as children within her family they are not treated the same, because most children in the household are from different mothers.

Bongiwe is discouraged from sharing her thoughts and fears with her family members, since her sister is always at work and hardly ever asks about Bongiwe's well-being and does not take Bongiwe seriously. She fears talking openly to her aunts about her life and her challenges because they do not treat her as their own child. Her relationship with her grandmother is sound but she cannot talk to her about her growing-up girl issues since she is very conservative and authoritative. Bongiwe's only confidante is her friend who is the same age as her. Some of the

decisions she has taken with her friend are problematic; for example, she has sometimes come home late, breaking her grandmother's rule. At home she is not allowed a chance to spend more time

studying because they still wanted her to do house chores during her free time. This has resulted in her having challenges with Mathematics and doing her practical for Dance and Drama in the afternoons. As an art learner, Bongiwe wants to finish her secondary schooling and become a dance teacher, a musician or a journalist. She also wants to buy a big home for her siblings and support them until they finish school.

Balu...

Balu was born at Amaoti, in the rural outskirts of Inanda, in KwaZulu-Natal and stayed there with her mother. The family moved from Amaoti to Molweni, another rural place outside Pinetown when she was 14 years. Balu is 22 years of age and lives with her mother and two siblings, her 11-year-old brother and her younger sister. Her father has been absent from her life and lives at Zwelihle, at Inanda. Balu's mother is supportive of her and has encouraged and supported her in her endeavours. Even though they have a healthy relationship with her mother, she sometimes finds it difficult talking openly to her mother about her personal life journey. Balu's mother is protective of her and Balu feels that her mother sometimes still regards and treats her like a child; because of this she decides to talk to her friends more about everything that happens in her life.

Balu is a grade 12 learner, and she attends a school in Molweni and has had challenges finishing school on time. This resulted in her having low self-confidence and thinking of quitting school because she sees herself as an embarrassment. The challenges at school have resulted in an attempt to kill herself. Since she loves English and enjoys debating, her English teacher intervened and made it possible for her to continue schooling although she is the eldest learner in grade 12. Her biggest fear is not achieving her goal of being a psychologist. Balu wants to help children who are having challenges when growing up.

Thembisile...

Thembisile, known as Thembi, was born in a rural part of Stanger and is the fourth child in a family of four brothers and a sister. She is 16 years of age and lives with her mother and her father does not live with them although her parents are not divorced. Her eldest brother and one of her sisters are independent and have left home to stay on their own. Thembi's parents have a very strained relationship that has had a very negative effect on their children's upbringing. This has resulted in the family not getting along and at times they have unhealthy

arguments over minor issues. At times the situation at home ends up affecting their progress at school; her eldest brother and sister had to drop out of school because of these challenges.

Thembi is soft-spoken and a very shy young person who loves soccer and has played it ever since she can remember. Every chance she gets she is on the soccer field with her two friends. Her friends have helped her with many things that her mother could not afford. Soccer helps her to escape from all the challenges at home and enables her to be in control of her life for a while. She would like to play soccer professionally and help other children heal through sport. She wants to be a social worker and be able to work with troubled families and help them to heal.

Velile...

Velile was born in rural Umkomaas, south of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. She lived with her father's family and was raised by her maternal grandmother whilst her father worked in Durban. She had to move from Umkomaas in 2018 when she was doing grade 11 after her grandmother died. Her brother is 22 years and Velile is 18 years of age, doing grade 12 in a township school in Chesterville. Velile lived with her mother in Umlazi, a township in Durban. Her mother is a street vendor and Velile's dream is to change the situation at home and be able to take care of her family. Circumstances at her home further compelled them to move to another township, Chesterville, south of Durban. Velile has commented on her struggle to have a strong relationship with her mother because she has only met her very late in her teenage years. Despite all the challenges she is constantly trying to build a healthy relationship with her mother. Her wish is to leave the communication line open with her mother.

Since she does not have friends in the township that she can share her challenges and fears with, as a teenager her only option is her mother. She has attempted suicide many times because she thinks that she is a burden to her mother. Despite everything, Velile enjoys school because she loves reading and playing soccer. She spends her spare time teaching young children how to play soccer. After all that she has endured, Velile believes that anything is possible for the youth if they are fully involved in sporting activities rather than being observers. She believes that if she is well educated, she is going to be able to achieve her dream of being a Chartered Accountant and improving her family's life.

Nomalanga...

Nomalanga grew up in the rural areas at Jozini, northern part of KwaZulu-Natal. She lives with her grandmother, who is 103 years old and very frail, her aunts, three sisters, a brother and her cousins. She is 16 years of age and goes to a neighbouring high school, doing grade 12. Nomalanga's parents died when she was eight years old. Even though she has a sound relationship with her siblings, she blames her elder sister for failing to understand her personality. She thinks she is always misunderstood by everyone at home and has developed resentment because of this. Nomalanga's aunts do not care about what happens to her and she has attempted suicide several times. Even though it is easier talking to her grandmother, Nomalanga feels that there is not much that she can share with her because she is old and struggles hearing. She finds difficulty trusting people and has become an introvert.

The situation became critical at home, and she decided to run away and live in the streets for a few months. One day she decided to take her own life because she was not coping at home, Social Services intervened, and she was taken to live with one of her aunts far from Jozini. The challenges she has gone through has made her lose focus in her studies, even though she is not a straight A learner, but she has never failed a class. She is scared that she might fail her grade 12 examinations at the end of the year. Nomalanga wants to be a lawyer and be able to speak for the less privileged people. Her dream of being independent has made her start to focus on her studies and has been excelling so that she can achieve her dream of building her own reputation.

Phakamile...

Phakamile is 16 years old and was born in KwaMaphumulo, a rural area near Stanger, north of Durban. She is raised by her grandmother and her single mother and lives with her three siblings, two brothers 36 and 35 years old and a 20-year-old sister. The family is not financially stable because her brothers do not have permanent jobs and that had forced her mother to look for a job in Stanger. Phakamile's mother only visited home when she was off duty. She became ill at the end of 2018, and she died within three weeks, when she was doing her grade 4 in high school near her home. She became her grandmother's responsibility. Her grandmother was a well-known community member, and this made it easier for the community to assist the family with food and necessities where they could.

Phakamile's grandmother died when she was in grade 10. She was left with her siblings and Phakamile has a very healthy relationship with her siblings, although they are half-brothers and half-sisters. As the last born she is supported and taken care of because her siblings do not want her to struggle but to focus on her schoolwork. Phakamile has been friends with a girl from her childhood and has become comfortable sharing everything with her. Growing up she has learnt from what the community did for them, that when people share what they have, they care for the needy. In school she enjoys debating and speaking for other learners. The skills she has learnt from debating have made her decide to become a lawyer and assist poor people from her community.

Sthabile...

Sthabile was born at Mantubeni in KwaMaphumulo. She is 17-year-old and lives with her grandmother, uncles, aunt, cousins and a two-year-old sister. Her mother works in a nearby town to support the family. Sthabile has an open relationship with her mother and aunt and can talk to them when she is troubled by something. This has resulted in her having to freely share her everyday challenges with them. Since the two work far from home, she has found a friend and a confidante in her younger uncle and is able to talk to him about any subject. Sthabile stated that she is confident and assertive; this is because she is fully supported by all at home. She has learnt to be independent at a young age because as a girl she has only young children who cannot help her with teenage issues.

Sthabile enjoys school, more importantly sport. She plays soccer and tennis but loves soccer more. She spends her time reading in the library and has become a bookworm because of this. She does not have friends in her neighbourhood because their parents think that she will corrupt their minds but only has three friends at school, who have been supportive of her sexuality. She loves school and has excelled in English, Geography and Mathematics. She wants to go to university and study actuary science; she believes that if she is educated, she can change her family financial status.

Yazile...

Yazile is a 17-year-old grade 12 learner in a high school in KwaMashu township, north of Durban, she lives in M-section in the same township with her grandmother, three younger brothers and her cousins. Although her mother is alive, she has not lived with her because she

is married and stays on the other side of the township with her other two sisters. When her grandmother died Yazile had to move and lived with her mother and her stepfather. She gets along with her siblings, but she always has tensions with her mother, who, she feels, does not understand her. Yazile had a good relationship with her grandmother; she was always free and sometimes a little spoilt. Her mother is strict and is worried that her grandmother was too soft and had spoiled Yazile when allowing her to be assertive. Her mother fears that too much freedom given to a child might lead her to get up to mischief.

Yazile has two friends that she is close with at school. They have misbehaved numerous times at school and have been suspended for more than 14 days and this has made her mother to be stricter with her at home. Yazile shares freely her life experiences with her friends rather than her mother. She states that she cannot talk to her mother about her life issues because she is not open and approachable. When she goes through some difficult times, Yazile dances and she uses her dance practice as a tool to escape from her problems. Her passion is to do drama at a tertiary institution, thereafter she would focus on helping children with learning barriers to achieve learning through art.

Sibusisiwe...

Sibusisiwe is 17 years of age and lives in Ntuzuma township, north of Durban with her mother, grandmother and her younger sister. She does her grade 12 in high school in KwaMashu. She shares a good relationship with her grandmother and her mother. Her family supports her in everything and understands some of the challenges she goes through as a teenager. She does not stay with her father, but they have a decent father-daughter relationship. Although she has a sound relationship with her family, she is very close to two of her school friends. Sibusisiwe's grandmother does not approve of her two friends and believes that they are a bad influence on her way of life. Both her grandmother and mother are staunch Christians, who believe that every problem will be solved through going to church. This has resulted in many clashes between Sibusisiwe and her grandmother and mother who have different beliefs when it comes to life challenges and the way a girl should carry herself.

Sibusisiwe is in the art stream at school, and she loves Dramatic Arts and Dance. Even though she sings very well and has been singing in many choral completions, she does not want to do music as a career. Most people see her as a performer and an entertainer. When she finishes high school, she wants to pursue art even beyond tertiary education. Sibusisiwe aspires to be a

producer of plays and work with youth, most particularly girls, to assist them to tell their stories through art.

Mbali...

Mbali grew up staying with her parents in Molweni, a rural place near Pinetown in Durban. She is 17 years old and has three siblings, ten, six and four-year-old sisters and an 18-year-old aunt. Her parents are divorced, and she stays with her grandmother. They always fight over her because they both want Mbali to stay with each of them in their respective homes. She spends time with her mother and moves to her father's place alternatively. This ended up affecting her schooling because at times she had to leave school in the middle of the school year if her father took her. Her father's family has been supportive emotionally and financially whereas her mother's family is going through a tough time bringing her up because Mbali's mother is struggling with drugs. This has negatively affected the whole family. Even though Mbali and her mother stay in the same home, her mother does not know what goes on in Mbali's life because she is always high. She does not know anything about what Mbali goes through as a young girl.

Mbali has a sound relationship with her grandmother who seems to understand her better and who supports her financially. Despite the close relationship that she has with her grandmother, there are times when she cannot tell her everything about her youth issues. Even though Mbali's aunt stays with them and is of the same age as Mbali, Mbali cannot tell her everything about her life because she is judgmental at times. Mbali has a close relationship with her friend, and she is the only person who supported her when she failed grade 11. She had attempted suicide more than once. That was the most trying time in Mbali's life, but no one understood why she was struggling at school. The school social worker helped her, and she could cope with her schoolwork. Mbali enjoys Accounting at school, and she wants to become a Chartered Accountant when she finishes university.

Zaba...

Zaba is 18 years old and is doing grade 12 in a high near her home. She stays with her parents, uncle and her two youngest sisters and a brother. She grew up in Ntuzuma township, which is situated north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. She described herself as down to earth and a person who loves reading and keeping fit. She is a dancer and plays soccer to keep in shape. After

completing her matric, she wants to go to university immediately but because of lack of funds and her parents' financial status she plans on working part time and hope for a miracle. Initially, Zaba was awarded a bursary from the Department of Agriculture for her outstanding academic results. She wants to study further and have a career in the same department.

She has supportive parents who understand how she struggles with her life issues. She has a close relationship with her parents, who usually advises her on life skills, but has been friends with three of her classmates from grade 10. These friends have assisted her with most of the changes she had to go through as a young woman. Zaba loves to spend most of her time doing her schoolwork or playing soccer. Zaba's dream is to finish school and to build a big, beautiful house for her parents as a way of thanking them.

Zoey...

Zoey is a grade 11 learner in a high school at Umbumbulu, South of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. She was born in Tsolo, in Eastern Cape. She was raised by her grandparents and has two sisters that are younger than her. Her grandparents died one after the other when she was doing grade three. They had to relocate to Durban to stay with their biological parents. Zoey's life under the supervision of her alcoholic parents has been difficult. She must support and take care of her sisters because her mother is always drunk. Zoey has assumed the role of a guardian taking care of and making decisions for her siblings. She wakes up early in the morning to prepare her siblings before she leaves to start school at half-past six because school starts early for the FET learners in her school.

Zoey's days are not the same; sometimes it becomes too challenging, nevertheless she wants to finish school and give support to her siblings. Her mother has been abusive, and her father has never intervened when she is beaten. Zoey loves English and Mathematics and wants to become a medical doctor, as a pediatrician, assisting children who need support something her did not experience. Zoey is a poet, and she writes her work drawing from her real-life experiences. She plays soccer to keep fit and healthy. Since her schedule is too tight, she hardly has time for friends. When she encounters difficulties, she sometimes shares them with her English teacher, Mrs. Xulu but has decided to keep most of her challenges within herself. Apart from her busy school schedule and taking care of her siblings, she feels that she was forced by circumstances to grow up too quickly.

4.5 Data generation methods

The following methods were used to gather field texts: grounded conversations, photovoice and diaries. These are conversations that put more emphasis on eliciting information that the researcher wants (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Grounded conversations are drawn from an interview technique that utilises semi-structured questions to obtain rich field texts (data) by using techniques that establish and maintain a positive and trusting interviewer-informant relationship. Grounded in-depth conversations were employed as a central tool in gathering texts with the purpose of eliciting information because the inquiry was employing narrative inquiry methodology.

A narrative interview guide was used to facilitate open-ended semi-structured interviewing. Semi-structured questions assisted with the gathering of rich data. Since depth was required, these grounded conversations involved more than one session per participant over time. Therefore, I saw participants 3-4 times for 2-3 hours per session. Participants were interviewed discreetly in places where they felt comfortable. The reason for this was firstly because the topic was sensitive and participants might have been concerned about their privacy and confidentiality when interviews were done in a public space and the fact that they would be discussing intimate aspects of their sexuality. I also worried about the participants' responses becoming public knowledge, mostly because the interviews were going to be recorded, which could not be made a secret in an open space, consequently, compromising their anonymity. Secondly, conducting interviews in discreet spaces also guaranteed confidentiality. Having interviews in more private spaces helped to keep confidentiality and anonymity among the participants. Lastly, these spaces allowed participants to feel comfortable and assisted in building trust between myself and the participants. Building trust was crucial for establishing rapport between us. I had hoped that this was going to encourage honesty and the willingness to communicate openly, particularly when discussing such personal stories.

Further, participants were informed about the aims of the inquiry. As stated by Cohen et al. (2007), participants need to receive clear explanations of what is expected from them to participate voluntarily. Even though it has been argued that a recorder introduces an element of artificiality, it was used (with permission from the participants) rather than depending exclusively on notetaking (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Though the participants were grade 11 and twelve learners and able to understand English, I made sure that at the beginning of interviews I gave them an option of language to be used during the interviews. The questions were in English, and the participants agreed that they will use both IsiZulu and English when responding to the question. Hence data was first translated and transcribed. During the data collection process, I had significant learnings about the study's aims. First, the plan to execute the data gathering was ready and I had hoped that the process would be easy, but it did not happen that way. I had overlooked identifying possible challenges that I might encounter during the data gathering period. Journaling my experiences helped me to do reflections on the specific difficulties I encountered during the first two sessions of the data gathering process. I was able to note aspects of the interviews that did not go as expected. Second, the first two interviews failed to give me data that I could have used in the analysis. The participants were only responding by giving one word or just one sentence. As a researcher, I felt that I was not asking relevant questions that would allow participants to say more. It was my responsibility to bring the discussion back to focus, failing which the aims of the study were not going to be met. I reworked the way I phrased my questions and asked open-ended questions that allowed for depth in the participants' responses. In my third interview session, I found that I needed to ask more probing questions. Finally, the process got better after I realised that it was okay for the participants to be more nervous and scared to talk to me about their experiences, because for some it was their first experience of being interviewed and by a person they were engaging with for the first time. I learnt that I had to constantly reassure them by being open and avoid asking threatening questions until the later stage of the process. I knew that if I became flexible, I would achieve the aims of my study.

It is useful to explain how saturation or richness of data was determined. Sampling in this was diverse and included participants with varied backgrounds and experiences that captured a wide range of perspectives, enhancing the richness of the data. Further, in-depth interviews were used to conduct comprehensive interviews that encouraged participants to share detailed narratives that provided deeper insights into their lived experiences.

4.5.1 Personal documents

The use of personal documents is one of the major sources of collecting data in qualitative research. In this study participants had to use diaries to journal their everyday experiences. They needed to capture moments and stories happening right where they are. These documents

were going to be helpful in providing intimate insights into participants' experiences, thoughts, and emotions. These diaries were to be always available to the researcher on request for data analysis. An advantage of using these documents as the data source was that they were readily available and produced by the participants. Using the diaries assisted in the sense that they did not change the interview setting in a way the researcher might.

4.5.2 Photovoice as a method

The study used photographs and diaries as useful methods to collect data that shed light on the participants' personal journeys. One way of promoting a higher degree of authenticity for narrative inquiry data is to create an opportunity for the researched participants to provide texts that are much more meaningful to the participants. This is achieved by using different research methods that elicit texts from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomenon, using

photovoice allows participants to take photographs of what is meaningful to them. Photovoice does not only create spaces for participants to express elements of their lived experiences but also allows for additional texts that complement narrative interview data. Photovoice is also a tool that is used when the researcher is tackling issues of social justice (Molloy, 2007). In Molloy's (2007) view, the technique used in photovoice gives an opportunity to different individuals that are oppressed to take social action by raising awareness within their communities, together with policymakers using photographic processes. Harley et al. (2015) and Bardach (2021) describes photovoice as the technique of placing cameras in the participants' hands to produce photographs that document their lived experiences and realities. The basic tenets of photovoice are that it represents the daily realities of individual experiences by giving participants cameras to produce photographs that present their own lives through photos (Harley, 2012; Liebenberg, 2018). Participants in this study represent an oppressed population and using photo voice is key in defining their realities (Bardach, 2021; Harley et al., 2015).

Photovoice was utilised not only because of its potential for engaging young people in analysing personal issues that affected their lives and in making sure that they act upon themselves, but also for the fact that it offered fun and a relaxed atmosphere for participants. I observed this during the camera orientation. For some participants, holding a camera and taking photos as a practice run provided a participatory learning environment that allowed each participant to learn from each other and to be creative in a way that reinforced an image of themselves as smart and capable young people. Given the sensitive nature of the inquiry, it was crucial to sustain the participants' engagement in the research. Taking photographs was not only allowing learning to take part in changing their situations, but participants enjoyed experimenting with cameras as well, which was a new experience for many of the participants. Peabody (2013) defines photovoice as a technique that is instrumental in giving participants a chance to ground social issues within their own definitions of their fears. Therefore, the use of photovoice methodology offered alternative strategies and involved participants in their own knowledge production.

Many scholars who use photovoice in their work have acknowledged the valuable perspectives of the participants and their understanding of a particular phenomenon (Kessi, 2011; Luttrell, 2010; Moletsane et al., 2007; Molloy, 2007; Morojele, 2013). According to Wang (1999), using photovoice prioritises the 'voices' of community members and assists their efforts in

recognising and speaking about their problems and find solutions. Consequently, photovoice

afforded an opportunity for the youth to provide their communities with a valuable perspective on their problems and resources. The participants' photographs and narratives were potentially key factors in opening the eyes of adults to problems and resources they observe daily but tend to overlook. The chosen participants' photographs were a point of departure for the discussions, and this assisted in opening possibilities for further discussions.

4.5.3 Sequence of activities

A workshop on the use of cameras in photovoice took place in four sessions, each with three participants per session. This brief introduction of participants to cameras was meant to take place in two sessions, each with six participants, but those participants who could not make it to the first session were seen during the most suitable time, which resulted in the four sessions. At one of the grounded interview sessions, the inquirer had briefly explained to the participants that the following meeting was going to be photovoice. What it meant was going to be explained fully in the first session. The participants were to take photographs of places that made them feel safe (comfortable to be in) or unsafe (or made them feel uncomfortable to be in). With the participants' permission, these photos were to be presented by participants, where they explained why out of all the pictures taken, that one was important. Some of the photos are included and used in the writing up of this thesis. A number of these photos were used in the discussion section of the thesis, though not all the pictures were used (see Chapter Seven). Being that the participants would have to take photos that might trigger some past experiences, the inquirer decided that the session had few participants who might be smaller in number and be easier to handle should emotions come into play.

4.5.3.1 Training

In the sessions, each participant was given a camera. They were all excited and it seemed like none of them had ever used a camera or heard of the term photovoice before. So, it was crucial for the inquirer to introduce participants to this technique of data generating information. After many trial-and-error attempts of training on how to operate a camera, and how to take photos, the session ended with many random photos of the groups that were deleted before the session was over. The last activity provided ethical guidelines on how to take photos and the emphasis was on the importance of taking photos without showing faces. This training is what Mitchell, de Lange and Nguyen (2016) call the 'no-face approach' where participants take photos with unidentifiable markers such as people's faces, building names, etc. Each session lasted for two

hours, I had planned for an hour and a half, but the excitement and enthusiastic attitude towards each session required that the inquirer did not cut short the fun and enjoyment of taking their own pictures, buildings and anything they deemed suitable during the training. A chance to ask questions and comments were given, since these might assist in giving clarity should the participants encounter challenges.

Each session had its own challenges, but after many trials, participants were requested to take pictures to keep as photography-based journals that depicted their day-to-day lives. Later, in the inquiry, I met with an individual participant for an individual photo-sharing session and photographs that participants chose which they thought best represented their experiences within their spaces were selected. The photos that were shared were about the participants' hopes, challenges and accomplishments. Participants were told about the day where they would share their photos in a group with other participants present. I then met with all the participants at a later stage for a group conversation and the photo sharing session. The group conversation was one session with all the participants. On the day, I picked up the participants that were closer to the place and those that were far out from the central venue were given transport money to come to the meeting. During the photo sharing session participants selected photographs that were the most representative of their reality and discussed these photos during the photo-sharing sessions with other participants. In a one-on-one session, participants were notified that only those that wanted to share would do so, no one was forced to share about their photos. During the photo discussion session, when the presenters were discussing their photographs, other participants would ask a series of questions. These questions assisted all of us in learning more about interpreting photographic images. Participants also shared their experiences, good or bad, with other participants. As expressed by Mitchell (2011) the photograph-sharing session present an opportunity and a valued platform for participants to engage extensively, through discussions and reflections in understanding their sexuality. Participants used photovoice as a tool for their emancipation of being excluded and often violated individuals in their communities (Musoke et al., 2016). Their presentations revealed the way they engaged with and perceived the communities they lived in (Ngidi, 2020).

4.5.3.2 Assessment of the steps followed

This method of eliciting texts assisted the inquirer to uncover enriched understanding of experience by shedding additional visual and narrative data. Those presentations were recorded verbatim, and these verbatim recoded texts were transcribed. They were then no longer photos

but texts from the photos used to tell others about the participants' lives. The summary of a five-step data collection outline is discussed below:

1. Camera orientation session.
2. Follow-up.

3. Collection and initial review and analysis of photographs and diaries.
4. Individual photo-sharing session.
5. Group conversation and group photo-sharing session

One critical point to highlight about the group presentation and photo sharing is that at this point of the study, participants were meeting for the first time. I needed to be careful that I treated this session with the utmost sensitivity. I did not want the participants to feel that meeting other participants was my way of outing them to the other participants. On the day, I started by explaining the purpose of the session and how I hoped that everyone would learn something new from the fellow participants' experiences. I also asked them if they wanted to set any guidelines that were going to assist in making sure that everyone was safe and protected within the room. Participants came up with guidelines such as confidentiality, creating a safe space for all and treating each other with respect. Upon asking what they meant about creating a safe space for all, they explained that they all have one thing in common, being lesbians, but their experiences might not be the same. Therefore, it was their duty to make sure that they allowed vulnerability and crying to happen without judgement.

I also asked if we could start by doing one or two icebreakers. These activities helped in diffusing any inhibitions they might have had. The debriefing after these activities also helped, I firstly invited participants to introduce themselves (by giving them their name and where they came from) and to share about how they felt during the activities and what were their key learnings about the activity, if there were any. After the ice breakers, I was ready to start the session, I again reminded the participants about the guidelines, and I then asked for volunteers to share their presentations of their photos.

Some of the photographs taken by the participants were not included in the thesis as they were rather a tool used to let the participants speak about their personal spaces and their experiences in and around these spaces. They did not in any way expose the participants' identities. Only those photos that participants agreed to be discussed and included in the thesis and texts transcribed from the words of what the participants shared were used as their stories.

Using photographs to gather texts increased the possibilities of seeing events and perceptions of the participants' events within the context of wider life experiences. Photovoice was used as a powerful tool that enabled the participants to portray, reflect and express issues affecting their lives. Using photovoice required the participants to reflect about their

experiences and spaces that made them feel safe and the reasons why they loved being within those spaces.

4.5.3.3 Choosing diaries as data collection tools

One of the strengths of narrative inquiry is that it is not associated with short-term elementary experiences and actions, but it is more concerned with longer-term or larger-scale sequences of actions, experiences and human events (Carr, 1986). Participants' lives are seen as a whole, with the public and the private viewed as things which cannot be separated, thus helping to transform the present and shape the future (Carr, 1986). The inquirer chose diaries as methods of eliciting data because, according to Jones (2000) and Elliot (1997), diaries have been used in feminists' research to focus on ordinary lives. Diaries are viewed as 'documents of life' that indicate a self-revealing record that might intentionally or unintentionally yield information regarding the dynamic experiences of informants (Jones, 2000). The use of diaries in this inquiry was motivated by the fact that diaries are relevant instruments that collect detailed information about a participant's behaviour, their everyday interactions and other aspects of their individual daily lives.

According to Leigh et al. (1998), keeping of a diary in a qualitative study has numerous advantages. Diaries offer greater frequencies of reported behaviours of the participants, especially of rather commonplace behaviours, more than that of traditional data collection methodologies. Since participants recorded their experiences on the day they occurred, occasionally within a short time after the occurrence takes place, logging this experience in a diary could reduce forgetting (Armstrong et al., 1992). Furthermore, the use of diaries was deemed necessary for the better capturing of sensitive information of the participants' everyday experiences than other methodologies (Huby, 1997). Lastly, diaries give a better sense of the rich context that surrounds behaviours of interest and provide a better understanding of the natural flow of various behaviours and their interrelatedness (e.g., hanging out, alcohol use, syringe acquisition, drug use, sexual).

4.5.3.4 Making entries

Goodson and Sikes (2001) state that diaries are useful in providing practical and factual information that can assist during analysis and interpretation of data. The topic researched in this study is a sensitive and a personal one, asking participants to make entries of their

experiences from the beginning of the research had many benefits for all of us. Not only did the diaries offer optimal ways of getting information for me, but they became tools for participants to write about their feelings and a platform to process their difficult times. Participants had to capture events, episodes and experiences close to where they unfold. This provided an opportunity for the participants to trace these experiences over time. These personal documents were used to track events as closely as possible to where and when they occurred. Participants were asked to record or log their daily activities and how those activities made them feel. These also assisted in keeping track of how these feelings have changed overtime. I was also fully aware that these diaries might sometimes not be relied on because participants might not fill them in as much as I would like them to. Therefore, I was not necessarily fully reliant on the data them as primary sources of texts, but they offered an extra supporting method of gathering texts. Although diaries were not the only tool in data collection, they were key in giving clear information about the participants' histories, personal developments and their day-to-day experiences. I was overwhelmed by the information from these documents during the data analysis period.

I also made sure that I kept a reflective journal that assisted me in recording information on who I had seen, whose diary I had read and my train of thoughts about the whole inquiry exercise. The use of a journal became a success during the process, because like the participants keeping diaries, it had a powerful influence on what I needed to reflect on and the extent to which I could engage in critical reflection about the process of doing this study. It also enabled me to understand the participants' processes more effectively. As a reflective tool, it assisted journaling important events, significant learnings, questions and good and bad experiences for me to extract meaning from and to do better the next time.

4.5.3.5 Field notes

Field notes are extensively recommended in qualitative research as a tool for detailing needed contextual information about the research, researcher and the researched (Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018; Maharaj, 2016). These notes are written accounts of observational data that are produced by the researcher during the data generation period. Field notes are helpful in describing participants' behaviours, practices, spoken words and other interactions among the participants and the contexts within which they interact (Swain & King, 2022). Using fieldnotes also permits researchers to be flexible and to work inductively, by asking probing or additional questions, planning for follow-up interviews and observations with participants (Creswell, 2007). Although this inquiry was not an ethnographic study, but the field notes

played a crucial role in the documenting and observation of the participants' behaviour during the interview sessions (Hoey, 2014). As an inquirer I wrote and recorded everything I observed during data gathering sessions. From the beginning of the fieldwork, during the sessions or after the session, I wrote field notes about my experiences, participants' experiences, daily engagement with the participants, including their body language, expression or phrases, gestures, spoken words, hesitations and silences. Later, the field notes would be transferred into the journal. Capturing of the participants' engagements throughout the project was interesting and very stressful. Many participants went through many challenges whilst I was collecting data. For example, a participant would remember a traumatic experience and started to cry, or a question would remind a participant of something good or bad. The silences and "uhms" and facial expressions would be noted for further exploration, only if the participant agreed to it. Field notes assisted me in capturing the heat of most situations I found myself and participants in, the feelings I experienced and what I perceived to be feeling of the participants at that time. Given the sensitivity of the phenomenon researched, using field notes allowed for a vivid and specific experiences of the inquirer and participants (Maharaj, 2016; Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018)

Similarly, the use of field notes assisted with planning and the processes of the scheduled session with participants. However, as a novice researcher I encountered challenges with regards to being adequately precise in taking and understanding my notes. There were instances when I visited my notes after each session for the consolidation of the day's work, only to be shocked to find that at times I had notes that were incomplete or had highlighted sections that did not make sense to me. These notes were sometimes not beneficial in giving data that would be useful when analysing data. Each time I experienced this setback I realised that I needed to improve my skills of taking notes in the field so that the notes can be useful in the end. The other challenge was when I had left out something that was central, looking at the notes and what was written always made me think that maybe I had left out information that was significant and had failed to note down. Throughout the sessions, I constantly felt guilty about my presence as a researcher and the influence it had on my participants. I was very aware of what was going on, the emotions, the silences and discomfort (evidenced by their posture). Some participants were careful not to divulge sensitive emotions at first and later flooded these in. My presence and the taking of notes at times made me felt guilty and uncomfortable for causing discomfort and opening the wounds of the participants.

Though some of the questions were left unanswered but engaging in these sessions assisted me in improving my skills of collecting data. With all issues that come with research the reference to ‘opening of wounds’ is not meant in a negative way. The study brought positive effect on participants lives because through the research participants were able to identifying challenges and shared these with the researcher and other participants. Additionally, this research uncovered unique obstacles that these learners face, including discrimination, bullying, and mental health issues, which can impede their academic progress and well-being. Further, understanding their experiences validates these learners' identities, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within educational settings. Lastly, insights from this study can assist in guiding teachers and policymakers in creating inclusive policies and creating supportive environments that can enhance the educational experiences of LGBT learners.

4.6 Thematic data analysis

Thematic data analysis is a qualitative method that the researcher uses in the process to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process, the researcher wants to find out if the set of data collected and the themes that emerges answer the research question meaningfully (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The thematic process requires the data to be systematically organised, described in detail and interpreted to the particular theme (Vaismoradi et al, 2013). The researcher identifies themes by carefully engaging in the reading and re-reading process of the data relevant to a particular research question. In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered. Thematic analysis was used because of its flexibility and the fact that it could be adapted to several research contexts and disciplines. This was the most suitable method of analysing data, since my study sought to analyse and interpret participants’ stories. Using thematic analysis offered a systematic approach that assisted in understanding data and in guaranteeing rich insights into the participants’ stories. Also, thematic analysis was appropriate because the data was collected in different phases with different tools. (Fereday & Muir- Cochrane (2006) defines thematic analysis as a “search for themes that emerges as being important for the description of the phenomenon” (p. 82). Through thematic analysis I organised and described data in detail and further interpreted various aspects of the research topic (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the data in response to a specific research question was a process I followed when using thematic analysis. In this study, thematic analysis offered a flexible form of analysis. Therefore, texts were categorized into broad themes and relevant information clustered into coded categories

(Goodson & Choi, 2008).

Since this study sampled a small group of lesbian youth, its main focus was not on prevalence but on the emerging themes that the data produced. Scholars maintain that part of the flexibility of thematic analysis is that it allows the researcher to determine themes in several ways (Tuckett, 2005). In the next section I provide rich thematic descriptions of the participants' views, experiences, meanings and realities, so that the reader is afforded an opportunity to get a sense of the important themes that emerged from the data.

4.6.1 Generating codes, identifying patterns and defining themes

I engaged with participants at all the sessions during the data generating process. I translated and transcribed textual data myself. So, when I got to the analysing stage, I had familiarised myself with the data. After organising the data into manageable chunks, I thoroughly embarked on the process of getting to understand the data to the point where I became familiar with the depth and breadth of its content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I repetitively read the data (including translated and transcribed data), searching for meanings and identifying common patterns. Prior to the coding process, data was re-read to ascertain patterns in the data.

4.6.2 Familiarising myself with data

The process of data analysis required that I use different coloured charts, placed on the walls around the room to start with analysis of data. I had translated and transcribed the data familiarising myself with it. I had printed and cut out the participants' responses and shaded them into different colours. I went through the process of arranging the data according to responses that might answer the first, second or third question and put it in different folders. I started the process by walking around the room grouping the responses by pasting them around the charts as coloured codes or words. I put the responses and chose responses for each of the questions. This process was the same for each of the three questions. I checked through the collage noticing similarities, differences, and taking notes to make sense of the data. This was also the systematic way of identifying patterns emerging from the data. I immersed myself in the data, arranging, reading, pasting and re-reading data to familiarise myself with its content. In line with the process is Braun and Clarke (2012) argument in that data analysis is not a linear process where a researcher just moves from one phase to the next with ease. The process was time consuming and tiring, but I was content when I saw how the analysis was starting to take shape.

4.6.3 Generating codes

After identifying and producing initial codes for each data sub-set, I integrated these into a whole. For each sub-set of data, an analysis worksheet which combined all the data collected was created. From the created analysis worksheet, semantic coding process started (Clarke & Braun, 2013) where I highlighted expressions or phrases, key words and commonalities from the data. I then used different colour stick-ons on each analysis worksheet to highlight what the participants were talking about or referring to in the data. I placed these stick-ons beside the

participants' words and phrases in different colours. On separate charts I created central groupings of data based on similarities in all the codes across all data sets.

Next, patterns were identified in data to be able to generate themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 63), a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question". Bearing this in mind, I revisited my three research questions specifically looking for patterns in the codes that addressed each research question. At first, I asked: *What are the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal rural and township areas?* This first research question required me to search for patterns that addressed what experiences of the black self-identified lesbian youth were. My second step was to search for patterns in the codes that addressed my second and third research questions respectively. To be specific, I searched for similarities in what the participants mentioned about how they construct and negotiate their identity and the reason why their sexual identities are constructed and negotiated in the ways they do. After thorough consideration of all the patterns I grouped all patterns into categories to which I later allocated headings.

My understanding is that looking for themes was an active process where themes are not discovered but constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, I examined all the categories I had constructed in more detail to identify what each category focused on in terms of the research questions. I started to consider the categories that emerged more theoretically as themes. These themes were categorised in terms of similarities, differences, relationships, links and contexts. My next step was to play around with the various categories, constructing broad themes and sub-themes that addressed the three questions from the codes until I was pleased with them as possible themes.

After a rigorous review of the themes, I had come up with the subthemes and when I felt satisfied with this phase as it formed part of quality checking (Clarke & Braun, 2013); I started to check the themes against the data. When I felt that all the themes had been organised into key ideas, I also checked if the themes did in fact correlate with the data. In this regard, I moved back and forward looking for the checking whether there was sufficient data to support the theme. Where there was insufficient data to support the theme, I transferred those themes into sub-themes.

4.6.4 Naming the themes

From the process of familiarising myself with data and coming up with themes, I was left with the task of defining and naming these themes. When defining and naming the themes I ensured that each theme was carefully aligned with the participants' meaning of her story by going back to the participants' written and verbal data to identify, phrases, quotes and expressions that they used. From these data, extracts were selected to present each theme analysed.

Lastly, I used the most suitable and compelling extracts as examples in supporting the presentation of themes. In this final phase of data analysis each theme was intensely and supported with relevant extracts. This process called for an extensive process of back and forth checking to see if each theme responded to each research question by providing synthesis of the findings, that drew from the data extracts, existing reviewed literature and the theoretical framework that informed this study. This is the stage where Clarke and Braun (2013) state the weaving together of the analytic narrative and data extracts by expressing a comprehensible and convincing story about the data, where one contextualises themes in relation to existing literature.

It is crucial to note that the process of analysing data was not an easy one, I faced some challenges during the reviewing and defining stages of themes. Firstly, I had to go through several possible themes, reviewing and modifying them with the intention of finding out if they were relevant, made sense, or whether there was adequate data to support these themes. Short quotes may have been needed to aid in the understanding of specific points of interpretation and demonstrate the prevalence of the themes. I also struggled with choosing more relevant passages of quotations to be included when supporting and giving the readers an essence of the original meaning of the texts. During this phase, a detailed analysis for each individual theme was written down, but identifying these themes and sorting them was difficult because each theme seemed important and befitting in answering the questions of the study. Also, some of the themes were overlapping and it was tricky for me to choose the most appropriate ones. Some of these themes were removed not because they were not useful in addressing the research questions, but because they seemed very closely related to each other. During this phase, it was evident that some themes did not have enough literature to support them, or the data was too diverse (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.6.5 Defending the trustworthiness of the study

In qualitative research, data is not ‘validated’ as the data collected does not involve numbers and therefore cannot be easily ‘triangulated’. Instead of the concept of validity, that of trustworthiness in relation to credibility, dependability, confirmability and rigour is mostly used. The issue of trustworthiness within this study is examined in relation to these four elements (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.7 Credibility

This element refers to the confidence that the data is accurate (Polit, 2001, p. 32). It poses questions of whether the researchers’ analysis and participants’ answers are corresponding. Shenton (2004) views credibility as an ability of the researcher to sustain similarity between findings and reality. While my study was not a positivistic one, however, to bring credibility to the analysis of data generated I had to make several considerations. Initially, I had to bring data from different sources that point to the same conclusions together (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). I chose to enhance credibility through allowing the informants to read the transcribed data to check if the transcriptions captured their experiences in the ways they intended. The use of mixed methods (semi-structured conversations, photovoice and diaries) was also useful in ensuring that the data generated was credible. Secondly, my mentor and the critical reader within the university read and gave feedback and input on both analysis and interpretation, which assisted in improving confidence that the data and the conclusions I reached matched. Thirdly, from the beginning of the study I belonged to a PhD cohort of self-reflexive researchers. During the study, I was offered an opportunity to present part of my work-in-progress through my PhD journey. Lastly, throughout the course of analysis I went back and forth from the data looking for explanations, clarifications and understandings instead of making generalised statements. The ultimate goal was to tell stories of lived experiences of and how they navigate their lives from the participants’ viewpoint (Taylor- Powell & Renner, 2003).

4.8 Dependability

Dependability relates to reliability and reflexivity (Rolfe, 2004). It refers to the extent to which the results would come out the same if the study was repeated by a different researcher using similar methods with the same participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). According to

Begley and Tobin (2003), reflexivity is central to the audit trail in which researchers keep a self-critical account of the process of the research including the internal and external dialogue. Firstly, to ensure dependability, the process within the study should be reported in detail. I provided a well detailed description of the methodology design I used in this study, aiming to give the reader a clear picture of why this design was employed. I chose and used methods and tools that are in line with the processes of the narrative inquiry, which, for this study, is to give the detailed accounts of the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth, how they construct and negotiate their sexual identities and the why they do it in that manner. Also, I wrote a reflectivity chapter that assisted in declaring any biases and provided the participants with my reflections and my position as a researcher and a teacher. Lastly, I wanted to ensure that trust between me and the participants was improved since Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba (2007) highlight this aspect as critical when researching the sensitive topics as it was with this study. I ensured that I created conducive spaces and built a sound relationship with participants by conducting interviews in spaces where they felt comfortable. This helped me to better understand them and their experiences.

4.9 Confirmability

Confirmability is mainly concerned with the degree to which the results of the research could be confirmed or corroborated by others, as stated by Rolfe (2004); it mainly deals with how the study is presented. This process is when the researcher documents the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study to ensure that the findings emanate from the participants' reports of their experiences rather than from the researcher's preferences (Shenton, 2003). After the transcription was finished, I gave participants an opportunity to read the transcribed grounded interviews. This allowed informants to confirm that what I had transcribed was a correct analysis of the informants' experiences and not merely my own preferences.

4.10 Rigour

According to Holloway and Wheeler (2002, p. 251), the means by which we show integrity and competence' is referred to as rigour. Further, Burns and Groves (2003) associate rigour with openness, and link rigour to having a philosophical perspective and thoroughness in collecting data (p. 391). I ensured that the data generation process was done thoroughly and with great insight. A reflective journal was very helpful in recording the entire research process.

The interviews I conducted with the participants were lengthy; though I had my notes and journal, I did not rely on them completely, because the notes were sometimes brief. I also had follow-up sessions with participants. I felt that spending long periods of time with the participants was important in building trusting relationships with them. I also engaged the participants and asked if they agreed with the data and the interpretations I had made. A reflective journal was very helpful in recording the entire research process.

4.11 Research ethics

When considering ethical issues in research, one would reflect about all the vital procedures within the study that may violate the rights of the participants. In this regard most, ethical issues in research fall into one of the four categories: protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy and honesty with professional colleagues (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p.181).

4.11.1 Ethical standards observed during the inquiry

In this study there had to be ethical practices that I adhered to as a way of protecting the privacy of the participants, as stated by Allen (2017). These were considered carefully in the decisions that I took, since some participants in my study were under 18 years of age; therefore, extreme sensitivity to ethics was imperative in this study. Participants were assured of confidentiality of their names, then, pseudonyms were used to refer to participants and to ensure confidentiality during data analysis and dissemination of findings. Josselson (2007) claims that it is the narrative inquirer's obligation to have an ethical responsibility to protect the privacy and dignity of participants by obtaining signed consent forms from parents, caregivers and/or legal guardians. It was difficult to obtain participants given that this was a sensitive matter that was under investigation. The number of participants was small. Although about 16 participants were intended, I ended up interviewing 12 participants. This was because I had struggled to get participants for a long time, finding 12 participants was still within the intended number and the goals of the study. Snowball sampling assisted in this regard. Another challenge was the issue of time that was required to complete this study. In general, participants were expected to sacrifice around 12-14 hours each for this study. This proved very challenging, given the fact that participants had other educational and/or social responsibilities that resulted in some of the sessions being cancelled minutes before the scheduled times for interviews. I understood and always made time to see those that were

having challenges, even though I had explained the demands around time from the start of the project to prevent participants from discontinuing their participation in the study.

After finding and meeting with the participant, each was given a consent form to give to the parents or guardians to sign to allow participants to take part in this research, before I started conducting the interview with them. When writing the letter to parents I was extremely careful not to mention that the study was going to be about black lesbian youth because the study had potential to harm the participants. Signing the informed consent was a critical part of the study, since this prepared participants for the nature of the study research and the expectations from their part. (Nijhawan et al., 2013). Signing the consent of involvement to the study was tested by the extreme conditions under which the research took place. Permission to record the interviews was also obtained from the participants before starting the interviews.

4.11.2 The unpredicted episode

The issue of ethics sometimes becomes complex when it comes to the relationship between the researcher and the participant through shared engagement and the experience gained during the interviewing processes. One incident that took place left me with several questions with regards to ethics. During data gathering, one participant (Nomalanga), hysterically called me in the early hours of the morning, one Monday in November. She requested that I drove her to the police station and later to the clinic because she was raped by several males at a party in the township the night before. To say I was shocked is an understatement, I was disgusted and angry because of the inhumane behaviour of those men. I could also sense defeat and confusion about the incident from her voice. She was crying uncontrollably and sounded confused at times. I had to calm her down and asked her to tell me what had happened the previous night. She explained everything word for word, and she was emotional, but very clear when describing her experience. We were both in tears by the time the narration was over. Unfortunately, I was away from Durban- but I contacted a close friend, who took her to these institutions, without telling the friend what had happened to the participant. The participant requested that she discontinue her participation in the study before I could finish the remaining sessions with her. She stated that her emotions were too raw for her to be able to hold it together. I agreed to this proposal, though about a month later she called to request me to continue with her sessions.

Although I had thoroughly elucidated the emotional and psychological benefits of participating in the study, I was not equipped with professional skills and responsibilities to continue interviewing her about her sexuality when she was going through emotional trauma. Further to that I am not trained to offer psychosocial support should she break down during the process. When I returned home two and a half weeks later, I assisted her by finding a psychologist who was assisting her with her journey towards healing. My emotions remained raw for almost three months. I failed to schedule the last sessions for some time with some of the participants. I went and consulted a psychologist. After speaking to a professional psychologist and a couple of sessions with her, I managed to continue slowly with my schedule.

Within weeks after her first rape, she was raped again for the second time by the men she called friends, they dumped in a remote area around Durban promenade until she was found the next day. I learnt about the second rape from the school resident social worker because my participant asked her to inform me. I was devastated and infuriated by all what she went through. It became clear that society is faced with crises where people fail to honour and respect another individual's right to sexuality. Through my participant's horrible and dehumanising experience, it became evident that social ills such as homophobia and corrective rape are very rife in our communities and my participant's right to choose when and whom to engage in sexual intercourse with was violated. It became evident that the rapists had no conscience or sympathy for the pain inflicted upon the young girl's body and upon those close to her.

A lot has been done by the government and other relevant stakeholders to educate communities about the LGBT community. It is saddening to hear people talking and experiencing rape, victimisation and discrimination that are fueled by homophobia. Although the participant had asked to discontinue with the study, after three months, she made contact and requested to finish her last session of the interviews. I was hesitant at first, but I remembered that although I am not a social worker, maybe having someone to talk to was part of her way towards her healing. On the day of the last session of the interview, I felt uneasy and not sure what to say. I plucked up courage and asked if she was certain that she wanted to continue. After she confirmed her commitment, interviewing started, in between times I constantly checked up on her to find out if she was coping well and wanted to continue. In between the interview, we had to stop when she was engulfed with emotions and allowed her to compose herself. That session was the longest and the most painful one. I went through an array of emotions. I remember after she left, I broke down and I cried hysterically.

The ethical responsibility regarding protection of participants came into sharp focus after the rape ordeal. The incident of rape made me even more committed to treat participants with respect. According to Josselson (2007), respecting participants is important for narrative inquiry studies because researchers interrupt the organised lives of people, thus, it is crucial that when need arises intruding should be done in a polite and respectful manner. This was simply because some of the participants would not have declared that they are lesbians to the parents.

I also explained that data (field texts) generated from the participants were going to be used for research purposes only and for no other purpose (Josselson, 2007). (*see the informed consent sample in Appendix*). Another important factor I considered in ensuring confidentiality was assuring participants that they would not be exposed to any form of harm during the sessions. Subsequently, I met participants in spaces chosen by them and where they felt comfortable. At times participants were picked and dropped at their homes and some were reimbursed for transport costs they incurred getting to the venue (Josselson, 2007).

4.1.2 Systematic reflection on methodological limitations

Using narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology offered profound insight into participants' lived experiences through their stories. However, it also presented several methodological limitations that I had to consider. First, it was the issue of ethics, handling personal narratives of the participants necessitated strong commitment to ethical practices, which included safeguarding their dignity, privacy, and well-being (Adams, 2008). It was crucial that I navigated a delicate balance between collecting rich data and respecting participants' boundaries. Second, I needed to be conscious of the interpretive challenges that came with the methodology. Since participants' narratives required interpretation as they did not inherently convey clear meanings therefore, I had to decide what constituted a story, identified themes and understood the context which might introduce subjectivity (Ivey, 2022). Third, because of the analytical complexity of the narrative inquiry, the multifaceted nature of narratives demanded a sophisticated analytical approach (Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Rogan & De Kock, 2005). This required that I did not only consider the content, but also the structure and context of the participants' stories, which was methodologically challenging and time-consuming. Last, I had to be aware of the potential for biases. The interpretive nature of a narrative inquiry might result in the researchers' perspectives influencing data collection and analysis (Foxall, et al., 2021; Morettini, 2019). It was important that I addressed these limitations by planning meticulously and being vigilant on issues of ethics vigilance. I needed to constantly commit to reflexivity throughout the research process to ensure the

integrity and credibility of this narrative inquiry findings.

4.12 Chapter conclusion

Chapter four presented the methodological journey that was undertaken in executing this inquiry. Firstly, the chapter started with a declaration of the paradigmatic positioning and research design adopted within the study. Secondly, the chapter continued with a detailed discussion of narrative inquiry, which is the methodology that formed the inquiry. Furthermore, methods of gathering data (selection of participants, generation the analysis of data) were discussed.

Utilising Narrative Inquiry methodology and engaging with participants was a remarkable experience that required that I constantly checked up through the interviewing sessions not to meddle in anyway with what the participants were telling as their stories. Narrative Inquiry afforded me an opportunity to live and be part of the participants' daily lives and through these interactions I was able to understand and to learn from their lived experiences. Apart from in-depth interviews, I also used photo voice and personal documents (diaries) as tools to gather data from the 12-lesbian youth of school going age in township and

rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. After the data generating process using these tools, I analysed data using thematic analysis.

In the next chapter, I present the narratives of the black self-identified lesbian youth which were gathered through using in-dept interviews, photovoice and diaries. The narratives of participants provided some answers to the first research question about the experiences of the lesbian youth. The answers are discussed in the presentation of the findings of the study. The participants' lived experiences are important in this study because van Manen (2016) views them as an immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life. This study draws from these participants' constructions to understand their lived experiences and therefore, I view their lived experiences as lived lives that are articulated in this study through the meanings they make about their stories.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLACK SELF-IDENTIFIED LESBIAN YOUTH LIVED AND TOLD STORIES: NARRATIVES RETOLD

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the methodological aspect of the inquiry which looked at the experiences of black self-identifying lesbian youth and thoroughly investigated the interpretivist research paradigm. The intended objective was to understand the lived experiences of the participants in the study and to give meaning to those experiences. Thereafter, the detailed research design that was intended to be utilised was disclosed as narrative inquiry, which studied only the stories told by the 12 black self-identified lesbian youth within the inquiry. Furthermore, the focus was on queer theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality as the two theoretical frameworks used in this inquiry.

This chapter gives detailed information through the re-storied narratives of participants in this inquiry, their personal and everyday-lived experiences as black self-identified lesbian youth. The re-storied narratives of the 12 black self-identified lesbian youth provided answers to the research questions 1. *What are the experiences of black lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts and why do they have these experiences?* 2. *How do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities?* 3. *Why do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities in the ways they do?*

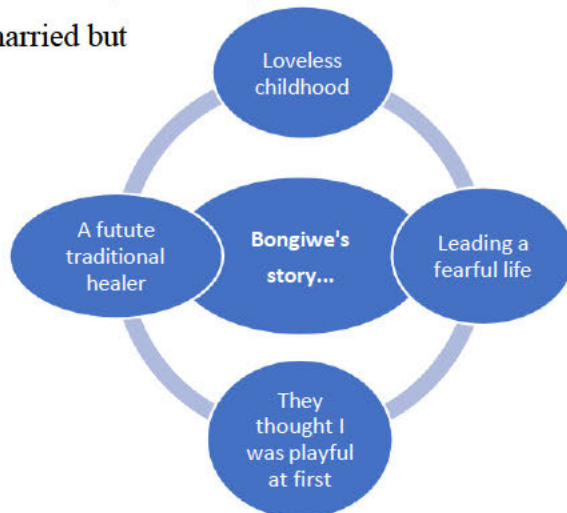
This chapter presents the participants' narratives in the form of summarised sketches and detailed stories about the participants' family backgrounds, experiences, interests and aspirations. These re-storied narratives that I present in this chapter are based on data from the combination of grounded conversations, photovoice and the diaries. These narratives have variations in the depth and length because some participants gave detailed stories and were able to elaborate on their experiences. On the other hand, there are narratives that were not so detailed and informative, maybe because the participants were not used to journaling their experiences. Those participants who are more introspective or comfortable sharing their personal stories provided richer, and more detailed narratives. The presentation of the participant's narratives follows the co-

construction of the experiences which were gathered through the stories they told during the data gathering period. The chapter is presented using the chronological order of each participant's story.

5.2 Bongiwe's story

5.2.1 Loveless childhood

I am Bongiwe, a 19-year-old girl, born in the year 2000. I live in the M-section of KwaMashu township in KwaZulu-Natal. I was born in Ntuzuma, E-section and have lived in this township for a few years of my childhood with both my parents before they separated. They were not married but



they kept on having one child after the other like a married couple. My mother passed away when I was young. My six siblings and I were required to relocate and live with my grandmother, uncles, aunts and my cousins in a four-roomed house in M-section, KwaMashu township after my mother's death. I still live in this place. My grandmother took us away from my father's house because she suspected that he was

responsible for my mother's death. Apparently, my father had met another woman and had planned to leave my mother to marry the woman. When my mother found out about the affair, she immediately fell sick and eventually died. Unfortunately, I did not enjoy my mother's love since she died when I was too young and because there were many of us. Every sibling wanted her attention, which was always given to the youngest of the family at that time. Living at my grandmother's house is not different from the life I have lived with my parents in Ntuzuma township. There is no one who is helpful by treating me specially as a child.

I learnt early that I must survive on my own because my aunts only focus on drinking more than rearing children in the house. My eldest twin brothers passed away when I was doing grade three. From that moment, I knew that I was going to be alone because my other three siblings are younger than me. My older sister (Zuzu) does not want anything to do with us after my mother's death, she keeps to herself. I taught myself to do everything for my younger siblings; cooking, bathing, feeding and getting them ready for school every day. My older sister dropped out of school in grade nine, two years after the death of our mother. She is working in a supermarket in town as a cashier. My sister fell pregnant when she was fifteen years, and she hardly spoke to anyone at home about her pregnancy. Her only focus is her baby-girl (Nandi) and her boyfriend. I have tried numerous times to talk to her, but she tells me that I am too

forward and I should learn to know my place and to mind my business. I am hurting each time because I see us drifting apart. I find difficulty sharing how I feel with her because of her dismissive attitude towards me.

My grandmother is a '*sangoma*' (traditional healer). She is a very special person in my family: in fact, she is everything to me. Despite the challenges we have faced growing up, as her grandchildren we know she loves us. I remember that my grandmother has always brought sweets, fruits and clothes from the little money that she gets from her grant. As children, we always look forward to her pension days. We would be extremely excited waiting for her to bring us goodies. Financially, I can openly admit that my grandmother is responsible for everything in the house. She has the help of her pension money, payments from the consultations from the people who sought her assistance as a healer and our foster-grant. Sometimes my aunts demand my grandmother to give them money when they run short of the drinking money. My grandmother tries to give me love, something I missed from my mother. Before I came to my grandmother's house, I had already started school when I was six years old in a primary school in Ntuzuma township before my mother died. I did grades one and two in that school and when we moved to the M-section in KwaMashu, I attended the remaining primary schooling at Sisulu primary school. I am currently attending at Busobezwe, a neighbouring secondary school in the township. I am in grade 12. I plan to pass with good grades. I believe that only when I pass well will I get an opportunity to study further at a tertiary institution and take care of my siblings to have a better future. I am grateful to have someone like my grandmother in my life who has given hope for her grandchildren.

5.2.2 Leading a fearful life

From as early as I can remember I was scared to express my feelings. I felt discouraged to share my thoughts and fears with my family members. My family does not allow me to contact my father because they think he might corrupt us because of the saga surrounding my mother's death. I have thought about contacting him secretly several times, I am scared that this might reach my grandmother's and aunts' ears. I know it can lead to severe punishment. To constantly live in fear has made me begrudge my family. As a child, I love my father dearly and I need him to support us holistically. It hurts to see other girls with their fathers during the school concerts and events, but no one comes for our special days at school. I sometimes wonder why my father is not fighting for us or playing his role in our lives. Since my aunts are always drunk

or do not care about what is going on in my life, it has become easier to keep everything to myself. My sister is always at work. She hardly ever asks about my well-being nor that of our siblings. I fear talking openly to my aunts about my life and the challenges I go through in life because they do not treat me as their own child. I have been intending to ask about the stages of growing up as a girl. I wanted to talk about how I feel about my sexual identity to my aunts or even my elder cousins. All my attempts are in vain because no one listens to me.

My relationship with my grandmother is sound but I know I cannot talk to her about my life issues since she is very conservative and authoritative. My grandmother believes that as children we should be taught and should listen without asking questions. Seeking to find clarity on certain issues at home is seen as a sign of disrespect. My only confidante is my friend who is the same age as me. Some of the decisions I have taken from my friend have landed me in hot water both at home and at school. My friend is not allowed to visit me at home because my aunts have openly sworn and accused her that she would 'turn me into *isitabane*' (lesbian). Hearing my aunts saying these hurtful words about my sexual identity has made it even harder to believe that they can support me if I sincerely share how I feel for girls with them. I am scared that they will spread the news of my sexuality in the community. Although I have openly displayed my interest in girls at school, I would not want my private life to be publicised by my aunts.

The drama that usually happens at home has greatly affected me and my schoolwork. As a grade twelve learner, I am not given sufficient time to study because I am expected to do house chores when I get back from school. Even during my free time and weekends my aunts continually find something that needs to be done. This has resulted in me having challenges with Mathematical Literacy at school. I do not get an adequate amount of time to practice my work or to do homework. I have also done badly in my practical examinations for Dance Studies and Dramatic Arts because of these challenges. I continually live in fear that if I come back late from school my aunts will either punish or ground me. Being in the arts class has come with a load of work which sometimes made me fail to submit work on time. Despite these challenges I want to finish my secondary schooling and become a dance teacher, a musician or a journalist. The choice of specialisation will be dependent on the university that will accept me next year. After completing my studies, I want to build a big home for my siblings. My

My only wish is to support them until they finish school. I would also want to thank my grandmother by spoiling her in every possible way for all that she has done for us.

5.2.3 They thought I was playful at first

Changes in my life have come with a lot of uncertainty. My relationship with my sister is strained. As children in my family, we are not treated the same way. This is because we have different mothers. I first noticed that I was different from other girls at home when I was doing grade nine. I always felt comfortable being within girls' company. I did not think much about this feeling at first. It was easy for me to talk to them about everything concerning love. The boys pursued me and asked me to date, but I did not like them. During home time after school one afternoon, I dared to kiss a girl named Nozi. She said I should not, but I did. She was a girl from another grade nine class. The kiss felt so great. I had a warm and fuzzy feeling inside my heart in a funny way that I could not explain the feeling. I did not know what it meant but I knew immediately that I was attracted to girls. I was not sure what that feeling certainly meant to me, but I loved it. I could not share that experience with my cousins at home since they are not supportive of anything I do. I was scared to cause more fights which have become part of our home life every day. I kept that secret to myself. A few weeks passed without meeting Nozi. Schools are closed for December holidays. I had hoped that my feelings for the girl would change but they did not change.

The following year I was in grade ten. I was with Nozi in the same class. Whenever I was close to her or when I looked at her, I had a smile on my face. One afternoon, I shared my confusion with my friend. She told me that maybe I was sexually preferring girls to boys. To be certain, I decided that I was going to ask Nozi to be my girlfriend. I did not know what that meant. One afternoon on my way back from school I asked her to walk home with me. I remembered trying to explain to her what I was feeling at that moment. We were both very young and confused. On our way home, we had to go under the bridge before we reached our street. I knew immediately that I was going to kiss her before we emerged on the other side of the bridge. I kissed her full on her mouth. From that day until grade 11, Nozi remained my girlfriend. We continued seeing each other secretly until I was caught by my uncle during the September school holidays. I was sent to the shops. I went past Nozi's home to ask her to accompany me. On our way back, we went passed our kissing spot, without checking the coast, we kissed and fondled under the bridge. I did not know that my uncle was on his way home from the shops.

He had followed us. My uncle saw everything that happened between us. I knew he was going to tell my grandmother. I decided that if I were asked about the kissing at home, I would not deny anything.

When my uncle got home that afternoon I was called to my grandmother's bedroom. The beating and shouting started from my aunts and uncle. My grandmother tried to intervene, but no one listened to her. My uncle and aunts scolded me for shaming and putting the family's name into disrepute. My grandmother was silent for the duration of the punishment. I was told that I was a mess, hopeless and wanting to throw myself at girls. I was called in many hurtful words. When my grandmother spoke, I expected that she was going to punish me too. Instead, she told them to leave her room. Only the two of us were left in her bedroom. She asked me if I understood what I was getting myself into. I explained that I had tried to fight the feeling for the past three years. I assured her that I knew I was only attracted to girls. My grandmother explained how my mother got into a loveless relationship because as a family they tried to 'save' her from a girl she fell in love within high school. The family forced her to have a relationship with my father instead even though she did not love him.

It was during this conversation that I understood why my mother did not love any of her children. Instead, she kept on getting pregnant with one child after the other to numb the pain she had suppressed for long. She got into a loveless relationship to make her family happy. Through the conversation I had with my grandmother numerous questions I had about my parents were answered. My grandmother stated that she does not want the same to happen to me. She continued to say if I was sincere about my feelings, she would support me. She pleaded that I finished school first before I can talk about loving someone as I was still young. I know that the support I get from my grandmother is enough to make me stay positive even when my uncle, aunts and the community do not support me as a lesbian girl. Somehow, I am grateful that my uncle saw me. I am not certain if I was going to openly tell my family about my sexual identity if he did share my story.

After the conversation I had with my grandmother, I thought my life was going to be easy at home. My uncle and aunts did what I had feared they would do. They told any person who would listen to their conversation that I was spoilt and immoral. That I was going to corrupt my cousins and girls in my community. They stated that I had my grandmother's support in

doing so. Life became downright difficult for me. I remember one Sunday after the church service; all the girls were asked to remain behind after the end of the service. The elders of the church and the pastor's wife wanted to talk to the youth. While no one had ever told me that a life of a lesbian would be easy, I was not prepared for what happened in that meeting. Everyone was requested to pray for the evil spirits to leave my body. I sat there stunned; it was as if my life had exploded in front of my eyes. I did not know what to say or who to turn to since my grandmother was not present at church that day. When the prayer ended, the pastor's wife told me to stop disgracing the church, the youth and the community. She instructed me to end the playful phase I was in and got back to be the God's child. While this might sound strange considering what had happened to my life that afternoon, I saw that life was beautiful. It was a gift given to everyone, a saint or a sinner. I smiled and I told my church congregants that I was happy the way I was. I was not prepared to change anything about myself. I later realised that whatever I went through that Sunday, someone who is a lesbian like me somewhere had gone through it or even worse. I stood up and asked to be excused. I decided to leave the church permanently. From that time onwards, I did not have any contact with the church youth. My grandmother has stopped inviting me back to church. I believe I will overcome this difficult period in my life when the time is right.

5.2.4 A future traditional healer

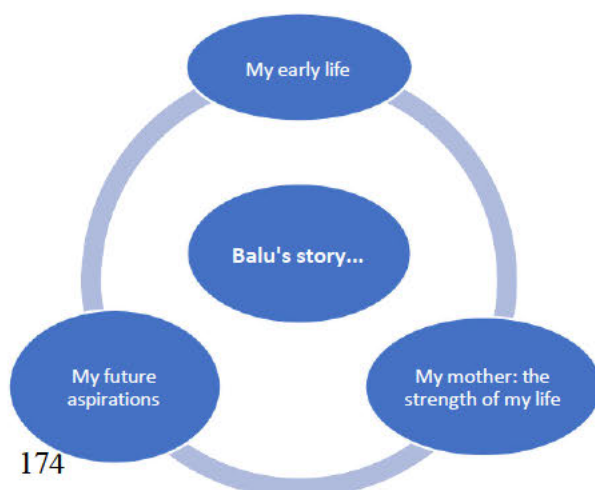
Our school is well known for its great academic results and extracurricular in and around Durban. The school starts classes as early as 6:30 in the morning from January to November. Hence, the 100% pass rate every year in grade 12 with many distinctions in almost all subjects. One Friday morning, I entered my grade twelve class before the register was marked. A girl at the back was crying. I asked in a jocular manner if she was crying because she had lost her boyfriend. I continued saying that if that was the case, I was going to be on her shoulder to cry on. Little did I know that she had indeed lost her boyfriend in a shoot-out with police in the early hours of the morning that Friday. Her boyfriend was a well-known thug in the township. Everyone in the class stared at me for being insensitive. But in all honesty, I did not know about her loss.

In another incident, my English teacher sent me to the staffroom to get our activity books. When I got to the staffroom teachers were up in arms trying to get information out of a grade nine boy who had brought dagga to school that morning. Seemingly, the boy was selling during

break time. He had denied everything, meanwhile he had hidden it behind his class under an old cupboard that was kept there. I casually told the teachers where to look. They found it packed in a zip locked bag inside a yoghurt container. It was my habit to tell if something good or bad was going to happen to people closest to me at school. One day my class teacher highlighted that I was gifted. She had observed how I help people to find missing objects. I denied that I have a calling until she called my grandmother, who agreed that indeed I have a special gift. I tried to deny that I have healing powers to see things that are about to happen or hidden from the naked eyes. My grandmother advised me that I can only accept the calling after I finish grade twelve. It is difficult to understand why I was chosen to follow in her footsteps, but I have accepted that I am following in my grandmother's footsteps. It is difficult to understand why I was chosen to follow in her footsteps, but I have accepted that I am following in my grandmother's footsteps. I am at peace that I have been called to heal people. As much as the whole experience scares me, I know I am going to be a future traditional healer.

What is different with me becoming a traditional healer is that I am going to finish school. I am going to study to be a professional dance teacher, a musician or a journalist. I would want to buy a big house for her siblings and support them until they finish school before I practice my duties as a healer. My grandmother has blessed me for the decision I had made. My grandmother has been awesomely great, playing a role of being a parent to my siblings and me. I am happy to have someone as understanding in my life. I have also proven to be the best in playing both netball and soccer. I prefer soccer to netball. On weekends, when I am not very busy, I gather boys and girls and train them. I know playing soccer has helped me to deal with my problems. I hope I can involve more of these youth, I have come to understand that sport calms me.

5.3 Balu's story...



5.3.1 My early life

My name is Balu, the first-born daughter of Zino and Mkhondlo. I was born in 1999 at Amaoti, in the rural outskirts of Inanda in KwaZulu-Natal. I am 20 years of age, I live with my mother and my two siblings, a 11-year-old brother and a 1-year-old sister. My

father has been absent from our lives for a
long

time. He lives in Zwelibomvu, at Inanda, north of Durban with his wife. My mother's family moved from Amaoti to Molweni, another rural place outside Pinetown when I was 11 years old. I grew up in a very poor background. In 2006, I started my primary school education in a primary school in Amaoti. When we moved, I continued with primary education at Molweni combined primary school. Whilst in primary, I struggled a lot with all my subjects. From my teachers' words I knew I was not academically strong. I failed in three different grades because my parents are illiterate, they could never assist me with my schoolwork. They did not go to school because of poverty in their families. I am the eldest grade twelve learner in the entire school. I, therefore, have had challenges finishing school on time. This has resulted in me having low self-confidence. I have constantly thought of quitting school because I see myself as an embarrassment to my family and my siblings.

A new teacher joined our school at the beginning of this year; she is a brilliant teacher. She is my class teacher too. What a supportive and caring woman! Because she is a dedicated teacher, I have developed love for English. I joined the debating team in the second term. I am enjoying every bit of my newly discovered talent. I wish I had met Ms. Lodwe (my English teacher) when I first started grade ten in this secondary school. She has completely intervened in my learning. She has made it possible for me to love my work and pass tests and examinations with average marks. I believe this is the beginning of my commitment academically. As a result, I have decided to continue schooling although I am the eldest learner in grade twelve in my school. Ms. Lodwe gives me books to read and review my work every week. I attend extra lessons every afternoon because she explained that I needed extra classes to be able to fully grasp the language and grammar outside the contact time. I remember I had been called names by teachers and my schoolmates because of the challenges I have in classes. I am slowly getting over that. Though I am gradually building my self-confidence, my biggest fear is to fail matric at the end of the year. This might disappoint those that are my supporters, but I am fighting to be afloat. I am working very hard because I want to see myself achieving my goal of being a psychologist. I want to assist children and those people who find themselves worthless like I was. My main purpose is to help those children who are experiencing challenges in school, growing up harassed and victimised because of their learning disabilities.

5.3.2 My mother: the strength of my life

I grew up very attached to my mother and my siblings because I believed that they were the only people who understood me from my mother's family. I guess the move from Amaoti to Molweni contributed immensely to the challenges I faced growing up. I found difficulty adjusting to the new life and I could not make friends. I was afraid that people were able to see that I was different. My mother, brother and sister are very supportive of my achievements no matter how small they are. This did not assist in changing the way I see myself. My mother is only a domestic worker in a flat in town working for an Indian family of four. She loves me and she does many things for me. Her love for me has made her a very special person to me; actually, she is my pillar of strength. Raising three children on her own has put a strain on her health. My mother has never forgotten to bring us something special like cake or clothes for all of us if it is our birthday. My mother never forgot to bring us something special like cake or clothes for all of us if it is our birthday. As a domestic worker, her employers would give her old furniture or clothes when they buy the new stuff. These presents always make us to be very excited because we get to wear expensive clothing that makes us different from other children in my community. As poor as we may be, my home is the cleanest house in our community because my mother likes cleanliness. She has taught us to do the yard and to keep the house spotless. Whenever we have visitors in our home they comment on the house and the garden that are always tidy and neatly kept with beautiful flowers.

I have noticed that my mother still regards me as a child even though I am 20 years of age. Even though she has trained me to clean the house and wash our school uniforms; when she gets back from work, she makes sure that she inspects the house and the yard. If she approves, she will take sweets or packets of chips and share it amongst us. This gesture has become one of our very special moments every evening at home. When she disapproves, nothing is given. As a result, I spend very little time with friends because I want everything to be perfect before my mother gets back from work. Apart from being a clean freak, my mother has taught me how to cook sumptuous meals. I enjoy being taught to cook by her because she is a great cook. If everything else fails, I know I can study hospitality after matric. I know I would prepare mouth-watering meals in a hotel or a restaurant for my patrons. I understand it is not my first option, but I enjoy experimenting with food in the kitchen. With the little that we have I managed to cook mouth-watering meals every weekday. My mother usually cooks on weekends and on special holidays.

My mother cares for me. She has encouraged and supported me even when I repeated classes for three consecutive years. She is the reason why I am still alive today. I have had thoughts of taking my life many times because of the shame of being seen as stupid in my class. Every afternoon when she gets home, she hugs me, every negative goes away. Even though we have a very healthy relationship with my mother, I sometimes find difficulty talking openly to her about my personal life journey as a lesbian. My mother is protective of me. I am certain that she knew that I did not want to date boys. When I was in grade 11, I did not have boyfriend issues like my cousins. One weekend during my mid-year break from school I went to her bedroom. I requested to speak to her. I tried telling her about my sexuality, but I could not. I thought she was going to shout at me. I eventually blurted it out saying: “Mom, I am a girl who wants to kiss and date other girls.” Yes! My mother knew this all along. She had known for a long time, and she had accepted that I am a lesbian. My mother explained that at first, she did not want to believe it, but my cousins confirmed her suspicions after she found out from them. From that moment onwards, she has been very supportive of my sexuality. She sat me down and wanted to know more about how I feel whether I understand about being a lesbian. I told her I would tell my father when I was ready to do so. My mother’s support has made my journey easier. After our conversation, she decided to talk to my aunts and cousins about everything that happens in my life. Whilst I supported her telling the family and close relatives, the whole experience turned into a circus. My aunts found something to share with every person on the street who was interested in their juicy stories about me being “*isitabane*” (lesbian). I did not blame them if they found my sexuality interesting and confusing. I was also confused at first.

I am naturally a kind person. I love people even though I choose to have less interactions with them, more importantly because I lack confidence growing up. The issue about my sexuality has been discussed by many at school and in my community. Thanks to my aunts, who managed to spread the news like wildfire. Within my community, I discovered that there are those people who understand what it means to be a lesbian but have decided to keep quiet and those who do not. I have decided that I am not going to explain anything to anyone. I do not owe anyone any explanation. I have gone through difficulties for most of my teenage years. At school I have been harassed openly by classmates (boys) stating that I am going to take their girlfriends. The only teacher who supports me is Ms. Lodwe. Sometimes the assembly would be about gay and lesbian learners at school. For instance, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the school had a resident pastor visiting during the morning assembly. During one of the sermons,

the pastor would specifically target lesbian learners by verbally stating how they were not fit to be in that school because of their 'bad behaviour'. To me this felt like a verbal attack as it targeted only lesbian learners in school. I am lucky I have not been called to the office. But my schooling experiences have been challenging socially and academically. Even in the community people call me '*isitabane* or a *moffie*' Many people call me that, but I do not care anymore. One woman told a group of women one Thursday afternoon, when I met them on the road. I believe they were coming from church because they were all in church uniforms. She explained to the other women that what I was demonstrating for young people in the community was "ungodly" behaviour. She stated that she wished my family could be sent back to wherever it came from. That day I decided to respond to her insults. I stated that I understood her concerns, but I believed that if what I was doing was "ungodly" it meant there was something wrong with God's creation. The same God whom she believed created everything on earth, created me as well. This therefore meant, she should blame Him for creating a lesbian like me. I turned and left them standing. They were astonished because I was known to be a quiet child. Being accused and embarrassed in public made something inside me snapped. I heard her friends mumbling something, but it was not clear since I had started walking away. Life has been challenging but I believe that things will change as long as I have a supportive mother.

5.3.3 My future aspirations

Understanding and experiencing what academic achievement was all about has fuelled me into planning to explore my talent further. My English teacher has been instrumental in shaping the woman that I am becoming. I have recently been involved in various activities in school like debating and poetry writing. I did not know that I was a hardworking person until my last year in high school! I have been fully involved in these activities without complaining regardless of the amount of work I have added to my schedule. One of my achievements, as a debater in grade eleven, was to be the best speaker. I know I still have a long way to go in my life but having been awarded something for my work has worked magic for my self-esteem. I have gained confidence. I am sure I am going to pass at the end of the year. My school is a technical school. I take Mechanical Engineering as one of my specialisations. I have worked on teachers' cars when they needed small jobs done in their cars. For example, if a teacher had a minor technical issue with a car and it was not something that needed testing machines, like changing of brake pads and the malfunctioning lights, I assisted and was compensated for this. This for

me is real talent. I know I want to pursue this dream. With my increased efforts in learning to understand English, I know I will achieve my dream. I am also gifted in designing and sewing clothes for my friends and siblings. I know I must choose amongst the three careers when I finish my matric. What has also helped me to deal with so many setbacks in my life is playing soccer. Though it is difficult at times to be accepted by other soccer players, they all know that I am good at it. I can safely say that playing soccer has saved my life. I remember I used to train every day in the afternoon and neglect my schoolwork because I thought I was good for nothing as I was told by my teachers and schoolmates. I love soccer! It makes me sweat out all my frustrations. Together with my coach, we have started to train the under ten team, both boys and girls. I enjoy being in control of what I love during the training sessions. Though I cannot choose sport professional, apart from Ms. Lodwe's interference in my life, soccer has made me not think about my negative experiences in life. Whenever I scored a goal, it always felt like an achievement in my life.

Engineering is my first option. This would mean getting paid more money. I would be able to change my family background. This would make my mother proud of my achievements. I wish to bring warmth home so that my mother and my siblings would feel happy. I want them to enjoy life like other families in my community. Failing to attain my first choice would mean I have to take cooking as one of the choices available to me. I enjoy cooking; I know that I am good at it, my future plans would be to open my own restaurant. I know there is nothing that I would enjoy more than experimenting with different menus, receiving compliments from my patrons after each delicious served dish. My third option would be to study fashion design. I have seen that there is a huge clientele out there wanting to look beautiful. Whilst this is true, I am aware of how competitive this industry is. I have learnt that I can achieve anything I set my mind into as my English teacher has always articulated. At times I get very scared that my dreams are becoming too big for me. I have realised that equal opportunities have been presented to all of us as learners, what is necessary is for us to grab them with both our hands. To be honest, the future looks promising for me and my family at last. At least I am looking forward to my final examinations with renewed energy.

5.4 Thembisile's story...

5.4.1 My childhood memories



I was born in 2003 in the rural part of Stanger by Sekeni and Zuka. I am the fourth child in a family of four brothers and a sister. I am 16 years old. I live with my mother and my siblings in a very small and old house in a deep rural area in Luphephesi North of KwaZulu-Natal. My father does not live with the family anymore, although my parents are not divorced. He left us for a younger woman in town. I hear they have three children. My eldest brother and one of my sisters

are independent and they have left home to stay on their own, like my father. The place we live in used to be owned by a white farmer, Mr. Stompie. Both my parents were employed on the farm when they were still young. When Mr. Stompie left South Africa in 1994, after the country got its independence, my parents got married. They were given the small house as a family home by the new farmer as a wedding gift and a long year of service. I knew this story when my mother told us how she met our father. For my primary education I attended two different farm schools; both these schools were Mr. Stompie's initiatives. When he left there was no money left to fix the schools, everything in the school was old and broken. The buildings were dilapidated with broken doors, sunken ceiling and pane-less windows. These two primary schools were situated in the area that was closest to my home. One was junior primary school and the other a senior primary school.

When I finished my senior primary school education, I moved to Sekusile secondary school which is far from home. I am doing grade eleven in this secondary school. I wish to finish school and move out of the house or go and look for a better job. Everyone who attends this high school walks a very long distance to and from the school every day. I enjoy these walks, especially in summer because we eat wild fruits and sugarcane on our way back from school. Sometimes we would even bring some for our younger siblings. I only hate going to school in winter because I do not have good shoes. The shoes that I wear are from my mother's employer's children. I hate being given these shoes and clothes because I prefer wearing trousers. My mother frequently gives these to my brothers. Although I had a very difficult childhood, my fondest memory was learning to knit woolen clothes from my mother. She

would bring left-over wool from her employer. Late at night my mother would teach us how to make baby booties or hats. She sold these to expectant mothers in the area. Knitting was a wonderful experience for me when I was growing up. I learnt how to knit very fast, but I knew that it was a hobby, I was going to stop doing the knitting stuff. For me to be in school meant I had to play as much as I could because I was growing up very fast. I grew up without my father, but I am strong, confident and a hard worker now. My mother encourages us to do whatever our hearts desire. We do not have much in the house, but she tries to do a lot for all of us. My home is full of love, as siblings we are taught to share everything no matter how small it is.

5.4.2 The absent father

The role played by a father in the upbringing of his children is very crucial in building confidence and structure that would hold the family together. Growing up as children in my home we witnessed fights and arguments between our parents. These fights caused my parents to have a very strained and unhappy relationship when my father was still staying with us. Their fighting had a very negative effect on our upbringing. Tensions and fights resulted in my family failing to get along. As we grew older, family relationships showed that they had been broken down from the beginning. At times my parents would have unhealthy arguments over minor issues in front of us. I know that my mother has been through a lot. She has been on antidepressant medication for a long time. She cannot speak to us if we need her viewpoint on any issues. I think my eldest brother and sister left home because my mother is always irritable and shouts all the time. My father's departure left her defeated. My mother has changed a lot from the woman I used to sit down and had the knitting sessions with. The situation at home got worse when during one of the arguments between my parents I just blurted to my father that I am lesbian. He was quiet for a few minutes. When he responded to his child, he swore my mother directly, accusing her of cheating. He told her he had doubts that I was his child. He pointed out that I was the only light-skinned child out of all his children and the only '*inkonkoni*' (lesbian) in the family. This confrontation and accusation were the worst. Furniture and crockery were broken. It was after this fight that my father decided to leave the next day.

This quarrel was the last one, a memorable one. It affected everyone's progress at school. My eldest brother and sister dropped out of school because of the challenges they could not bear. The talk about our parents failed marriage from the community was the most hurtful experience we all had to go through. Even today, I still blame myself for making my father leave home.

Even though my mother tries to compensate for what happened whilst living with my father, the damage is huge. There are too many cracks within my family structure. I have no self-love, no matter how sincere one compliments me, I still feel uneasy and unsure if it is a genuine compliment. I hate myself. On the other hand, my mother blames herself for my father's decision to leave home. My two younger sisters and I feel sad because of what happened to our family. As a result, I have decided to keep to myself. At times I wish for my father to come back home, at the same time I know that if he gets back their fighting might end badly.

5.4.3 Who am I?

I have always looked up to my big brother and sister. I believe that if we get educated, we will change the situation at home. Since they were ahead of me at school, I always got assistance for my homework from them. These days, I constantly feel guilty about what happens at home. The fact that my father doubted that I was his child has destroyed me. He made me believe that I was adopted or that my mother cheated on him. I keep on asking my mother about my real parents. For my father to state that I was a lesbian because I was not his daughter left me broken. I have always been very shy and kept to myself. After that incident I would stare into space and get lost in my thoughts. I become withdrawn. I think I am going to go mad. My mother's reaction after seeing the damage caused by their fights was to reassure me that I was my father's daughter and that she gave birth to me. I am young to comprehend everything but somehow, I need to believe her. `

I am still going through the emotions about my parents' break up. On the other hand, I keep asking myself about who I am. I am sad that I would never know the truth. I have accepted what my mother told me as the truth. I have learnt that sometimes one has to grow up very fast and make decisions that are going to change one's life in the long run. I am in a secondary level of education, a lesbian girl. I know I do not pretend to be a boy like most people in my community would say. I can never change and be a boy. I have accepted that I have very strong connections for girls. At school, I have had numerous relationships with girls. I am happy that I feel this way even though I repetitively expose myself to a lot of victimisations at school and in my community. I have decided to follow my heart and make myself happy. I respect my parents' decisions about their lives. I know that worrying about my paternity is something I would have to focus on later when I start working.

5.4.4 Walking a lonely path

I am a soft-spoken and very shy young person, who loves soccer. I live for soccer; my bedroom has faded cut-out pictures of well-known soccer players around the world. I have played it ever since I can remember. Growing up on a farm has its advantages and one of these is the involvement in activities that are offered at school. I started falling in love with soccer before I even realised that I was a lesbian. Every chance I got; I was on the soccer field with my two best friends. My friends have helped me with many things (like sanitary pads and body lotion) when my mother could not afford to buy those things for me. Soccer helps me to discharge the negative feelings I experience at school and in my community. It enables me to be in control of my life for a short while. As I have stated, I love soccer, I do not want to miss any practice. One afternoon, I was walking back from the grounds, it was winter, it got dark very early. The route I took was a pathway between an open land and some sugarcane. I grew up in the area walking on the same path every day. I was walking alone because my friends did not come for practice that afternoon. I was walking fast because I was worried that it was getting dark. I saw an old man in his late forties approaching from the opposite direction. When he got closer, I saw that he was carrying a stick in his hand. I did not recognise who he was.

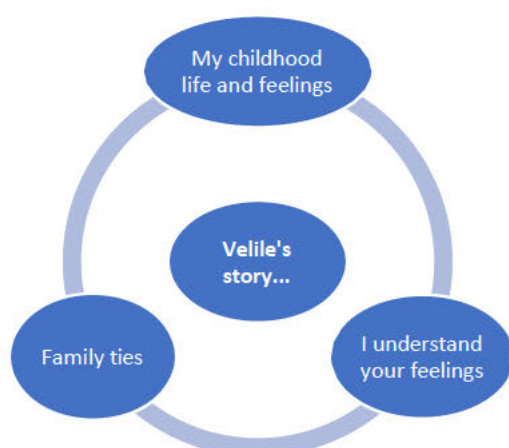
We met; the man walked past me. He suddenly grabbed the jersey from behind and he pulled me backwards. He asked if I was a boy or a girl. I told him I am a girl. The man told me to stop behaving like a boy in the community or else he was going to remind me that I am a girl. He quickly pulled out a big knife and told me that if I do not stop this funny nonsense, he was going to teach me a lesson or two. I tried to explain that I cannot change who I am. He struck me on the head with his stick, he pulled the knife and tried to pull my shorts down. He aimed for my chest, I ducked, and I fell on the ground. I rolled over three times and tried to stand up. He aimed with a stick again and missed. I knew he wanted to rape me. I decided that I would fight to survive. I begged him to stop but he attempted to pull my shorts down again. Lying on the ground I saw his body towering over me. I could smell his sweat. I decided to kick with full force between his legs. I jumped up and ran as fast as I could. I was sobbing and shaking after realising that I had escaped a rape attempt. When I got home, I told my mother what had happened. She comforted me. I told her I was not going to report it to the police because I was scared to be humiliated because of my sexuality. When I got to school, I told a friend about my ordeal. I had heard from a girl in my class how her friend, who was raped the previous year

was treated at the police station when she went to report her case. I decided to keep my experience to myself.

After this incident I am always inside the house if I am not at school. I only go for soccer practice if my friends are attending as well. I need to be careful after that incident, though I sometimes miss practice. I have come to understand that community people and teachers at school have judged me because they do not understand the challenges I have gone through because I am a lesbian. Despite all the challenges I still aspire. I would like to play professional soccer. I am good at it. I enjoy being in control of the ball. I know that playing professional soccer can afford me opportunities to train younger children, who have different challenges growing up to heal through sport. Soccer has helped me when I was going through life challenges. I know if I work with youth, I can teach several values that I have learnt that are important in sport, values such as discipline, respect, teamwork and having love for each other. As players, our safety depends on trusting that your team player is constantly watching out for you. My second love is to become a social worker. Working with troubled children within different families and communities can help them to heal too. Being involved in their healing can also be therapeutic for me.

5.5 Velile's story...

5.5.1 My childhood life and family struggles



I am Velile, I was born in 2002 in a rural village in Umkomaas, South of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. I lived with my father's family in the early years of my childhood. It was a big family with relatives and distant cousins all living together. I was raised by my paternal grandmother whilst my father worked in Durban. I come from a very poor background. I was told that my father took me away from my

mother when I was three months old. He left my mother heartbroken because he was doing it for the second time. He had taken my brother, who is older than me before. His reason was that

his children were not going to be raised in the township and be influenced by the township life. The funny thing was that he did not support us because he was married to another woman. My father had two other children with his wife. They were younger than me and my brother. The family lived in a three-bedroom home made of mud with no electricity. The village is poor with no infrastructure. The roads have potholes, there is no electricity and no running water. Every morning before I went to school, I had to fetch water from the river that we shared with the cattle in the village. Democracy has brought no civilisation for the people of Qadasi.

Both the primary and secondary schools I attended were many kilometres away from home. My grandmother struggled a lot when raising us. In 2010, my dad passed away in the faction fight that took place amongst people of different villages during the Christmas holidays. The fight was about the demarcation of the grazing land for the villagers. I was in grade two. That was a sad time for my brother and me. Even though my father did not support us financially, he was still our father. I sometimes miss him and occasionally I would think about the role he would have played in our upbringing. We remained with my grandmother. She tried to provide everything for us with the pension money that she received. It was not much but she kept the family together.

My brother and I moved from Umkomaas in 2018 when I was doing grade 11, after my grandmother died. My brother was 22 years; I was 16 years. I was grieving and heartbroken. I had never met my mother before in my life. I only knew my father's family. Seeing that we were suffering after my grandmother's death, my brother decided to go to Durban to look for my mother. He found her after months of searching. My mother was renting a shack in Umlazi, a township South of Durban. At the end of the year, we moved from home to Durban. I did not feel any emotion when I first met my mother. I had hoped that she was going to positively change my life. Her life was not easy; she was a street vendor selling in one of the taxi ranks in town (CBD). She has a ten-year-old daughter. She told me that she does not make too much money from her stall. Her everyday takings depend on several circumstances in a day. From the day I met my mother she has given me love and support. For me this is enough. My brother had to drop out of school in grade seven whilst we still lived in the village. He became the herd boy to assist my grandmother support the family. He used to be paid a sack of maize meal and a bag of cabbage, a pocket of potatoes, oil and a bag of sugar. Young as he was, he played a significant role in helping to feed the family. Since he left school before completing his matric,

when we moved to Durban, he found a job in a shoe manufacturing firm in Clairwood. After that he moved out from my mother's place since it was small for all four of us. I sensed that he needed his privacy. He now lives in a neighbouring hostel dwelling in Isipingo, in Durban. The situation at home has compelled my mother to look for a place to stay in another township, Chesterville, West of Durban. Although my mother is still renting, this new place has two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. At least we have a bedroom and a kitchen. This meant more rental money should be paid, luckily my brother assists occasionally with food and rental money.

5.5.2 I understand your feelings

I grew up in a village, in a peaceful and clean environment. I am struggling with life in the township, most houses are small and clustered. I am doing grade 12 in Lokusa secondary school in Chesterville. Adjusting to a township life so late in my life comes with numerous challenges. At home, I am struggling to bond with my mother because she has only met me very late in my teenage years. At school I am called 'farm Julia (a farm girl)'. I have recently told my mother that I am a lesbian. I told her because of the frustrations I always encounter when I get back from school. Although I cannot talk openly to her, she tries to talk to me every day. I feel that she is a stranger. I am also angry at her for neglecting us. I hope this phase will pass in our lives and I learn to embrace the love that she gives me. Despite all the challenges we have, my mother constantly tries to build a healthy relationship with me. She tells me that she wishes to leave the communication line open between us so that when the time is right, I can be open to her. The day I told her that I am a lesbian, she told me that she knew the first she saw me because of the way I dress up. She found that I do not have a single skirt, dress, or high-heeled shoes. My mother explained that she was waiting for me to tell her. Life in the city has made her aware of different lifestyles led by different people. Since I told her about my life, she has supported me. She sometimes jokes about me not giving up on her grandchildren. I have explained about the different methods of adoption methods. Every day my mother tells me that I should not see myself as different from other girls my age.

One evening, after she arrived home back from town, she called me to the bedroom. She asked to talk to me. My mother told me that she understood that I blamed her for all the difficulties that I went through growing up. She explained that the reason she did not visit my brother, and I was because my father told her not to contact his family nor his children. Or else he would

harm her. From that conversation it became evident that she too had suffered as much as we did. She told me she understands the resentment I have for her. When concluding our conversation, she mentioned that she hoped I would forgive her one day. After this conversation I did a lot of soul searching. I decided that I would give my mother a second chance to be with me because it was not completely her doing to neglect us.

My brother is also supportive of my sexuality. He was always in my corner even when we were in Umkomaas. Although he mentioned that he did not understand what being a lesbian meant but he told me that in life I should make myself happy first before I worry about what other people say. I have tried adjusting to the new environment and the new school. I have had difficulties making friends. Adapting to the new school environment is very difficult with boys calling me a '*moffie*' from the rural area. One day during the study period I was coming from the toilets. A group of boys were standing in the corridor. As I approached them, one boy came up to me, held me and kissed me full on my mouth. That whole action paralysed me, I remained fixed on the same spot for some time. They all laughed and clapped hands, cheering him for kissing me. They followed me to my class passing hurtful remarks. The boy who kissed me said he hoped his kiss would bring me back into my senses. They said I was not their competition; all they needed was to remind me that I was a girl. I cried that whole afternoon even beyond school on my way home. Life at school has become unbearable. I have tried to commit suicide several times because of the insecurities, difficulty adjusting and the torment from my schoolmates. In the last attempt I almost lost my life. I had slit my wrist and locked myself in the toilet. One tenant found me bleeding on the floor in the toilet and she called the ambulance. My mother was hurt by my actions even though she does not talk about both suicide attempts. My Life Orientation teacher has arranged for me to have sessions with the school social worker. While it is difficult sharing my life with a stranger, for the first time during the sessions I have talked about my journey from childhood to now with the social worker. The sessions are healing. I hope I am on my way to restoring my life.

5.5.3 Family ties

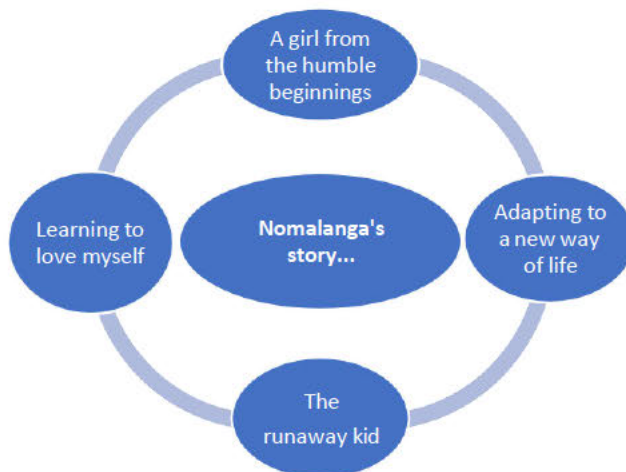
Since I do not have friends in the township and at school that I can share my experiences and fears, as a teenage girl, my only option is my mother. I am slowly beginning to trust her. I do not see myself as a burden to her anymore. I have learnt that parents, especially mothers, share a very special bond with their children, especially girl children. I have learnt to be open to my

mother's advice. I know I can talk to her about anything. Sometimes I would come to her crying after school when a group of boys had called me 'isitabane' (lesbian) on my way back from school. My mother would hug me and tell me that despite everything I have experienced, she loves me. I wish she had been in my life earlier. I do not think I was going to experience such difficulties if she had been involved in my upbringing.

The support I get from my mother has yielded good results. I have never been an average learner at school. When I started school in a township school life began to be difficult. I lost concentration in my subjects and felt too drawn to my emotional baggage. I grew up in a poor family but that did not stop me from excelling at school. First term for the first time, I failed. I was not surprised because emotionally I was absent from my lessons. Ever since I started counselling, I have started to pay attention to my schoolwork. The focus and hard work have slowly started to yield good results. I got two awards for English and Accounting in the school's speech and prize giving awards ceremony in the third term. My mother was extremely happy. The school treated all the awardees and their parents to a special dinner afterwards. Over the weekends I spend my spare time teaching young girls how to play ladies' soccer. I love assisting with their training. After all that I have endured growing up, I still believe that anything is possible for the youth if they are highly involved in sporting activities rather than being observers or drowning themselves in substance abuse. Sometimes, I train very hard to try to sweat out all the pain I have endured. I am young and I believe that if I get educated, I am going to achieve my dream of being a Chartered Accountant. My mother and my sister deserve a better life. I have big dreams. One of these is to own a girls' soccer team since there are very few female soccer teams in South Africa. I have come to understand the impact sport has on people like me. My life is getting better because every weekend I lose myself in laborious training.

5.6 Nomalanga's story...

5.6.1 A girl from the humble beginnings



I was born in 2003 in Mzingisi village, in the rural area at Jozini, in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal. I am 16 years old, I initially lived with my grandmother, who is now 103 years old and very frail, two aunts, my three sisters, a brother and my five cousins. Our house is big and old. One could realise that my grandparents did not have financial problems before my

grandfather died. I lost both my parents in 2008 when I was eight years old. They were involved in a bus and a lorry accident on their way to town where they worked. They died instantly. I cannot remember much about the accident. My grandmother told me it was the most horrible accident that happened in the area. More than forty passengers lost their lives on that fateful Monday morning of the collision. Life at home back then became tough since we had to stay with my grandmother. My grandmother is getting a meagre pension grant to support the family of twelve. While both my aunts were working, they were paid peanuts in a sugarcane farm where they worked and lived. They only visited home at month ends and during Christmas holidays. My grandmother went out and planted crops in her land. She sold vegetables to the community to supplement her pension money so we could all go to school, pay school fees, buy clothes and buy food.

My grandmother played a significant role in our upbringing. Since we were a very big family, she brought us up with the teachings of the importance of family values. We were a close family. Being raised in such a big family, I learnt to share everything no matter how small it was. As kids, we never had a dull moment because every evening my grandmother would call us to her room. We would sit around her bed. Every evening, she would share different stories that had beautiful lesson-orientated endings. She is a good storyteller. The girls took turns sleeping with our grandmother on her big old bed. I still miss these moments now that she is too old to sit up all night telling us stories. We never needed friends even when we started school because we walked together to and from school. We played soccer and we were coached by my cousin brother. I fell in love with playing to the extent that I would force everyone to come and play even when they did not want to. Everything started to change in my life when

my aunt moved to a new place that was far from our home. It was decided she would take me with her together with her three children to reduce the burden of raising us from my grandmother because she was getting older. Even today I miss those interesting and enjoyable evenings I longed for every day in my grandmother's bedroom. Life at my aunt's place was not the same as the one we had at home. I did not know why she chose to move with me out of all the other children in my family.

5.6.2 Adapting to a new way of life

Even though we grew up very close with my cousins, that close-knit family relationship we had started to show signs of cracks. I blamed my grandmother and my eldest sister for agreeing to that new arrangement for me moving with my aunt to her new home. My cousins and I are almost the same age. I was going to start grade 10 when I moved in with my aunt. Everything changed in my aunt's home. I was expected to do all the housework before I left for school every morning. There were four girls in the house, but I was the only one who did most of these house chores. My cousins and aunt ordered me to do so. At first, I did not have a problem doing everything because I am very particular about doing things. Cleaning and cooking alone meant that I would have a clean house or kitchen at the end of day. That was the reason I enjoyed doing those chores. When my cousins started ordering me around, I knew that my life was going to be very difficult. In 2018, when I was doing grade 11, one of my cousins fell pregnant. My aunt blamed me for introducing her to dating boys at school. I was punished harshly that Friday evening when my aunt discovered the news. She accused me of not looking after my cousins before and after school. She forgot that I was no longer walking with them to and from school anymore because I was rushing to get home early or the last one to leave the house in the morning. I did not have time to walk with friends because I was always rushing to get home to fetch water, clean the house and cook meals every afternoon. I tried to tell my grandmother that life with my aunt's family was tough. She told me to adapt to the new conditions, stating that things would get better with time. She explained that the reason why we were separated to live with our aunts was because she was too old to take care of us. I cried after hearing that there was no chance of me going back home.

My aunt did not understand my personality. She was always away from home working in the sugarcane fields. She continuously misunderstood me. I developed bitterness towards her, because of that. When I was in grade nine, I told my grandmother that I thought I was different

but I was never sure in what way. When my cousins started dating boys, I understood the way in which I was different. I did not like boys to date them. I only felt comfortable and attracted to girls. One afternoon my aunt found me talking to my younger cousin, who had asked me about my attraction to girls. We were in the kitchen. I was explaining how I felt but I was not clear about the explanation because my feelings scared me as well. Even today, I do not want to remember that day. My aunt shouted, punched and hit me saying I was teaching her child to be '*isitabane*' (lesbian). She mentioned that I was a disgrace to our family. She told me that my parents were turning in their graves because I wanted to be a man. She asked why I would do not behave like normal girls, have a boyfriend with the intention of getting married. I was punished, locked out so I could think about changing my behaviour. I slept outside in the cold and cried to sleep. My aunt did not care about what happened to me.

A month after that incident I attempted suicide by drinking paraffin, and I was punished for that. I saw myself as useless and an embarrassment to the family. Funny enough my grandmother did not say hurtful words when she was told about my sexuality. Even though it is still easier talking to my grandmother, I feel that there is not much that I can share with her because she is old and currently struggles with hearing properly. Life at my aunt's home is very tough. My aunt and cousins are making it impossible for me to enjoy being a child. I miss my grandmother and my siblings.

5.6.3 The runaway kid

The situation became very critical at home when I was doing grade 11. I decided to run away and lived in the streets for a few months. At home my cousins knew that I was a lesbian because as girls we spoke about our experiences. I did not know that they had spread the news about my life at school, stating that the reason I was not having a child was because I was dating girls. When the principal heard about this, my aunt was called to school. She told the principal that I was a problem child and how she had told me to stop acting like a boy, but I ignored her. I was suspended from school for 14 days and could not write the mid-year examinations. The principal stated that I needed to clear up my head and when I come back to school, I should behave like a girl that I was. I felt lost and defeated and I took rats poison that same afternoon after suspension. I was found by boys, who were coming from the soccer practice fainted along the road. An ambulance was called, and I was admitted for 12 days. While

in the hospital social services intervened and I was taken to live with one of my other aunts from my father's side at Empangeni, north of KwaZulu-Natal.

The trials I have gone through have made me lose focus in my studies, even though I am not an A learner, but I have never failed a class. I missed the June examinations during that period I was suspended and at the hospital. The psychosocial support that I got in the hospital and the move to the new home have assisted me in trying to find the purpose of my life. I have gone back into working diligently. I have passed grade 11 with good marks. I am worried that I might fail grade 12 examinations at the end of the year. This is because some days I become too withdrawn and get emotional when I think about everything that I went through at my aunt's place. I visit my grandmother's home once a year, but she is too old and half blind. She is lucky to live to be above 93. She sometimes cannot recognise me. I feel sad that she is gradually losing her memory. I have gone back to playing soccer. I find time to play, even though I have a busy schedule. I only feel alive when I train. The team members I play with seem to support me. They treat me like one of their own, there is no time to speak about my sexuality. I have been playing good soccer before, and I continue where I left off. I am in a happy space when I am in the grounds training. I would like to continue playing even after I finish school. Soccer has allowed me to forget many hurtful experiences. I want to perfect this skill, who knows I might play in the national squad one day.

5.5.4 Learning to love myself

In my current school I have support of my Mathematics teacher (Mrs. Mda). She has been assisting me with extra lessons. Sometimes she calls me during break times and gives me sandwiches from her house. She is making me believe that not every teacher is judgemental to lesbians. I find difficulty trusting people. I have become an introvert. My teacher is slowly making me believe in love. Despite the love she gives me not everyone is my fan. I remember one day I came to school late. The deputy principal and other male teachers were standing by the gate. The names of all learners who came late were taken down on a book. I explained that I was late because there was a shoot-out in the morning between the taxi people. The deputy made a comment asking why I was scared because I am a man, was I not man enough to go out and face those that were fighting. He further stated that I think I am a man only when it suits me. Another teacher stated that ever since I came to their school, I have taught other girls to join me in this "thing". Everyone who was by the gate laughed. I was devastated by the

teachers' actions. I was shamed and humiliated in front of other learners. The very same people who are educated made fun of me because of my sexuality. I know that I cannot teach anyone to be a lesbian, it is something that one is born with. My teachers do not understand that being a lesbian does not mean that one wants to be a man or can instantly change her behaviour.

During break time I went to Mrs. Mda. I could not control my anger. I cried uncontrollably. She hugged me and said I should learn to love myself first before I expect other people to love me. She explained that people judge because of lack of knowledge about something. I have been trying to do that ever since she spoke to me. I decided that I will not attempt suicide anymore. I love the person I am becoming. What my Mathematics teacher made me discover about myself and life is that my obligation is to ignore negative people. Anyone who says hurtful and sarcastic comments because I am a lesbian does not deserve my attention. I need to follow my heart. I cannot force them to understand and love me. I must live the life that makes me happy. After that discovery my schoolwork is improving every day. I am active during lessons, something I had stopped doing long ago. I want to be a lawyer. I want to speak for the less privileged people, more particularly young lesbian girls who are shamed, ridiculed and killed because they cannot protect themselves from the communities that prioritises heterosexual relationships. I dream of my independence every day. I am certain that I can achieve my dream of building my own reputation and my own empire. I am preparing for my final examinations with a positive attitude. I have realised that life is only enjoyable if one is successful.

5.7 Phakamile's story...

5.7.1 Changes and challenges in my early life

I was born in a rural place in KwaMaphumulo, near Stanger North of Durban in 2003. I am 16



years old and the last born from a family of three.

I was raised by my grandmother and my single mother. I live with my three siblings, two brothers aged 36 and 35 years old respectively and a 20-year-old sister. I come from a family that is not financially stable because only one brother has a permanent job. My mother was forced by the conditions at home to look for a job in Stanger, a neighbouring town. She only visited home on her off days. Whilst working at Stanger,

she stayed with a man she was dating because she could not afford to rent a space in town. After four years in a relationship with the man, she started losing weight. I remember one weekend when she was home, my grandmother told her to come back home if the town life was not good for her. She promised to see the doctor and find out about the problem. My mother became ill at the end of 2018. She died within three weeks of AIDS-related diseases when I was doing grade eight in high school near my home. After her death I became my grandmother's responsibility.

When growing up, my eldest brother was known as an intelligent man in the family, but something troubled him after he left home to look for a job in Durban. As he was from the rural area, I guess he made the wrong choices because he started drinking heavily and took drugs. That became his addiction. He ended up getting in and out of jail because he always fought when he was under the influence. He lost his job at a garage after his longest stay in jail. My brother was not earning much in his new job. He was able to pay for my school fees and bought me clothes when he had extra cash. He assisted my grandmother with the little that he had before he got stabbed and almost died in a fight with his friends. The family was told that they fought over a bottle of whisky that was bought by my brother. Unfortunately, my brother is wheelchair bound ever since he was discharged from the hospital. Since my grandmother was a well-known community member, the changes and challenges we went through as a family did not weaken her. She became stronger for my brothers, sister and me. My grandmother was

adored by many in the community, this made it easier for the community to assist the family with food and necessities where they could after my brother's ordeal and mother's passing.

My grandmother died when I was in grade 10. I am now left with my brothers and my sister. My younger brother finished school and became a policeman. I suspect he chose this profession because he wanted to protect and serve his community. I have a healthy relationship with my siblings. My eldest brother stopped drinking after his near-death experience. I have recently discovered that we are all half-brothers and half-sisters. As the last born I have been supported and taken care of because my brothers do not want me to struggle. I must focus on my schoolwork. My family always motivates me to be positive in life. The encouragement I have from them made it easier for me to tell them one Saturday evening that I was a lesbian. I remember that it was a few days before Christmas. I did not care even if I would not get Christmas presents. I trusted my family enough to share what I was going through. It was interesting to see my brothers' facial expressions when I spoke with them. I waited for their responses, some shouting or scolding. None happened, my sister stood up and hugged me, and so did my brothers. I cried not because I was sad, but the tears of joy. I felt immense support from them. I knew with my family loving me I could achieve anything I set my mind into.

5.7.2 Art gave me strength to live my life for better

My childhood life has been filled with numerous tragedies. Firstly, I lost my mother to AIDS related sickness. Secondly, my brother is permanently disabled. Lastly, I lost my granny the only person who loved me and nursed me after my mother died. I had been distressed but after everything I experienced, I managed to pull through. As I grew up in adverse conditions I had to adapt at my pace. At school I joined the school choir, and I sing beautifully. My voice is sweet and melodic. Singing assisted me in finding a way out of my sadness. I love playing soccer!! I see myself as the next big soccer player. If it was not for my music and playing soccer, I might have given up by now. These two have very powerful healing power. I have started attending local competitions, there is a chance for growing in this sport. I have big future plans, and it involves young people. After so many setbacks, I decided to concentrate only on important things, especially those with positive influence. So that they are imprinted on my mind. I passed grade nine with flying colours. I was awarded in seven of my nine learning areas. My siblings were happy that I was excelling in school regardless of what I went through.

My younger brother motivated me. I want to become someone big in life. Being able to differentiate important things from not so important has aided me to use the opportunity I got to shine in everything I do.

When I started secondary school because our primary school ended in grade 9, I did not cope with the load of work I received every day in my new school. I did not realise that being at a secondary school, doing grade 10 was that challenging. I have been friends with a girl from my neighbourhood since childhood. She is from my township. I have become comfortable sharing everything with my friend. Her name is Siza, she also comes from a similar background as mine. She was raised by her grandmother. She does not know her parents. They died when she was 10 months old. She has two older brothers. When I got to my new school, I had to choose the stream to specialise in. All learners were workshopped on different packages offered in school. After the departmental heads had finished with their presentations, I decided to choose the art stream. I did not know anything much about it. I knew I wanted to sing, dance and act as I was told the class was exciting. Little did I know that Siza had chosen the same class though we did not discuss the choices we would make after the workshop. I was excited that we were in the same class. Being in the same class with Siza afforded me an opportunity to look after her in a sisterly way. At a very young age I have learnt from my community that as people we need to share with the less fortunate everything we have. The community shared the little that they had with my family when times were difficult at home. I started caring for my friend because her situation was worse than mine. I am in grade 11 currently. I am excelling in all my subjects, and I look forward to my grade 12.

At school I enjoy debating, acting and public speaking. The art skills I have learnt are helping me in debating and public speaking. If I do not get a chance to do art at a tertiary institution, I can become a lawyer. Growing up in an unstable but loving environment has made me unafraid to take risks, to try and expand my knowledge. In the school choir I sing soprano. In 2018, the school won the provincial choral competitions. During the mid-year school break, the choir travelled to Johannesburg for the national competitions. That experience made me realise that I had made the best choice in joining the school choir. Surprisingly, the skills I learnt from my drama lessons assist in shaping and giving me confidence in everything that I do. The idea of a ‘challenging childhood’ is a thing of the past. I have stopped focusing on the past, the loss and setbacks. I now have confidence in everything I do.

My great artistic skills did not prepare me for the trouble my sexuality brought for me at school. When I started secondary schooling, I never hid my interest in girls. Siza knew that I am lesbian. I did not explain anything to anyone. Towards the end of June, still in grade 10, I started spending most of my free time with a girl named S'fanele. She was in grade ten, in a science class. Our friendship grew into something special. I did not hide my feelings for her. Yet, I did not explain the type of friendship I had with her. I heard that I was discussed by some teachers and learners at school. People were concerned that being a lesbian was going to ruin my academic record. Apparently, the school was expelling every learner who displayed signs of being lesbian. My primary school was closer to my secondary school, so, my teachers knew that I was a top achiever. It eventually turned out that even the School Management Team (SMT) was worried about my friendship with S'fanele. I was not the only girl who was seeing other girls. Most people tend to judge without finding any conclusive information about the subject, this was the case with me. One Monday morning I was summoned to a disciplinary meeting. The principal has a boardroom where he holds his meetings with different stakeholders. This was where my disciplinary meeting took place. I thought to myself I would use my dramatic skills to teach my teachers a thing or two about the value of embarrassing anyone because of their differences.

I was told that the purpose of the meeting was because I had broken one of the school's codes of conduct. The disciplinary chairperson explained that I was lucky to be given an opportunity to sit in the meeting because I was an A-learner. The principal ordered me to stop any relationship I was having with S'fanele because I was modelling bad behaviour to other girls at school. He emphasised that as a Zulu girl I should behave properly as expected in our culture. The principal expressed how my grandmother would not have approved of my behaviour. Seeing me turning into a '*isitabane*' (lesbian) would have broken her spirits. How was I going to have children? One SMT member told me I would be damaged goods if I continue behaving like boys. The chairperson said when the fun was over no man would want to marry me. Another teacher pointed out that more girls have started copying what I was doing because they think that "*thing*" was allowed at school.

When I was given a chance to speak, I first asked for the copy of the school code of conduct. This was because previously parents and the learners were required to sign the code of conduct

at the beginning of every year. I explained that it was going to be better if we had proof of what they were talking about. I was a member of the school Representative Council of Learners (RCL). In one of our meetings, we had deliberated on the silences on some of the issues within the school code of conduct. In that year, the school did not issue out these to parents and learners for signing. One of these was the issue of relationships and sexuality. The teachers were shocked by my request. I sat there with the smug on my face. I knew they were not certain about the contents of the code of conduct simple because it was drafted ages ago. To the school it was a document they never fully engaged with. Though the whole experience was meant to humiliate me at that point I felt I had won that first round. My negative experiences when I was growing up trained me to have the inclination of always expecting that something bad would always happen. In my drama class I was also taught that I cannot change my past, but I can learn to look at it from a different angle and build from that. I wanted to let the School Management Team (SMT) and disciplinary committee know that being a lesbian was not infectious. That it does not stop people from living their lives successfully. I mentioned that I had done nothing wrong because most learners were dating within the school. I asked if it was allowed because it was a boy-girl relationship? I apologised to everyone present about my behaviour. I explained that I was not being disrespectful by asking to see the school code of conduct. I further clarified that if I can change who I am within a day it can be better for all concerned but I am not a lesbian by choice. The school principal was furious. He explained that the only reason I was not suspended was because I was academically strong. Above that, the schools' choir competitions were continuing. They excused me. I did not realise that that was the beginning of my torment at school.

5.7.3 Increased adaptability

After that meeting most learners started ridiculing me openly. They hurled bad names my way whenever we met within the school premises. Some girls stopped talking to me because they were scared, I would want to date them. Boys blatantly came out and said I wanted to take their girlfriends. Even community members became judgemental towards me. I remember I once went to the clinic because I had a very severe influenza. The nurse who assisted me told me she hoped I was not pregnant because it was not possible for girls to impregnate each other. I was too sick to respond to her insults. I quickly jumped down from the bed she was examining me on. I went to the next consulting room. I explained to the sister I found there the misunderstanding between me and the nurse. When I left a group of nurses were standing

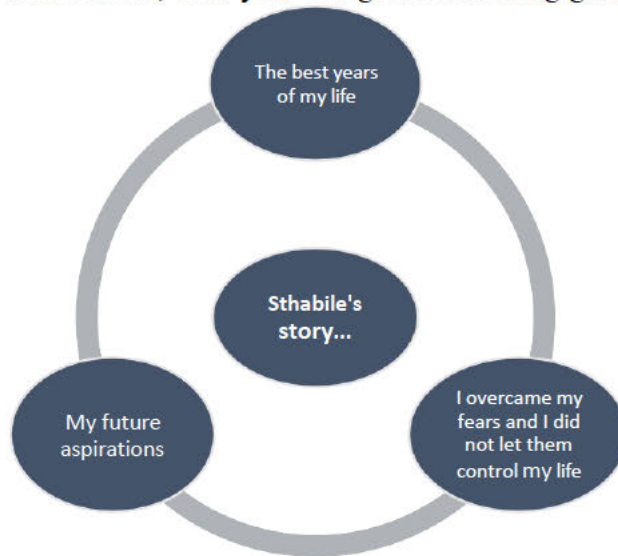
outside an office giggling and pointing at me. It turned out that the sister I reported the incident to the supervisor. I learnt that from another learner whose mother is a cleaner at the clinic. The nurse was reprimanded for ill-treating me. It is unbelievable that my experiences of being lesbian has made me aware of the disadvantages of being seen differently at school and in the community. I have decided to focus on the positive side of my life. I know the disadvantages outweigh any advantages I might experience. I am using positive support from my siblings and my friends to continue with my life. The satisfaction I get from doing well in all my subjects has fueled me to live my life as an optimistic learner in school. I do not want to be seen as a victim of the circumstances.

Life is not easy, but I am in grade 12 this year, I will soon be leaving school. The behaviour of some teachers and learners is not the same in terms of the treatment that is given to any learner, who is seen as being different. I am grateful for the choice I made in grade 10 because drama has helped in sharpening and shaping my skills. I am growing up with increased self-confidence. I have developed skills which I can easily adjust at any time. I usually find a way out of any existing situation. As a black self-identified lesbian, I have acquired skills to defend myself when I feel I am being attacked without being rude or resorting to a fight. I have managed to make people understand that not everyone will live life the same way. More learners I interact with have become more sensitive towards other people's choices in life. They are slowly accepting that not everyone is the same. My everyday experiences have stopped me from thinking much about my sexual identity. I am living my life the best way I know how. I see myself studying for a degree in opera, dance or drama, I would like to be in the performing art because I want to communicate my thoughts through my talent. I am empathetic, fun and have developed the best communication skills. I love art because I use it as a skill to navigate my everyday life in my school and community.

5.8. Sthabile's story...

5.8.1 The best years of my life

I am Sthabile, a 17-year-old girl. I am doing grade eleven at Silungu secondary school. I was



I was born in 2002 at MaNtubeni in KwaMaphumulo, North of Durban. I live with my grandmother, two uncles, an aunt, three cousins and my two-year old sister. My mother works in a hospital in Pietermaritzburg. She has lived there for seven years. My family is not wealthy, but I grew up having everything that a child wants. My grandfather was a farmer. When he died, he left his sugarcane farm, cows, goats and pigs to

my grandmother, who is a teacher in a school near our home. My eldest uncle oversees the daily running of the farm. His younger brother is studying Computer Hardware Engineering at the University of Cape Town. I am very close to my younger uncle, and he is supportive of many of the things I do. My grandparents' farm is not very big, but it takes care of the family and the workers. There are ten people working on the farm. Our home is a big five-room house. It has an outbuilding that has two bedrooms for my uncles. My upbringing has been characterised by a stable, responsive and caring relationship from my grandparents. I was told that my mother (Aza) fell pregnant when she was in grade ten. My grandfather was deeply hurt by that because my mother was very young at that time. My grandmother decided that she would raise me and as a result my mother went back to school. She finished grade twelve three years later. She looked for a job in Durban. My mother stays there and only comes home on month-ends or during special holidays. I do not miss her because though we talk about girl issues, but I hardly know anything about her.

She left home after she finished her training as a nurse and moved to work in a hospital in Pietermaritzburg. My grandparents loved me very much, I was the only youngest child in the family at that time. I was spoilt with everything I desired so that I could not feel that my mother was a teenage mother. I have never met my father nor heard anything spoken about him at

home. Sometimes I wish I knew who he was, where he lives or even his name. Even though my

grandparents loved and supported me, I still crave my father's love, his attention and presence as I grow up. I am loved but I constantly dream about the role he might have played in my life. The powerful messages he would share, his time, attention and interest in shaping the woman that I am becoming.

When it was time to start my schooling, my grandparents enrolled me in a former model C school in town. I enjoyed travelling in a school bus with other learners when I started school. The only season I hated was winter. I had to wake up too early and get ready so that I would not be left behind. I attended in town from grade one to five. One day during one of our cooking sessions with my grandmother I told her that I wanted to attend the neighbouring school the following year. I explained that I was not enjoying the school that I was in anymore. I took advantage of the fact that we got along very well with my grandmother. When we were together you would swear, she was my biological mother. My grandfather was told about my request, he agreed. The following year I started attending in primary school. I rode with her every morning and in the afternoon. Those were priceless moments for both of us. We talked about several things. We got very close. After school we cooked together in her beautiful kitchen, singing and talking about school. My grandmother taught me many different recipes which she took from her thick recipe book that was kept in the bottom shelf in the kitchen cupboard. Everything that I learnt about cleaning, cooking and baking I was taught by her. I still remember how envious my mother would be to see me cooking confidently, dishing out mouth-watering breakfast or lunch over the weekend when she came home for the holidays. Even currently I still love cooking. I have become a very tidy person because I learnt that from my grandmother. I love housekeeping better than going out to the farm. I hope when I become a parent, I will teach my children the same things I was taught by my grandmother.

I enjoyed primary school, more importantly sport. I played for the junior team when I was in grade three. When I started attending my grandmother's school at the beginning of the year, I was selected to play in the senior girls' soccer team. I have learnt a lot about soccer. I sometimes dream of playing in big teams. Our coach was very patient with us. He said he believes in being talented and a natural. We sometimes went to school on Saturdays so that we could have more time practicing. In the two years I spent at that school I became the best soccer player. I loved and focused on playing soccer. It allowed me to be in control of many things. I am a disciplined team player. I also appreciated spending my free time reading in the school library if I was not

busy during break times. I became a bookworm because of that. I loved school. I excelled in English, Geography and Mathematics. My dream is to have a career in the science field when I finish school. I believe that if I am educated, I can help my uncle to better the farm. My grandfather died in 2015, when I was in grade nine. I was inconsolable during that period of loss; I loved him like my father. He took care of me like his daughter. Since my mother never told her parents who my father was, my grandfather became the closest father figure to me. I cried the whole week before and after my grandfather's funeral. My grandmother comforted me during my grieving period. I was thankful that I grew up in a nurturing environment that encouraged me to explore and engage in many activities because of the support. As a result, my early life was the best because I was loved. I treasured the activities I did with the people who loved me unconditionally, like my grandparents and all the family members.

5.8.2 I overcame my fears, and I did not let them take control of my life

My growth in self-love and self-esteem has been nurtured by my grandmother. She made it possible for me to love my schoolwork and everything that I set my mind into. I worked diligently every year. I achieved excellent marks in my first year of secondary schooling. I had an open relationship with my grandmother and my aunt. I was able to talk to them whenever I was troubled by something. That resulted in me having to freely share my everyday challenges with them. Since my mother was never fully involved in my upbringing, I have had reservations telling her about the challenges I faced growing up. I did not have close friends at school or in my neighbourhood because I always spent time with my grandparents and cousins. I recently have started to hang around with three girls from my class. I am in a science class. We do not know much about each other. I noticed that they are good listeners.

In the four years at the secondary school, I have not had the best moments. I struggled to adapt with many things. I have noticed that I miss my special moments with my grandmother. In primary school I was with my grandmother most of the time. The amount of work was not as much as I had in secondary school. Although I am used to working hard, I have many problems that I am faced with. I remember when I was in grade five, I was comfortable to be within the company of girls although I did not make friends with them. That worried me, but at that time I failed to understand why I felt relaxed amongst girls. I hated to be around boys, I thought it was because I did not give myself sufficient time to know them better. Later, when I was in grade ten, I told my younger uncle that I was confused about my feelings for girls. He

told me that it meant that I was a lesbian. I had heard that word before, but I was not clear what it meant for me. I got into the internet, searched for the information about being a lesbian. From then onwards I confirmed to my uncle that indeed I am a lesbian. I requested him to support me when the time was right for me to tell my grandmother about it. He agreed. I waited for the right moment to talk to my grandmother first before telling the whole family. It took more than six months to talk to my grandmother about my sexuality.

I grew up confident and assertive because of the love and support from everyone at home. Being comfortable to speak to my grandmother allowed my space to requested to speak to her one Sunday morning after breakfast, I felt anxious. I was brought up in a large family. I was not scared to speak about any subject. I missed my mother's love, that experience taught me to be independent at a young age. At home I am the eldest of all the girls. They could not help me with my growing-up issues. The only person who was left to share my challenges with was my grandmother or my aunt. That was the reason why I chose to speak to my grandmother. During our meeting I asked her if she knew anything about lesbianism. I was shocked to find out that she knew more about the subject than I had thought. I explained how I have researched it with my uncle's assistance. I told her that my interest in the subject was because I was also a lesbian. I shared with her how sorry I was that there was going to be no '*lobola*' (bride- prize) and no husband for me. My grandmother's response surprised me. She stated how, as a parent, she notices everything in her household. She told me she suspected a long time ago that I was not interested in boys. She said that was because I never talked or asked about that subject during our cooking or cleaning sessions although we spoke about almost every subject daily. She further stated that there were other girls at home, my cousins, who had already shown signs of interest in boys. As someone who was educated, she knew what it meant. That I might be a lesbian. After that she kept quiet waiting to be assured by me that that was what I felt. She stated that she was glad I had confirmed it. I felt relieved after I spoke to her. With her support I knew that I could face whatever challenges that might come my way. One thing I learnt from that experience was that it is possible to overcome fears when one has a support base. I stopped letting fear control me because I could not have known my chances in life if I had stayed afraid to talk to my grandmother.

Hardworking is one of my attributes. It was for that reason that I had been involved in many school activities. The projects that were very close to my heart were reading, short-story and

poetry writing. I initiated these with three of my classmates in the grade eight classes at school. I shared the responsibilities of running the three projects with my intelligent and close classmates, Lulu, Zama and Ntando. When I remembered how I struggled in grade eight with the huge workload and adjusting to working hard, I was motivated to present three proposed projects to our school principal. If I were to describe our principal, I would say he is a good listener, a democratic leader and supportive of great initiatives. More importantly, if they were learner-driven but also a very strict person. My friends and I took advantage of that, and we knew he would back our initiative. After the presentation he was extremely excited about our proposed projects. He promised to support us with the printing out of the materials needed every week. We agreed to give him monthly reports in his office on the chosen days. At the end of the year the grade eight results were outstanding. During the speech and prize giving ceremony the four of us were awarded for supporting grade eight.

The following year we worked with the new grade eight and grade nine learners, alternating the afternoons, except Fridays. As a granddaughter of a teacher, I knew that what we were doing was going to offer great opportunities for those learners to do well in their schoolwork. Their involvement in the projects would give learners a sound background later in their lives. After the first year doing the projects more grade 11 learners wanted to take part assisting with the projects. The committee grew. We became the talk of the school and the community. Parents saw the commitment from their children. The community library was busy every day with learners borrowing books, reading and writing in the library. My grandmother was pleased that we took the leadership role for the young ones. Our happiness was short-lived. In the second year of the programme, mid-year, some teachers complained to the principal that the reason we wanted to assist grades eight and nine was because members of the committee were all lesbians. Our intention for the project was to take advantage of the young girls when we were left alone at school in the afternoon.

The principal heard about that; the first four members of the committee were summoned to his office. Attending the meeting were the School Management Team (SMT), the teacher liaison officer and the teachers' union site stewards. Only when we got into the office did we realise how big the issue was about our involvement in the projects. As I have aforementioned, I am a confident person. I have positively led in many learner-associations in primary and secondary schools at a very young age. That day I felt that confidence dissipating as I sat looking at the

principal. He chaired the meeting. He started by applauding us for the good work that our initiative has produced for Silungu secondary school. He continued to say that he had faith that when the learners write their grade twelve final examinations, the school will attain many distinctions, mostly in English First Additional Language. The principal further indicated how disappointed he was to hear that we are lesbians. How we had planned to take advantage of the grades eight and nine learners and to have sex with them for our satisfaction. As he was talking some teachers were cooing, others nodding or shaking their heads. I stopped listening to what he said next. I was overwhelmed with anger and feelings of fear of what I was going to say when I was given an opportunity to speak. The principal questioned me if it was true that I am a lesbian. He wanted to know how long I have been feeding the poison to his young girls at school. I tried to respond; my voice failed me. It was squeaky, hoarse and inaudible. I requested a glass of water; the principal took a bottle from his fridge. He gave it to me. I took it, thanked him and I took time drinking the water and trying to calm myself down.

My grandmother taught me to be self-assured in life. To always tell the truth. She described how most people keep quiet about accusations and ill-treatments in their everyday encounters because they felt scared and intimidated. When responding to the principal's question I remembered these words. I did not confirm nor deny that I am lesbian. I started by stating that the South African Constitution guarantees the protection of the right to sexual orientation to all citizens. I stated that I feel that my rights were not protected if I was openly asked about my sexuality in front of many people; yet sexuality is very private and confidential. I further told the meeting that before we started the projects, we had asked for the principal's approval which was given and applauded. After that permission was granted. I further stated that currently there seemed to be a problem with what we were doing after school with grades eight and nine learners. To us, it was shocking. I highlighted that we were abruptly summoned to the principal's office before people who knew nothing about the intended objectives of our initiative. I warned the meeting that for the sake of our protection, the principal should have taken all necessary and appropriate action when addressing the matter to make sure that no harm or judgement would be directed at us. I finally said I would respond to the questions asked to me after our protection was guaranteed. Everyone present was shocked by my response. I saw that the principal was not comfortable after my talk. We were requested to leave the office and to wait outside. From that moment I knew that knowledge had banished

fear, our meeting was not going to continue that day. I drew my strength from that. I was ready for the outcome of the meeting. We were not called back to the office the whole day.

After school, we went out and continued with our projects. The news of what happened in the office had reached the entire school. Likewise, grades eight and nine learners had heard the accusations directed at the committee. I did not know when they planned the presentation they had had the next day. After the morning assembly, eight learners from these two grades, comprised of four girls and four boys, asked to speak in the assembly. I had no idea whether the teacher who conducted the morning assembly gave them that slot on purpose or whether she did not know the contents of their presentation. They started by highlighting how saddened they were by the news that were making rounds at school. The learners stated clearly that there had never been any occurrences where the afternoon lessons were about relationships, sex or dating. They begged teachers to support the committee members because if the principal had to stop the projects, all of them were going to suffer. They pleaded with anyone who had been harassed by the committee to report the matter to the principal. They ended by stating they hoped the principal would make a decision that was not going to be clouded by hate from the person who instigated false accusation towards the committee members. Everyone in the assembly clapped their hands. I stood there shocked by what had happened. After assembly, my Life Orientation teacher came to me and stated that I almost set the whole school on fire with the way I handled the whole issue about my sexuality during the disciplinary session. She was glad that I managed to educate some of the teachers about every person's rights.

During break time the committee members were called to the principal's office. He apologised for victimising us publicly. He stated that he used his feelings instead of thoroughly engaging with the accusations. The principal allowed us to continue with the projects. We thanked him and left his office. It was easy for the committee to find out who the instigator teacher was. During our meeting we agreed that we would not entertain him. While most teachers decided to support us with the projects, others continued hating us. Those were the teachers, who wanted to become popular by commenting and bad-mouthing us. They openly mentioned that the principal failed the school when he did not expel us for our bad behaviour. We agreed not to take their comments to heart. What was amusing in the whole lesbian saga was that out of the four of us, I was the only lesbian. I confidently believe I was born like this. It is impossible to teach anyone to be lesbian. I wish people can get more information before they

say bad things about my sexuality. Some boys have been nasty towards me, maybe it is because they are scared to come out openly and challenge me. This is because of who I am and my family's reputation in the community. I am thankful to my grandmother for raising a girl that is not afraid to speak up even when the odds are against her.

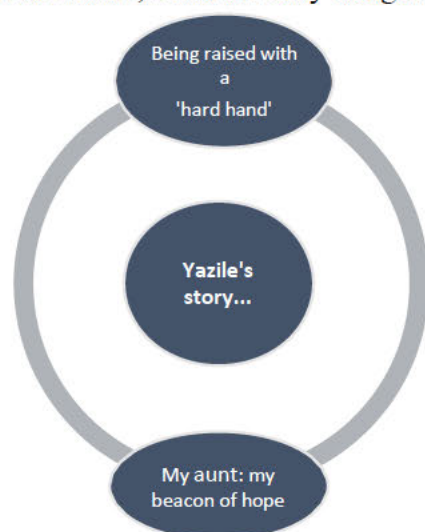
5.8.3 My future aspirations

My dream is to challenge myself academically and physically. I will continue playing soccer because I love how it has made things positive about what I have gone through. I would like to go to university to study Actuary Science. I have fallen in love with numbers. I have eventually developed good mathematical skills. Mathematics and Physical Science have become my favourite subjects. I know these subjects can be very boring and difficult to understand for someone who is outside this specialisation. I like working in some competitive environments. I have confidence that if I am well educated, I can have a balanced life. I fell in love with solving problems at primary school. I am now excelling at it. I am convinced that I can use my skills and knowledge to solve people's business problems. I cannot wait to earn more money. My goal is to spoil and take care of my grandmother in her old age like she did to me when I was young.

5.9 Yazile's story...

5.9.1 Being raised with a 'hard hand'

My name is Yazile, I am the only daughter of Mathabo and Mbenge Cwele. I was born in 2002 in



Mvuzo, a rural area, on the South Coast. We relocated to Durban because of job opportunities for my family. The family settled in KwaMashu township. I am a 17-year-old grade 12-learner at Mdweshu high school in KwaMashu township, North of Durban. I lived in M-section with my granny, my uncle, three younger brothers and my two cousins. My mother and aunts got married when we were

young. They left us to be raised by our granny and uncle. Although my mother did not stay

with us, she occasionally sent money for support. She lives in J-section, on the other side of the township with her husband. She has a fifth child, a four-year-old girl (Effie) from her marriage. My mother's husband does not like my brothers and me. He is not our biological father. When my mother met him, he made her choose between us and him. My stepfather is the taxi owner. He has a fleet of taxis, close to 30 taxis. His house is a mansion and one of the most beautiful houses in J-section. I was happy for my mother to find someone who loved her. I had hoped we would stay with them after she got married, but that did not happen. I was not too young when she got married. My granny explained that we were to remain behind with her after my mother got married. While I was disappointed, I was pleased to be left with my granny. That meant that all five children became my granny's responsibility. Life at home was busy, preparing for school and crèche every day became our daily activity.

My granny worked in a nearby clinic as a general cleaner. She was a special person to us since she had to raise all five of us single-handedly. I remember when I was 11 years old, she was hospitalised for three weeks. Life was difficult during those weeks. As the eldest in the house, I took care of other children. My uncle assisted occasionally when he was off from his security job. It was tough for me. My mother and aunts did not bother to come and assist my grandmother. Since my granny liked cleanliness, I had to keep the house clean when she was hospitalised. My granny taught me to cook at an early age. Whilst she was admitted to the hospital, I did not cook anything fancy, but we slept with our stomachs full. After my granny was discharged from the hospital her health deteriorated. She did not return to work. She went in and out of hospital. One day she called me and told me that if she dies, we should go and live with our mothers in their houses. I did not think much of losing her. I had hoped that that time would not come. My granny died at the end of the second year. I was going to start grade seven the following year. After her funeral, my mother and her husband came and took us to live in their house. That was the beginning of a very trying life for us. Every day my stepfather reminded us that he was doing my mother a big favour in raising us and letting us stay in his house when our biological father had dumped us.

I have made two friends that I am close with at school. I have misbehaved frequently at school and have been suspended more often, and this has made my mother to be stricter with me at home. I have always shared my life experiences freely with my friends rather than with my mother. As young as I was, I understood that the reason why my stepfather was strict was

because he was trying to establish authority and discipline for us. We never bothered him. We

did everything that was expected. I started to dislike him because he hit us for no apparent reason. I became more troubled by his actions. I was concerned about my brothers' wellbeing, who were very young. They were punished regularly for minor mistakes. One of the many punishments was to wash my stepfather's cars even though there were people responsible for doing those chores. If the cars were not clean enough, my brothers were made to sleep without food. My mother kept quiet all the time. I once told my uncle that I wanted us to get back home and to stay with him. He indicated that he was not working at that time, and life was difficult for him. He could not support us financially. Circumstances compelled us to continue to stay with my mother. I tried to talk to my mother to intervene when we were punished, but she did not. I discovered one day that she was physically and emotionally abused too behind the closed doors.

I tried to focus on the positive side of our lives, like having a roof over our heads, having food on the table and clothes on our bodies. The abuse continued, especially over the weekends when my stepfather got home drunk. We were close with my siblings, however, I continuously had arguments with my mother because of her nonchalant responses to her husband's abusive behaviour. I sensed that she did not love us. She regretted giving birth to us from the man who deserted her. She blamed us for her abuse in her home. Her behaviour suggested that it was compulsory to take us in because my uncle ordered her to. I treasured the fact that I had had a good relationship with my granny. I was able to talk and share my problems with her freely. At times, I think my granny spoiled us. My mother complained that my grandmother gave me too much freedom. In my mother's mind, it was guaranteed that that freedom might lead me to get up to mischief.

Immediately after the move to my mother's house, I started performing badly at school. I was constantly tearful, bad-tempered and sensitive. My teacher asked for the reason for my abrupt change in behaviour, I lied to her. Dishonesty became my coping strategy. I thought I was losing my mind. Life became unbearable such that one day I decided to run away from home to look for a job in town. I packed a few clothes and put them in my schoolbag. I went to school as normal. That Friday afternoon I did not come back home from school. I stole money from my mother's purse. After school I took a taxi to town. Upon reaching town I walked towards the beaches. Before I reached the Marine drive road, a car stopped next to me. One of my stepfather's friends was driving, he had seen me first. He did not ask any questions, but he ordered me to get into the car. He took me back home. It was late in the evening when he dropped me off at home.

My mother opened the gate, and she told me to go inside the house. I knew I was going to be disciplined. I heard my stepfather thanking his friend. His friend drove away left. After that I went to my bedroom without eating, I knew that I was going to get severe beating. I was not scared of his punishment anymore.

My stepfather came in with a belt in his hand. He hit me until I was blue on my back and thighs. I thought I was going to die. I truly wished to die but I did not. My brothers were crying standing outside my bedroom. Seeing how severely I was punished, my mother locked herself in her bedroom. She too was crying. I saw a side that I did not know existed in my stepfather's behaviour. When he stopped the beating, he searched my room. He opened my bedside drawer. He found my diary. He sat on my bed and read it. He found out more information than he had anticipated. Daily entries mostly about the girls I liked at school and how unhappy we were staying with my mother in her home. All my thoughts, fears and anxiety about my life were clearly detailed. That night I got a double punishment. He swore to me. He told me it was the balls embedded in my stomach that made me think I was the second man in his house. He said if my balls were strong enough, I should look for my father instead of being ungrateful for the life he was giving us. My stepfather spat on my face. He told me how much he hated '*moffies*'. He swore that I should be reminded that I was a girl, and he was a lion that roared in his house. My stepfather told me he would kill me if I ever stole his money. If I was brave enough, I should look for my father, who needed to do a cultural ritual for me maybe that was going to stop me from wanting to sleep with other girls. I cried to sleep that night. I did not go to school the next day. My brothers told my teacher what happened. Later that day my class teacher, social workers and police came to my home to speak to my parents. Unfortunately, my stepfather was not at home. When the police saw my condition, they took me to the hospital. Regrettably for me, my stepfather was not charged, as he was friends with the police in the township.

When I got back from the hospital, I went to school the next day and told my teacher everything that had happened the previous night. I requested to be taken to a faraway place because I feared my stepfather. All that time my mother said nothing but cried even when she was asked to give clarity on what was the reason for my abusive life. I felt sorry for her. I could see that she wanted a good life for herself, that was why she could not leave her husband. My only concern was my younger brothers. I suggested that social workers should contact my aunt,

who lived in Umlazi. I requested to stay with her. I was taken that afternoon after my aunt agreed to take me to her house. When I left my stepfather's house, my brothers were back from school, they cried standing by the gate until I could not see them. I am broken; I miss them every day. My stepfather does not allow me to talk to them. I know they are abused every day. One day I did not go to school. I got into a taxi to KwaMashu to see my brothers at school. They looked healthy but they had lost the spark of happiness. Like me, they hardly ever smile or are fully engaged when one speaks to them. It broke my heart to see them in that state. I promised to take care of them soon. I have not contacted my mother, and she also has not made contact. My aunt talks about her mostly in the evenings when we sit and talk about life. I understand my mother is her sister and my aunt does not see her as a very irresponsible mother.

5.9.2 My aunt: my beacon of hope

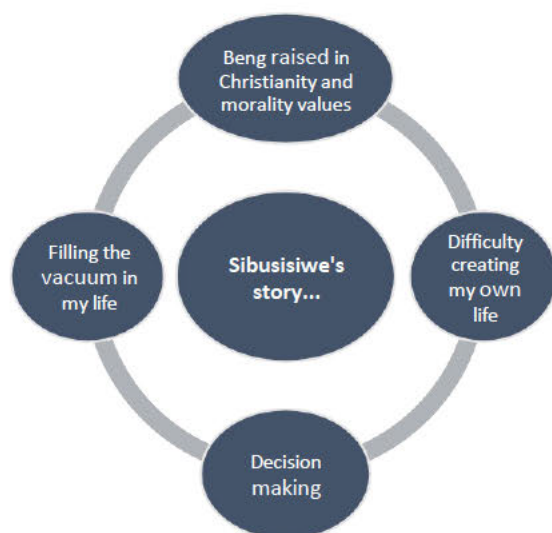
I was transferred to Lizokusa secondary school in Umlazi, South of Durban instantly with the assistance of the social services. My aunt lives with her two younger girls. She lost her husband in 2021 in a taxi fight. He had worked as a taxi driver for many years. Unlike in my stepfather's house, my aunt does not have much but her home is warm and full of love. There is always laughter coming from the lounge or in the kitchen, depending on where we are in the house. My cousins and I walk together to school every morning. They come back early because they are still in primary school. My aunt works at a surgery in Isipingo. She comes home late in the afternoon. When I get home after school, I cook, clean the house and assist my cousins with their homework. My cousins wash the dishes and clean the kitchen after supper, while I do my homework. I have been attending therapy sessions every Saturday as per the arrangement with the social worker. Life is not the same without my granny and my brothers. I know I am too young to have had such traumatic experiences. However, the support my aunt gives me is amazing. During one of the sessions, I told the therapist that part of my problems was that I am a lesbian. I explained that I would love to tell my aunt before she hears it from the wrong people. The therapist told me to break the news to my aunt whenever I felt I was ready. It was not long after that conversation with the therapist and I told my aunt about my sexuality one evening after supper. She listened and did not judge me. She is helpful. She has accepted me the way I am. We frequently talk about how I feel about myself every time on Sundays when we cook lunch. My aunt speaks to me about the importance of education and the endless opportunities for a girl-child, especially if she has dreams. In her, I know I have found a mother.

My aunt reminds me of my grandmother. She loves me unconditionally. I did not experience her love before I moved to her house since she got married when I was very young. I know I am far from healing from my wounds, but my aunt has brought me hope of something I had long lost. She has made it possible for me to talk to her about my life issues because she is open and approachable. During one of the sessions I asked if I could take dance classes as a hobby and play soccer on weekends. I know these two would demand full commitment and training, but they are also fun. I use my practice sessions to escape from my past. I am far from healing, but I have learnt to take charge of the process of healing. I have worked hard to shape my life in the last 12 months. I am confident I will pass grade 11. I want to finish school and start working so that I can take my brothers and live with them. My aspiration is to do dance studies at a tertiary institution, thereafter I would work as a dance instructor, helping children with learning barriers to achieve learning through art.

5.10. Sibusisiwe's story...

5.10.1 Being raised in a Christian and moralistic home

My name is Sibusisiwe, a 17-year-old girl. I live in Ntuzuma township, North of Durban with



my mother, grandmother and my younger sister. I am doing grade 12 at Loftus secondary school in KwaMashu, P-section. My school is located 20 kilometres away from home. Sometimes learners from my township are challenged by several socio-economic issues when it comes to attendance at school. These learners are regularly absent from school because of taxis or community strikes. These issues have posed a huge problem for Loftus secondary school community. The decision was taken by the principal and the School Governing

Body (SGB) to prioritise learners from the surrounding areas than those that came from outside P-section. So, when I got the space to do grade 10 in the school it was purely because of my good marks and because of my mother's reputation as a leader in the community. Both my

mother and grandmother were highly grateful that I passed grade nine with flying colours. My family supported me in everything I did that was education orientated. They understood that there were challenges that I experienced as a teenager. What troubled me was that their understanding was very selective at times. Both my mother and grandmother are staunch Christians. They believe that every problem is solved through going to church and prayer. This has resulted in many clashes between me and them. They have different views and opinions when it comes to life challenges for young people, particularly a girl. They have particular principles on how a girl should carry herself in society.

Since I was in high school, whenever I brought a new friend at home, I was interrogated whether she was attending church or if she was a God-fearing person. Growing up being taught these values did not bother me until I felt that I was forced to go to church even when I did not want to. I understood that I had made it to where I am today because of the principles and values that my mother and grandmother taught me. Their teachings have to some degree shaped my life. Later, in my life, I was suffocating because Christianity and morality did not mean the same to me like it did to them. I have had numerous disagreements with them when I refused to go to church on Sundays. Each time I refused to go to church either my mother or grandmother would give me a lesson on morality and sexual issues. I was told that sex is a special gift. I should keep myself until after marriage. I did not plan on engaging in sexual activities any time soon, nor have I thought of marriage at my age. I attempted to breach the subject to them and held back several times. It was not because I feared talking to them; it was because I knew it would end badly. My sister is six years old. She is too young to understand my frustrations at home. That meant I had no one to share my secrets with. I have not stayed with my father since he married someone else. Nonetheless, I have a decent father-daughter relationship with him. At times I wish he could allow me to live with his family. I have hinted at him many times, but he has not once invited me to live with his family. He knows I will not be allowed to leave home.

5.10.2 Difficulty creating my own life

I realised that my early childhood experience has created an impression that it is a sin to live a life that is not God-orientated. Not until I started experiencing different feelings when I held hands or was with girls, did I realise that I was a lesbian. I think I suppressed these feelings for a long time because of my upbringing. Instead of expressing my life freely, I created a life

that fitted the life my mother and grandmother wanted for me. As they were rigid in their beliefs and actions, consequently, my world swung back and forth between abiding by their rules or breaking every one of them. I am struggling to be happy that I am in high school because of my Christian-based upbringing. I am confident that I am a lesbian. My entire existence, life and presence have been centred around my mother and grandmother's lives. In 2017, I decided to tell my father about the love I have experienced for girls. It was Saturday evening. I had requested my mother to visit my father for the weekend because I wanted to talk to him about what was bothering me. Though she was not happy about it, she agreed. She drove me to my father's house in Durban North after lunch that Saturday. My intention was to tell my father that I was interested in girls and how I think I was a lesbian. My father is liberal in his thinking. Understanding the principles and values I was brought up to believe, I knew that it was going to be difficult to talk to my mother and grandmother about my challenges. I did not know how my father would respond to my revelation. Fortunately, I decided not to prolong or to avoid my problems any longer. I knew it was not going to be easy to tell my father about my sexuality issue, but I was ready to speak about it.

One of my observations when I got to my father's house was that my father and my stepmother were as anxious about the meeting as I was. I saw that they could not wait for the dinner to end so that I could talk to them. Not staying with my father did not change the way I saw him. I have enough respect for him even though he did not marry my mother. I realised early why he left my mother after they had been together for ten years. Later, my father told me that he hated the Christian life that my mother wanted to impose on him. That was the reason he did not marry her after such a long time together. My stepsister and I finished washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. My father and stepmother were waiting for me in the lounge. I adore my father, and I am proud to be his daughter. His home is warm, as a child I always felt happy and enjoyed being in his house. I sat down and I started talking. I tried to explain what I intended to tell them, but words failed me. My father prompted me by saying that everyone has problems in life. I should not be scared to say what was troubling me, more importantly to him. For the most part of my talk I was mumbling. Eventually, words came out unexpectedly. I told them that from grade eight I had been fascinated by girls, which might mean that I am lesbian. The biggest mistake I made was to have that conversation with my father together in the presence of his wife. When she heard the word lesbian, she screamed in disbelief. I sat there unemotionally. I had hoped I was not going to be judged. I had been wrong about her all along.

The biggest mistake that my stepmother made was to make me feel as if I did something bad. I believe that in life a person should not be judged about the kind of life a person lives. When my father spoke, he asked his wife to leave us. He wanted to know if I had told my mother. I told him he was the first person to know about it. I explained I wanted to speak to him first so that he could be at home when I tell my mother and my grandmother about it. He cautioned me that it was going to be difficult for me from then on. He stated that they would not be very understanding of my news. I agreed to remember my upbringing. He professed that my being a lesbian would not change that I am his daughter. I was delighted by how my father received my news. I was grateful for my mother and grandmother's contribution in raising me. At times I witnessed the financial struggles they went through every day for my sister's and my transport money, school fees, and extra tuition. Having no partner meant that my mother is solely responsible for everything at home. The little that my father gives for maintenance does not stretch far. My mother works in a departmental store in a shopping mall near our township. She does not earn much. My sister's school fund is high. She attends a school in town. Her father died when my mother was pregnant with her. Despite all the financial problems staring at my mother in the face, she had been there for us supporting and cheering our achievements. I remember there were many times in our lives where we enjoyed life at home without any disagreements. I had hoped that my mother and grandmother would understand that people are not the same. The following Saturday my father came home to talk to my mother and grandmother about my sexuality.

Nothing prepared me for the way they responded to the matter. I know that parenting sometimes involves taking resolute decisions about your child's wellbeing. When my mother and grandmother heard that I am a lesbian, they both started praying at the same time. Somehow, I wanted to laugh but seeing my father's stern face stopped me. I contained myself. In their prayers they talked about demons. They prayed that I needed to be absolved because I had sinned before God. My mother even asked for God's forgiveness because she thought God had punished me because of her sins. She asked how she would lead in church if her child was living a sinful life. After praying and crying, my mother thanked my father for being there for me. My father said that he had hoped they would support me as he was willing to support me. My mother asked him to leave immediately. I understood why. She witnessed his support, and she did not like it. After he left, they both told me that they would request the congregation

to pray for me the following Sunday. On the day, the sermon was about me. My heart was torn into small pieces, hearing people giving testimony that if I died, I would go to hell. That broke my spirit. After the church incident, most people in the township knew about my sexuality. I was judged, girls I grew up with distanced themselves from me. My mother stopped giving me pocket money. There had been times when I regretted my decisions of telling them about myself. Instead of blaming myself further I rather motivated myself. I continue living my life as I understand it to be.

My life has dramatically changed. I am often intentionally not involved in conversations at home. I did not go to church after the prayer incident. Both my mother and grandmother stopped telling me to go to church. I do not want to give up on myself. I know they will forgive me one day.

5.10.3 Decision making

Since my sexuality is out in the open, my life at school has become awful. In one of the many instances, my Music teacher gave a lesson on how bad it looks when girls want to change what God had given them as a gift. He stated that at times he wondered why those girls would want to live sinfully. He laughed and stated that people behaving that way had to be disciplined or rather be expelled from school because they set bad examples for other learners. I knew his lesson was about me. I wanted to push him a little bit. I asked him if he believed in God. If he did why was he judging those girls for being lesbians. I told him that God was the Creator of everything living. If he questions His creation that meant, he thought God made a mistake creating those girls. By judging the lesbian girls that suggested that he was God himself because only He can judge. A day after that lesson I was not surprised when all the other girls that were “suspected” to be lesbians were given letters to come with their parents to school. When I gave my mother the letter that afternoon, she was extremely angry. She politely expressed her anger in front of my sister, saying “what is your problem, you are messing up your life. You are dragging our names in the process.” Consequently, that made me realise that she had not accepted that I am lesbian. I was living my life the way I wanted to.

I know that I am young, and I need to be with my family because I have respect for my family, I eventually asked my mother to go and stay with my paternal aunt. She lives with her husband in a town house. Their children had left home. They are old and independent. My mother called my father, who in turn called my aunt who agreed to take me in. Neither my mother nor

grandmother went to school for a meeting with the principal. I was suspended for 21 days. During those days I worked very hard studying at home. Getting ready for my grade ten examinations. I did not comprehend how I passed with outstanding marks. I had focused on my studies irrespective of what I went through in life. My hard work paid off. My father had taken full responsibility for me, paying school fees and transport money. My aunt's home has everything. I am treated like the baby of the house. Even my cousins spoil me every time they come home. I have a special transport that takes me to school.

From the moment I moved out of my home I have been emotionally shattered. I needed someone to console me. My aunt has been the pillar of support for me. My life is gradually getting back to normal because of my father's and aunt's support. It has been two years since I last saw my family. I miss my baby sister. They have completely cut contact with me. This makes me feel emotional when I realise the fact that I have no support from my maternal family. I love and miss them every day. I regularly speak to my sister when she calls. I have eventually decided to live my life the way I believe is good for me. At school I keep to myself. No one is there to make me smile when I have had a bad day. I do not trust anyone. Many girls blame me for being suspended for being lesbians. Too many incidents in my life remind me of the loss I went through. I hope that one day I will be united with my family again. I long to see my sister, though I know that my mother will not allow me to visit her.

5.10.4 Filling the vacuum in my life

I am in an Art class at school. I love Music, Dance and Dramatic Arts. I dream of myself as an Opera singer and travelling around the world and singing in global completions. Most people believe that I am a born performer and an entertainer. In the past two years I have grown up very fast. My experiences have made me understand that every individual goes through the ups and downs once in his/her life. I give love and care to other learners who are struggling with many challenges at school by lending a hand. My father had come back into my life at a very crucial time. Together with my aunt, they provided support when my mother and grandmother judged me. Every day I fill the void within me by motivating myself to excel in everything that I do. I have decided to join the girls' soccer team, though I sometimes get overwhelmed with schoolwork, I enjoy attending the training sessions on weekends. It has not been easy, but it seems like I have been accepted in my team. We played in a number of

tournaments: I have scored more goals than my other teammates. I assist with the younger team when I am not busy. Playing has become an outlet for my emotions.

There had been times when I felt sorry that I moved out of my home. My schoolwork and the awards I received in grade 10 have assisted in making some teachers eat humble pies. I am in grade 12 at present. My everyday experiences have made it easier to discover who I am. The two of my newfound qualities are strength and resilience. I respect all those that positively support me. I am happy I do not live a lie. I have stayed true to my feelings of being a lesbian.

5.11 Mbali's story...

5.11.1 Within battles I lost myself.

I was born at EMolweni, near Pinetown, in Durban, in 2002. When I turned five years, in 2006,



my mother moved with her parents to Jevu, a rural place North in Pinetown after my parents got divorced. I spent most of my upbringing in this place. In Jevu people have strong cultural beliefs. I am 17 years old; I was born in 2002. I come from a family of seven members: my mother, grandmother, three siblings, ten, six and four-year-old sisters, an 18-year-old aunt and me. My mother does not work. She used to stay at home taking care of her family before

her divorce. She was later injured in a bus accident in 2007 on her way back from a friend's funeral in Port Shepstone. Her injury was the cause of her divorce. Seemingly, my father blamed her for attending the funeral even though he had denied her permission to attend the funeral. Besides the blame issue, when my mother got her Road Accident Fund (RAF) payout, my father wanted to control how she spent that money. They fought about it every day. They ultimately got divorced.

My parents' fights did not stop because they were divorced. They both wanted me to stay with each of them in their respective homes. When they divorced my mother got full custody. My

parents agreed that they would be a co-parent. Things did not work according to their arrangement. Six years after the divorce my mother found a partner. She fell pregnant with my stepsister. That was a sore point for my father's ego. Maybe he had hoped they would reconcile and get back together. My father complained and told my mother that she was not a good role model for me. He works for Transnet. I am told that he is a big shot at work. When we stayed as a family before they divorced, my father was a family-centred man. He was very traditional in his beliefs. That is the kind of mentality that my father transmits in everything he does. I did not understand why he was upset when my mother moved on with her life. I believe he was selfish to expect her to put her life on hold whilst he swiftly moved on with his although he did not remarry. My mother had been called to numerous family meetings where my father wanted her to let me stay with him and his family. My father is certain that I am being brought up badly. He stated that I would have lost morals the way I was brought up.

Their continued fighting has affected my schooling. At times I had to leave school in the middle of the school year when my father took me and did not bring me back in time. I would miss the whole term's work because he would send me to his relatives to hide me from my mother. He would only bring me back after the police had been involved. My father's family had been emotionally supportive of me. Whenever I visited my granny, I felt loved. Ever since my mother was paid R10 million from the Road Accident Fund (RAF), she started drinking heavily and taking drugs. Her behaviour has negatively affected my family. My mother was beautiful before she started taking those substances. She has considerably changed. She had neglected taking care of herself. Two years after she gave birth to my sister (Sami), she fell pregnant again. She gave birth to another little girl (Tutu). Even though I live with my mother in the same home, half of the time she does not know what goes on in my life. She is constantly intoxicated. Her addiction has made her neglect my sisters and me.

My father has taken her to court to revoke the decision about my custody. He has not worn it because he is not married and seen as not having a stable home as well. Most of the time my grandmother takes care of my sisters and me. Days would go by without my mother remembering she has children. I feel pity for my sisters because they are too young to experience such life. At least I have seen my mother live a sober life. No amount of money will compensate for a mother's love. My sisters still need my mother's love. Their upbringing is very unbalanced. It is true that money is the root of evil. I see what it did and continue doing to my mother. I hope my father wins the custody case. Each time my mother promises to get

help or go to rehabilitation institution, the case is suspended. I have been embarrassed several times in the community since my cousin and I are always sent by my grandmother to fetch my mother whenever she is under the influence. She often sleeps or swears at people on the road. She always looks dreadful with dishevelled hair and sometimes urinates on her clothing. I constantly worry about her safety when she gets home in the early hours of the morning because the community is not safe. I battled a few issues in my young age. My mind is always not quiet. I continually tear myself apart thinking about my parents. I am dead but alive.

5.11.2 The lack of stability and security in my life

I remember when I was younger when my family was still unbroken. I looked forward to my father's payday because he used to bring everything good for me. The 25th of each month became like Christmas day for me. That was the culture that my father created for his family on his payday. When that family structure was wrecked, I was left overwhelmed with feelings of uncertainty about the future. I started acting out fear and anger in a very destructive way. I was repetitively called to the principal's office. I had either disrespected the teachers or was involved in a fight with other learners. When I turned 12 years I had graduated in the lies and absconding from school. If I happened to spend the whole day at school, I would fool around and neither do my classwork nor my homework. I became a burden on my grandmother. Though I have a sound relationship with my grandmother who seems to understand me better than my mother, I have been a troubled and an unstable child. My grandmother had spoken to me about my behaviour several times. Each time I promised to change but I never changed. I understand why my father wants me to live with him. I have failed grade five twice, but my mother does not care. Despite the close relationship that I have with my grandmother, I have found it impossible to talk to her about my feelings.

When I started grade eight in high school my behaviour got out of hand. The harder I tried to fight the terrible sense of worthlessness because of my mother's addiction, the more I closed the communication line with my parents. There is still a huge reservoir of anger in my heart towards my parents that is leading to self-destruction. I blame them for the lack of stability and security in my life. I am broken emotionally. My only hope is that the custody battle between my parents can be resolved soon so that I can move and stay with my father. I hope I can learn to trust people again. With all these varied emotions I am going through, there is one thing that

I am certain I have no interest in going out with boys. When I turned 15 and in grade ten, I told my cousin that I thought I was a lesbian. I was in my third year in high school. It was not the easiest decision to make. I did not plan to tell her. I explained that I have many issues in my life. The feelings I experienced for girls were also stressing me. From grade seven I felt connected to my friend at school. Though I was not sure what they meant I thought they would pass. I did not date my friend. My cousin was doing her first year at Wits university. She told me she had seen lesbians at the university. She wanted to know if I was convinced about the way I felt about myself. She thought the issues between my parents could have been the trigger of the feelings I had for girls. I explained to her that I was unable to control the emotions I felt for girls, which had increased since I had grown up. I explained to her how from time to time I felt miserable because I knew how everything would turn out if my mother were to find out about my sexuality. The more I explained, the difficult it was for my cousin to believe me. I requested that she accompany me when I talked to my grandmother. After the meeting, my grandmother thought I was going through a phase in my life. She told me that she hoped I would outgrow '*that lesbian thing*' soon before it ruins my life. She indicated that nothing like that had ever happened in her family. It would not start with me. After this conversation, I was scared to talk to my grandmother knowing how firmly she believed in tradition and culture. I sincerely want to outgrow these feelings for the sake of peace at home.

5.11.3 Toxic relationships

From childhood I was very self-confident. I never shied away from speaking my mind. My parents were my biggest supporters in everything I wanted to do. It was also never difficult for me to make friends. In primary school I had many friends from different grades. It became easier to have friends when my mother was paid compensation for her accident from the Road Accident Fund (RAF). Most children at school and in my community wanted to be my friends because I carried cash for lunch. My mother spoiled me after she got her money. I was surrounded by many girls during break times. I bought sweets, fruits and chips for all my friends. When I got to high school everything changed. During my years in high school, as the situation worsened between my parents, I was left with two very close friends, Nolitha and Zama. Out of the two, Zama became very close and dear to me. That friendship resembled a romantic kind even though we both did not know what was going on. I was shocked that I fell in love with my best friend. We became inseparable. None of us wanted to be in a romantic relationship, however we did not fight the feelings we had for each other. Those were the best

days of my life. I started getting back late from school. I had the best and the most fulfilling relationship with Zama. I became disrespectful in many ways at home. I invested too much love in that relationship because it was something I saw as authentic in my life. I was so absorbed in our relationship that I stopped concentrating on my schoolwork again. I was anxious and constantly afraid that she was going to leave me or that the school or my grandmother would break us up. For me, Zama meant more than she should be. I suffocated with her. She did not want it known that she was going out with a lesbian; that was too cruel. Before the end of term two in 2017, whilst still in grade 11, she broke up with me. I knew that was the reason for our break-up. I gave away everything I had (emotionally) until I was depleted. When the relationship was over, I became very emotional. I fought with her in front of other learners. I demanded that she talk to me. That behaviour went too far until she reported the matter to the principal. My anger became uncontrollable. I was on the verge of devastation. With everything that was going on in my life with my parents, I think losing my girlfriend made me snap.

My grandmother was called to the hearing. She did not want to entertain my behaviour. She supported the decision by the school SMT that I should be disciplined because I was a rotten child who did not want to listen. It was not that I hated my grandmother. I admired and appreciated her presence in my life. When I was suspended for 14 days, I lost the spark in my life. I was doing grade 11. Being suspended meant I was going to miss most of the third term's work. Everything that happened after that hearing affected me. I hated myself, my life and everyone at home. After the suspension whenever my mother was not drunk, she would swear at me about my sexuality. She used to say I was useless like my father. The relationship with my mother became non-existent. I became very insensitive towards everyone at home. I did not care about other people's feelings except for my sisters. I lied about a few things. There were fights at home and in most instances, I was the instigator. Like my mother, I neglected my health and my needs. I stayed for days without bathing or eating. Though I was going through all of the emotional rollercoaster in my life, not once did I think of taking drugs or drinking. I could not stand that thought. The swearing from my mother pushed me into committing suicide. One day I locked myself in my room. I had stolen my grandmother's hypertension tablets and drank all of them. In my mind I was killing myself because I wanted to punish my parents and my grandmother for mistreating me. I remembered crying because at that point after taking the pills I thought of my sisters. I loved them greatly but, then again, I

wanted to die. If I continued to live, I would be embarrassed to them. The pain was intolerable, my intestines were twisting and turning. I wanted everything to end, and I blacked out.

5.11.4 Renewed purpose in life

I remember waking up in a hospital, at first, I saw my grandmother and my cousin sitting next to my bed. My cousin called the doctor. The doctor came and explained everything to me. She told me that I was lucky my sisters came early from school that day because there was no water at their school. They found me almost dead on my bed. After telling my grandmother, I rushed to the hospital. After three days in the hospital a psychologist was assigned to my case. I attended several sessions before I started trusting her enough to talk openly about my issues. My friend, Nononto, who was my classmate, stood by me during that time. She is the only person who has maintained our friendship after the suicide attempt. I failed grade 11 in 2017. I knew I was not ready for examinations after what I went through. That was a trying period in my life. No one understood why I was struggling in my life. I tried repeating grade 11 the following year. I passed very well. I still visit the psychologist once a month. I also see the school resident social worker every week. I can cope with my schoolwork because of my friend's support (Nononto) and the social worker. I know I am a fighter. I survived killing myself therefore, I would survive whatever comes my way. My goal towards healing is to unlearn my toxic attitude towards my life, my parents and my grandmother. Deep down I love them. I know they are all scared because of the challenges I went through. They think I might try to kill myself again. I want to live with my father as I have hurt many people in my family. I stopped blaming my mother for the bad behaviour and the wrong I did. I have learnt that I am responsible for my actions.

My favourite subject is Accounting. My wish is to become a Chartered Accountant when I finish university. Numbers excite me. It feels exciting to have ambitions these days; it proves that I am getting better because I have stopped being a body without a purpose. I want to assist my sisters to have a better upbringing. Talking to someone has helped me to rediscover who I am. I wish I had snapped out of the destruction earlier in my life. The most significant thing is that even though my family does not support that I am a lesbian, I am content that they know about it. I hope one day they will understand what I went through because of my sexual identity. My mother has started attending counselling and rehabilitation in a centre in town.

She has been sobered for nine months. I understand that she has a long way to recovery. She is no longer verbally and emotionally abusive towards me. Slowly she has started to appreciate that we are a family. I am truly grateful that my grandmother took care of my little sisters whilst my mother and I were deep in the dark hole. I am lucky I have snapped out of all the depression before it shattered my life.

My social worker has suggested I find something that I can do during my spare time. I chose to play soccer in my area. I know people in my community know more about my family and me. During the training we are all focusing on what they teach us, no time to think about negative thoughts. I love playing and training becomes very hard at times, but I am used to pain, therefore I enjoy the kind of pain I get during the training sessions. I might continue playing because I have learnt many valuable things through soccer. I am much more in control and disciplined. I love seeing change in my life.

5.12. Zaba's story...

5.12.1 Growing up in a loving home

My name is Zaba, I am an 18-year-old girl. I was born in 2001 to Lulu and Sono Mliza. I am the



first born in a family of two girls and younger brother. I grew up in Ntuzuma township, which is situated North of Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. I live with my parents, uncle, sisters and my brother. I have very caring parents who understand that as a girl I sometimes grapple with many questions in my life. My mother gave birth to me when she was 17 years old. When she discovered

that she was pregnant, she also found out that my father had impregnated another girl in the same school. They broke up. My mother dropped out of school. My grandparents were disappointed by what had happened to my mother. She was compelled by circumstances to look for a job so that she could take care of her unborn child. She found a job in a shopping centre.

centre near her home. While working in a laundromat, she met a sweet guy, Sono Mliza, who was prepared to marry her with her unborn child. My stepfather (Sono Mliza) told his family that I was his biological child. When I was born five months later, my parents showered me with love. I did not know that he was not my biological father until I was 17 years old. My parents got married when I turned one year. My father is a loving family man. He works for a law firm in Pinetown. When I was three years old, my father sent my mother back to school to finish her high school education. Every day he would drop me off at the crèche and picked me up in the aftercare after work. He fully supported my mother and me. I grew up in a warm and loving environment as a bubbly and talkative girl.

My mother finished school. She applied and was accepted in a hospital in town. She trained for four years as a nurse. I was in primary school at that time. While my mother was studying, I spent most of my time with our helper (Aunt Musa) at home. She was meticulous with her work. Our house was always spotless even though she allowed me to play inside the house even after she had cleaned. I enjoyed being the only child in the family. Both my father's and mother's family spoilt me. My grandparents had long forgiven my mother for being a teenage mother after she got married. When my mother graduated my father was excited. He organised a graduation party for my mother in a hotel in Durban along the beach front. Both families congratulated my mother for her achievement. I started grade eight in a high school in town, in 2015. I was pleased as I looked forward to a life in high school. I had gone through primary schooling easily. I did my schoolwork together with my father as he worked in his study until it was time for me to sleep. Life at home was awesome. My father allowed me to do extracurricular activities that I loved. I tried to play netball, but I did not like it. I joined the hockey team; it was not appealing to me. Eventually, I joined the girls' soccer team. I fell in love with it. I trained every Wednesdays and Thursdays afternoon. My mother sometimes worked night shifts, so in those days I spent more time with my aunt (helper) and my father. He taught me to cook and bake. My father was talented in the kitchen department. At the end of 2015, there was an additional member in the family, a baby girl (Onesipho). Two years later a baby boy was born (Fanele). Our family grew. Our parents adored us, and I became close to my siblings.

When I was 17, I accidentally came across my mother's old diary. I was looking for a book I had borrowed for my mother in the library. I had to return it that morning. My father was waiting in the car to take me to the library to return the books. I was rummaging in the bookcase

in their bedroom. I found the book but before I could close the case I saw a beautiful book that had pictures of my parents pasted on the cover. Interestedly, I opened it. I found out that it was my mother's old diary. I paged through it. I knew it was wrong for me to read it, but I found myself reading certain pages. From its contents, I learned that my father was not my biological father. That was the most upsetting thing I have ever experienced. I went through a lot of emotions at once. For the first time, I discovered that the man who was responsible for everything that I was, was not my biological father. I cared too much for my father that I was not angry at my parents for not telling me the truth. I waited for the weekend to talk to both about what I read from my mother's diary. I also had something which I had been waiting to tell them about, but I kept on postponing it.

After breakfast that weekend, I told them that I had accidentally found out that my father was not my biological father. I informed my parents that he was the only person I could call a father because of the love he gave me after my mother was chased out of her house for falling pregnant with me. I mentioned that it could have been better if they had told me earlier because I felt I was old enough to understand life. I also told them that I was a grown-up young girl. I tried to explain how as a girl I preferred dating other girls. I confirmed that I had tried to fight the feelings, but they had not gone away. I was not sure if they heard me well since nobody said anything. They both stood up at the same time and hugged me. At that moment, I knew I was loved but I did not know how much. My father told me that there was nothing wrong with my sexual identity. From the day I found out that he was a stepfather, nothing has changed at home. My father contributes largely to my upbringing. I am who I am because he loves my mother. He is all I have known for 17 years. Even today he still does good with me.

5.12.2 A soccer player and a dancer

As I have mentioned before I am talkative. My parents taught me the importance of being disciplined in everything I do. The days I spent in my father's study had made me fall in love with reading books. I also developed a love for jogging with my father on weekends this has made me enjoy running and keeping fit. On top of the love I have for exercising, I play soccer at school. I adore it. I joined ballroom-dancing by mistake. One of the dancers was absent and I asked if I could help. That was how I ended up being a dancer and a soccer player. These two sports have kept me in shape and in control. Most girls in my school like me because of my physique. I started noticing this when I was in grade 10. I did not want teachers and learners to

know that I was a lesbian. I tried to keep my life very private at school. At times girls seemed to follow me everywhere I went. I purposely ignored them. Towards the end of the first term, in 2017, a new girl came to our school. She was beautiful. Her name was Blue. She was 16-years old. I fell in love with her instantly. My parents have always been very comfortable and secured in loving each other openly by showing affection. There were no instances where they showed jealousy of each other even though my mother sometimes worked different shifts. Consequently, I learnt not to be a jealous person. Even when my sister and brother joined the family, I was not jealous. This was a positive element in everything I do. I felt very secure. My parents spoiled me because I had everything I wanted. Since I wanted to be the first person to befriend Blue, I invited her to my dance class one afternoon. She seemed to enjoy the class before the end of the second week she joined the dance class as well. On weekends, when we had soccer matches, she became my supporter.

At the beginning of the second term, we were an item. I do not understand the feelings of jealousy and insecurity apart from a cognitive level. Blue was a complete opposite of what I was. I discovered that she was possessive and a liar. Apparently, she was seeing other lesbian girls at school without my knowledge. She did that for a couple of months until the girls fought over her. My name was amongst the five names given to the principal as her lovers. When I was called to the office, I was disappointed because of the way she conducted herself in school. I deserved to be treated with respect that I was taught to give to people. I loved Blue but I could not allow her to treat anyone who was present in the principal's office with less than utmost respect. It came out that since I did not want our relationship to interfere with my schoolwork whilst I was busy with my daily routines, she was busy entertaining other girls. Our parents were called to school. The whole debacle was entertained by many teachers and some learners at school. Because I grew up in a very loving and peaceful environment, I never learnt to tackle tough issues when I was confronted with them. As a result, I discovered that I did not have experience of how to deal with tricky subjects. During the hearing, I wanted the discussion to be over because everyone was blaming me for what Blue did at school. It was as if I had forced her to have a relationship with me. The principal sent us and our parents out of the classroom where the hearing was taking place. He deliberated with all the parties present on the outcome of the hearing. After the decision was taken, we were all called back into the classroom.

The principal gave a summary of how disappointed he was that we wanted to cause havoc and ‘corrupt learners’ in his school. He stated that he thought I was brought up with good values and morals since I came from a very well-to-do family. He stated that all of us had dragged the school’s name into disrepute by wanting to ‘act tough like boys.’ He had thought my schoolwork and extra-curricular activities spoke volume of me. He told our parents that the school could not accept our behaviour. As the school they had decided to expel all of us. He promised our parents that he would write reference letters for us to take to our schools of choice. I was in grade 10. One examination was left for me before the year ended. My father pleaded that the school allowed us to write our examinations since it was towards the end of the year. He also requested to talk on our behalf. He said as a lawyer, he could have taken the matter further fighting for our rights. The only reason he was going to let the matter pass was because he wanted to protect me from being humiliated further. He felt that we were ill-treated enough already. I felt my father’s love enveloping me in that classroom at that moment when he uttered those words. I knew I had embarrassed my family, but my parents’ backing made me stronger.

5.12.3 Passion is important to anyone’s life: stick with it

My father found a school in a neighbouring township. I did not want to go to schools in town anymore. The principal allowed us to come to school only on the days we were writing examinations. I passed all my grade 10 subjects with distinctions. What I found out about Blue after hearing was that she had been expelled from her previous school because of the same behaviour. I did not blame her for what happened to me. Her behaviour taught me a lesson, not to believe anyone or anything at face value. I was ashamed of the way our case was handled by the school. My teachers did not understand our sexuality. That instantly called for an unfair judgement on our side. All six of us paid dearly for being lesbians at school. I am in my second and last year in my new school. Although it was tough at first, I have adjusted well.

When I think back to my first day I entered high school, the excitement, anxiety and the desire to make many friends I smile. I had thought that high school was a place where one needed to discover many things about oneself. That is why my sexual identity took its form in the early years of my high school. The first year was supposed to be difficult but it was quite the opposite. I was sure of myself and independent. When I started in the new school in grade 11, I swore to myself to excel so that I could bring back trust to my parents. News of my sexuality had travelled faster than I had predicted. They reached my new school in leaps and bounds.

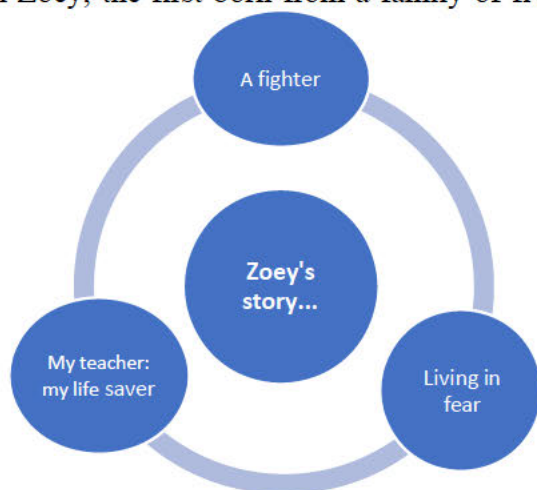
Although I am labelled as a lesbian learner, no one has come outright and confronted me. My decision is to live my life without disappointing my parents. Since I have already developed and figured out my talents, I have become passionate about dancing and playing soccer. I managed to balance everything I did. When the June examination results came, they were great, such that I was awarded a bursary by the Department of Agriculture. They had paid for my school fund in grade 12. The bursary would pay for my fees at the university for four years. My family is pleased with my progress. I have applied to several universities in South Africa. I have also entered dance competitions. In all the competitions that I have entered, I have been the best performer.

My life experiences have made me realise that passion is important for anyone who dreams big. It is crucial that one sticks with his dreams once one has clearly figured them out. I was disappointed by my behaviour and that of my teachers in my previous school. That experience became a lesson. I found courage in everything that happened to me. I am happy to have such a supportive family. After Blue, I decided not to date anyone until I finished school. I know that if I am asked to change something about myself, I would not change anything. It is difficult to live a normal life if you are different. I am judged every day, but my family has made it easier to live truthfully. I am content with the way I am. After completing my grade 12, I want to go to the university and study Agriculture Mechanics. I would like to contribute to the technological aspects of farming by solving the farmers' problems. I decided to start playing soccer and dancing during my spare time, but like my parents, I want to specialise in something to utilise the skills gained in preparing others within my field.

5.13 Zoey's story...

5.13.1 A fighter

I am Zoey, the first born from a family of five. I was born in Tsolo, a rural area in Eastern



Cape, but grew up in KwaMakhutha and Umlazi townships, south of Durban respectively. I used to stay with my grandparents in the Eastern Cape because my parents were working in Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. They only visited Eastern Cape during Easter and Christmas holidays. I loved everything about rural life. Unfortunately, my grandparents died one after the other

when I was nine years old when I was doing grade three. They were poisoned at one of the funerals they attended one weekend in the village. With my two sisters we had to move to live with our parents in Durban. Though my parents were not married, my father had paid '*lobola*' (bride price) for my mother, only the wedding day was left for them. That day did not arrive until my mother's parents died. My parents have three girls; I am the eldest. Life had been difficult for me since we moved to Durban. From the time we left Eastern Cape I took care of my siblings daily since my parents are alcoholics. I was not prepared for their drinking problem before we arrived, nor did I have an idea that they were heavy drinkers.

I continued my primary education in KwaMakhutha, in Mvuzo primary school where I did grades four to grade seven. We left KwaMakhutha after four years and relocated to Umlazi township, south of Durban. Life in my house was not easy. I did not get any opportunity to enjoy being a child. My mother ended up abusing me. She does not do her best to care for us. She never asked if I was coping with everything that was happening in our house. Or if I was fine after losing my grandparents. We do not have any maternal relative who could have taken us to live with, since my mother was the only daughter to her parents. Every day I wake up early in the morning to prepare for my sisters to go to school. They must be ready before I leave for school at half-past six because my school starts early for learners in grades ten, eleven and twelve.

I am 17 years old, and in grade 11 at Zenzele high school, in Umlazi, B-section. I miss my grandparents every day. When I think of them, I cry. I remember the love they gave us. In my mother's house I have become the helper. I do every house chore after school and on weekends. When my parents get back from work, they go to the nearest tavern to drink every afternoon until late in the evening. They expect me to assist my sisters with their homework, wash, cook and clean the house. I even iron for everyone the next day. I always sleep after 12-midnight because I do my schoolwork after I finish doing everything. Although my sisters and I have food and shelter there is no love in the house. When I see other children after school being picked up by their parents, showered with love and affection, it always makes my heart as heavy as a lead to know I would get to the house and work like a slave without any gratitude. My parents work for the government. My father is a warder, and my mother is an administrator in the government hospital in Umlazi. They both get paid enough every month. There is nothing to show in the house. Most of the furniture is old or broken. They drink more than they can save or buy food and furniture. Most of my parents' money goes towards buying alcohol for parties they host every weekend.

I have become protective and strong for my sisters. I constantly fight for their safety in the house. Most of my parents' drinking happens outside the house on the camp chairs on the veranda or along the street with friends. I had the desire to run away but the thought of leaving my sisters behind stopped me from leaving the house. Although some neighbours have tried to intervene by talking to my parents about raising us properly, their attempt had fallen on deaf ears. It is clear, my parents do not want to take responsibility for raising us well. Some days are better than others. On these days my mother would cook supper for the family, dish-up and try to tidy the kitchen up. I wish my grandparents were alive, they should have brought us in a warm and loving atmosphere. I cannot remember when I slept early because I have become a mother to my sisters. The way my parents are casual about being fully hands on with our upbringing, I sometimes doubt if they are our biological parents. If they are, why have they given themselves so much into drinking, neglecting their children in the process? If I was given a chance to choose my parents, I would never have chosen them. I have started to gradually dislike both for bringing us to Durban and to make us suffer.

5.13.2 Living in fear

What I liked about living with my grandparents was that I had a relatively normal and peaceful childhood. They were loving, responsible and cared for us. At my parents' house I got shouted at for something I did not do. My mother threatens to send us back to Tsolo to live with her distant cousins if we do not behave. I noticed that she has completely changed from the woman I used to see coming home with presents for us every Christmas holiday. I do not remember a day when my parents celebrated our birthdays or any milestones in their children's lives. Being brought up in this environment has caused me to become extremely defensive, even at school.

In 2017, during the December holidays I sat my mother down and tried to make her aware of what I was going through in our house. One of the other issues I talked to her about was the inadequate time I must do my schoolwork. I explained how sleeping late everyday affected my days at school. I suggested that I do most of the chores over the weekend. My other concern was her inability to assist with my sisters' schoolwork. I thanked her for allowing me time to talk. I explained that I was always overwhelmed with work because she was regularly busy with friends or under the influence. I did not realise that she was drunk even as we spoke that day. Since we were having a talk, I voiced out how I needed her assistance with my issues as well. How I was grappling with the feelings of confusion about loving other girls. To this day, I still feel tightening in my stomach when I remember what she did next. She struck me with the back hand and banged my head on the wall. I thought my head was going to explode. I wanted to cry but nothing came out. My mother swayed sideways and stared at me. She asked, "tell me, but why can't I have a normal girl like every other girl in the township?" She stated that it was because my grandmother had spoiled me, that was why I was telling her that rubbish. When she regained her strength, she took her one shoe and hit me with it. She chased me out of the house onto the street shouting and swearing. I had hoped my father was going to intervene. He did not. He had passed out on the veranda and could not hear what was happening in the house, I slept at the neighbour's house until the next morning. My mother did not bother whether I lived or died out on the street. Ever since I told her about my sexual identity, every single time I did something wrong; she would curse me about my sexuality. It breaks my heart to know that my mother hates lesbians. I was expecting that kind of behaviour from other people, not my biological parent.

The beating and swearing have gone on for a long time. Each mistake equals beatings and sometimes I sleep on the veranda. Sometimes I think of ending it because nothing I do at home pleases my parents. I have concluded that my parents cannot be trusted with raising children. I remember one morning before my sisters, and I went to school my mother came to the kitchen. She demanded that I make them breakfast first before I left. I tried to explain that I was going to be late for school. I remember how she took a broom and hit me in front of my sisters. She cursed and told me she was taking out the manly demons from my body. She said there was only one man in her house and that was for her my father. I feared that the beating might go too far one day. Yet again, my mother's behaviour was out of control that Tuesday morning. I thought she wanted to kill me. The beating left an indelible mark on my body and in my heart. I completely stopped trusting my parents. I say to my parents because the punishment was always done in front of my father, but he was too weak to intervene. Whenever they were drunk or entertained their friends, they talked about me and my unacceptable behaviour. I do not do anything wrong or disrespect them. Sometimes they only try to be better parents when they are sober, which is less often than when they are drunk. Recently, they have started to fight between themselves when they are drunk. My sisters have become nervous and always terrified when they are around my parents. We only laugh and play when they are at work. The house becomes quiet whenever they are back from work. I detest my parents. I hate alcohol. It has destroyed my family life. I am too young to experience so much heartache. I still need my parents' love and guidance.

5.13.3 My teacher: my lifesaver

At school, Mrs. Xulu became a class teacher and a mother to me. I have shared my trials about my life at home with her. She knows how I feel about my parents. She has visited my house. Mrs. Xulu clarified with my parents that if my mother continues to abuse me, she will report her to the social services. Mrs. Xulu suggested that my parents seek help before we are all taken away from their care. After that discussion, my mother tried to be a responsible mother. They both attend Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) every Saturday morning. I can see that she wants to bring back peace and stability in her house. I am not certain if she knows where to begin. My only hope is that my parents get better before they destroy their family further. The beating has stopped but she still shouts when she is frustrated seeing her drunk friends, which is mostly over the weekends.

I have been an average learner, though I have not repeated a class. Part of the lack of motivation is my challenges at home. No one has ever cheered me when I did good or supported when I failed. I did not feel the love through hugging or kissing. Like most children, I have big dreams of a good life for myself and my family. These dreams are what keep me going daily. They are objects for me to strive for a better life. University is my first step after grade 12. Every day I strive to do my best to improve my grades. My greatest desire is to become a medical doctor, who will specialise as a pediatrician. I know I need to work ten times harder to apply at the university. I know I will pass grade 11, my teacher has changed the way I view my life. I am certain I want to make something of myself and not to disappoint Mrs. Xulu and mostly my grandparents. As a doctor I would be able to save children's lives. My teacher's interference in our situation at home has produced the greatest results. I have become a self-taught poet. I draw my creativity from my real-life experiences. Penning then down has eased the pain I have kept pushed in heart. My English teacher believes I am the best grade 11 poetry writer. Sometimes she asks me to recite my poems in class or at the assembly. Like Mrs. Xulu, the attention she gives me has boosted my self-assurance. This newfound talent might end up as a compiled poetry booklet for grade eight learners. I plan to share my story and my childhood problems through art with young learners. I have started to be aware of my surroundings, I had seen girls practising soccer after school. I told Mrs. Xulu about it. She supported me and spoke to the sports coach. I was allowed to join, and I started playing soccer. I think I love it. Every Thursdays and Fridays, sometimes on weekends we train or play. It is a complicated sport because it requires us to work as a team. I have been learning a lot from it.

5.14 Chapter conclusion

Chapter Five presented details of the narrated stories of black self-identified lesbian participants in this study, stories that were developed from their diaries, photos and through in-depth interviewing sessions of their lived experiences. These shared stories mainly represented participants' family backgrounds, lived experiences, losses, community involvement, sporting activities and reflected on the participants' journeys through life. These experiences also demonstrated the past, present and the projected future experiences of the participants. Again, the participants' societal, cultural and structural conditions such as acceptance, support and embracing of the differences were reflected through their re-told stories. Apart from the participants' narratives, as a researcher I have learnt how resilient, emotional, loving,

supportive and at the same time suicidal their conditions were. The participants' experiences were contributory factors that have shaped and re-shaped them.

In the next chapter, a comprehensive analysis of data and the presentation of the themes that emerged from the interviews and the personal documents are presented. Data analysed responded to all three of the research questions posed in this study. Given that the study was a qualitative research, thematic analysis was seen as a useful and flexible method, since it offered accessibility and was the theoretically flexible approach in analysing data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

6. CHAPTER SIX: MEANINGS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF BLACK SELF-IDENTIFIED LESBIAN YOUTH

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Six builds on the previous chapter that presented the re-told stories of the 12 black self-identified lesbian youth. In it, I outline the themes and sub-themes that emanated from these stories, based on a detailed analysis of the data, which was generated through individual semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, diaries and photovoice.

When presenting the themes I use different pictures because of the insight they bring in complementing the verbal discussions and the analysis of the themes. These are placed in different parts of the discussion next to the paragraph where I discuss them. As discussed in Chapter Four, thematic analysis was used to analyse and discuss the lived experiences of the black self-identifying lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts.

Key abbreviations are used from data extracts to indicate if the data came from interviews, photo-sharing session and diaries. Each citation is labelled accordingly.

- ✓ Grounded interviews - GI
- ✓ Photo-sharing session - PSS
- ✓ Diaries- (personal documents) - PD

Below I present the ten themes and three sub-themes that emerged from the analysis:

1. Family networks as either supportive or demoralising
 - i) Difference enriching family relationships
 - ii) Children raised to think that they are useless, a shame and worthless
 - iii) Dysfunctional families and hatred of difference
2. *“Understandings of (absent) fatherhood”*
3. The village fails to raise a child
4. Schools are an unsafe space
5. *“Use the boys’ toilets because you are boys”*: the teachers’ perspective
6. *“You are not competition; you need to be reminded that you are a girl”*: other learners
7. *“Behave properly, as expected in our culture”*
8. Rejection and isolation: the cleansing of the sin
9. Assertion and self-esteem: sport, art and healing
10. Violence, trauma and resilience

6.2 Theme 1: Family networks as either supportive or demoralising

How participants in this study construct and negotiate their sexual identities have been impacted by their daily interactions with the immediate environment of family, for better or worse. These environments had either positive or negative influences on the daily lived experiences of the 12 black self-identified lesbian youth participating in this inquiry.

6.2.1 Difference enriching family relationships

Some families see the importance of raising children that are grounded with values and principles that are going to assist them later in life. As such, parents would want to build self-confidence and high self-esteem. However, in this study, out of the 12 participants, only 4 participants seemed to have had some kind of family support. In cases where the participants find family love or form of support negotiated their sexuality differently. Phakamile, Balu, Velile, and Sthabile mentioned how their family members believed in supporting them and protecting them from potentially negative societal influences by laying good foundations for the participants to become good citizens. The realisation that a daughter saw herself as lesbian strengthened family relationships in some of the families.

Phakamile experienced support from her family with regards to her sexual identity. Her siblings have a close relationship that formed a support structure and interconnectedness even in times of challenges when she was grappling with the issue of finding her identity. Her siblings' suggestion was that she needed to make herself happy first, before she thought about other people. When I asked her about the role her siblings played in supporting her after she told them about her sexuality Phakamile responded: *"The day I told them (her family) that I was a lesbian they accepted that, they said that there was nothing wrong with me, it was common to be different and have feelings that were different from other people. They were very, very supportive"* (GI). The above extract reveals the support that Phakamile got from her siblings led her into sharing some of the difficulties that she has experienced as a lesbian youth. It is evident that she expected negative responses from her siblings, more especially from her eldest brother. Instead, her brother responded positively, she explained: *"It was interesting to see my brother's facial expressions. I waited for their responses, some kind of shouting or scolding. None happened! My sister stood up and hugged me, and so did my brothers. I cried not because I was sad, but the tears of joy. I felt immense support, I know with my family supporting I can achieve anything I set my mind into"* (GI). From the above extract it appears that Phakamile siblings were supportive during the most crucial time in her life. The siblings' support seemed to have had a major impact on her acceptance and becoming comfortable with her sexual identity. The support from her family was instrumental in motivating Phakamile to excel in everything that she does in life and at school. She grew up without the care of her biological parents, but her siblings gave her immense support during a very difficult time in her life.

Writing on her diary, Balu shared that: *“After talking, my mother did not say anything for a long time, but she eventually told me, be what you want to be and I will accept you as you are because you are my child”* (PD). Balu’s mother in this instance has shown that she embraces Balu’s difference because her sexual identity does not change that Balu is her child and she loves her. Likewise, Balu also shared that, *“At home they are a supportive family, and they do not judge me, in fact they encourage me to do me and not to care about what people say about my sexual identity”* (GI). The above extracts reveal that the support that Balu received from her mother and her family assist her in positioning herself with a positive attitude and strategically for her to be able to function and adapt within her community. Balu’s family support also contributed to Balu’s increased self-love which resulted in her excelling in her singing at school. Not only did the support she received from her mother increased her self-esteem, but her mother was there for her when she failed classes continuously. Because of her mother’s support and her involvement in her life during difficult moment, Balu was saved from committing suicide. She elaborated *“This did not assist in changing the way I saw myself. Her love for me has made her a very special person to me; actually, she is my pillar of strength* (PD)”. From the above extract it is clear that Balu was able to rely on her mother to give her great support and comfort even when she lacked the desire to continue with her life. Balu’s mother’s positive involvement has assisted in Balu gaining confidence in life.

Likewise, Velile experienced positive support from her brother, who was willing to help her through her sexual identity journey, although he was not understanding what his sister was going through. Velile explained: *“My brother is also supportive of my sexuality. He was always in my corner even when we were still in Umkomaas even though some of the family members wanted to make me feel that I had done something bad”* (GI). Velile’s brother supported her during a challenging time at her home where she had to disclose her sexual identity. He was the only family member who gave support before everyone else. Velile explained: *“Although he mentioned that he did not understand what being a lesbian meant but he told me that in life I should make myself happy first before I worry about what other people say”* (GI). Velile’s experiences suggest that her brother’s willingness to offer support irrespective of whether he understood what she meant about being a lesbian showed that he loves her for who she is. Because of the support and protection that Velile received from her brother she was able to have a leg to stand on while she needed full support from other members of her family. Velile also experienced huge support from her mother when she was united with her years later in her life. On the days when she experienced difficulties, her mother was always

there to give support. She described: *“My mother would hug me and tell me that despite everything I have experienced, she loves me. I wish she had been in my life earlier. I do not think I was going to experience such difficulties if she had been involved in my upbringing. The support I get from my mother has yielded good results.”* (PD) It is clear that Velile encountered difficulties because of her sexual identity in the community, but her mother’s continued backing brought forth hope and lessened the load she had to carry daily. Through her mother’s support she is positive that her negative experiences might change.

Sthabile is one of the other participants who also acknowledged her family support as a fundamental structure that made her stand up and face her challenges directly. She seemed to be satisfied by the favourable responses her uncle’s wife (aunt) gave her about her sexual identity; she stated, *“My aunt said no one should force me to do anything about who I love and how. I should make my own decisions and should know who I am and be not afraid to show other people who I am. I should learn to stand up for myself and should follow my heart”* (GI. Like the three participants mentioned above, Sthabile’s experiences show that her aunt’s words were instrumental in making her find ways to live her life as she pleases without fearing what other people think about her sexual identity. Sthabile’s aunt created an environment conducive enough for Sthabile to talk openly about her fears. As a result of this support, she is willing to experience life as she has envisioned it for herself. Similarly, Sthabile’s grandmother contributed to Sthabile’s increased self-love by giving her support and showering her with love. Her grandmother’s love helped her in her journey of finding out who she is. Sthabile reveals: *“As someone who was educated, she knew what it meant, that I was a lesbian. She kept quiet to be assured by me about what I felt. She stated she was glad I had confirmed it. I felt relieved after I spoke to her. With her support I knew that I could face whatever challenges that come my way”* (PD). Sthabile’s self-esteem was boosted because her family. Her grandmother was not only educated but she was also liberal in her thinking and willing to support Sthabile’s sexuality without judging her.

It is evident from the above participants’ experiences that families’ contribution to children’s lives is significant in many ways. As a result, the support that children receive affects their future paths and how they view themselves in society. There is a strong belief that the influence of family impacts positively when the relationships are dynamic and motivating (Wallace, 2017). The relationships that Phakamile, Balu, Velile and Sthabile shared

with their families played a central role in shaping their individual well-being in the choices that they might take across their lives' course. The above participants' sentiments resonate strongly with that of Wallace (2017), who puts forward that family relationships impact positively with one's identity. Although some of the participants in this inquiry have gone through a few complications regarding their sexual identities, the support from their families has made these challenges bearable.

Black self-identified lesbian youth in this study drew stories from their daily experiences to indicate that their families as structures were often goal orientated, interconnected and had dynamic systems that directly impacted these individuals (Wallace, 2017). The families' direct involvement seemed to have assisted participants not be fearful to negotiate their sexual identities by feeling safe in the most unsafe and unprotected environments. The very challenging issue that some of the community members have a problem accepting served instead to build a strong bond within some of the youths' families. The family involvement and support have influenced the participants' self-acceptance of their own sexual identities, consequently impacting on how they might value and care for others in the future regardless of their sexual identities. This theme reveals the potential of families to respond to their members in ways that enable social change and to develop a greater degree of mutual acceptance. The importance of support from certain people who didn't necessarily understand or approve of sexual diversity but overcame this uncertainty to be supportive.

6.2.2 Children raised to think that they are useless, a shame and worthless

Although some of the participants from this inquiry received positive family support, not all participants were offered positive family support. Thembisile's experiences differed from the aforementioned participants' experiences, as her father did not approve of her sexual identity, which seemed to have had a negative influence on how she views herself. Thembisile has written:

The situation at home got worse when, during one of the arguments between my parents. I told my father that I am lesbian. He was quiet for a few minutes. He swore to my mother, accusing her of cheating. He told her he had doubts that I was his child. He pointed out that I was the only light-skinned child out of all his children and the only 'inkonkoni' (lesbian) in the family. This confrontation and accusation were the worst. It was after this fight that my father decided to leave the next day. This quarrel was the

last one, a memorable one. It affected everyone's progress at school. My eldest brother

and sister dropped out of school because of these challenges they could not bear, the talk about our family from the community (PD).

There is a belief that physical responsibility of family in rearing and supporting the child's life influences growth and development of that child. However, that did not seem to be the case in Thembisile's life. Her upbringing appeared to have heavily and negatively affected her and her siblings' lives, creating cracks that have affected each family member. The atmosphere in which the children in Thembisile's home were brought up did not seem conducive enough. It seemed less nurturing and warm to allow for the children's positive individual growth. Thembisile's parents' parenting style did not take any interest in their children's lives. Their parenting style seemed to have completely disregarded the detrimental effects on the lives of the children in the family. The swearing, fighting, accusations and confrontations at Thembisile's home resulted in a broken family structure. Within her family, some of Thembisile's siblings' futures were affected because of the way their parents approached their relationship with each family member. For instance, Thembisile's brother and sister dropped out of school at a young age because of the challenges that were experienced by everyone at home. This might have a lasting effect on their lives to an extent and the lives of those that might depend on them as parents in future. Failure to finish school might limit the choices they have in finding the jobs that may lead to fulfilling and satisfying lives. Children are better protected when they are with their families attending school, unlike in Thembisile's home.

Equally, Thembisile, like her siblings, seemed to have been traumatised and negatively affected by the conflicts at her home, which left her feeling responsible for the wrecked family structure. She saw her sexual identity as the cause of the separation between her parents. As a child, she had to deal with a double burden of blaming herself for her father's decision to leave home and the disrupted family organisation. Consequently, Thembisile was affected academically and emotionally because of the judgement her father displayed, causing Thembisile to develop a negative outlook towards herself. Having no self-love and being withdrawn might have negative implications later in Thembisile's life. Thembisile's family life seemed to be compounded with challenges that had torn the family members apart. This experience left Thembisile struggling with her sexual identity and in finding answers on how she could live her life without being judged.

In the same way as Thembisile, Nomalanga experienced negativity about her sexual identity from her aunt. Her aunt promised to be her guardian after Nomalanga left her grandmother's home to live with her in another village. Yet she failed to provide emotional support to Nomalanga when she needed it most. Commenting on this issue of support, Nomalanga explained: *"Even today, I do not want to remember that day. My aunt shouted, punched and hit me saying I was teaching her child to be 'isitabane' (lesbian). She mentioned that I was a disgrace to our family"* (GI). This extract shows how Nomalanga's experiences as a child appeared to have negatively impacted on her life in many ways. The core function of the family as aforementioned is to serve as a scaffold to protect the children and to give a balanced structure during childhood. As evident in the above extract, Nomalanga's aunt chose to become the cause of the problem rather than a solution when Nomalanga was struggling with her sexuality.

While Nomalanga's grandmother loved and supported her in everything that she did, her aunt on the other hand nearly drove Nomalanga to killing herself. Nomalanga's aunt's lack of knowledge about sexuality and sexual issues was almost disastrous. Her utterances that Nomalanga would teach her cousin to be *"isitabane"* meant that she viewed sexuality as performance, something that could be taught or transferred to the next person. Nomalanga's aunt's saw her as abnormal because of her understanding that Nomalanga wanted to behave like a man. The aunt seemed not interested in sitting Nomalanga down to understand what Nomalanga meant by having different feelings about girls. Nomalanga's aunt perceived heterosexual marriage as a powerful indicator of Nomalanga's social acceptance. This behaviour showed that her aunt was not a kind, supportive and loving human being.

The punching and punishing exposed Nomalanga to bodily harm and pushed her into a dark hole where she wanted to harm herself. Apart from punching and hitting Nomalanga, she was left to sleep outside in the cold and unsafe environment. This action could have exposed Nomalanga to many risky conditions which might further have exacerbated her situation. Again, a couple of weeks later Nomalanga attempted to take her life. She explained in her diary: *"A month after that incident I attempted suicide by drinking paraffin, and I was punished for that. I saw myself as useless and a shame to the family"* (PD). As a parent, it was Nomalanga's aunt's responsibility to provide necessities, such as shelter and protection to her niece without being judgmental. While the decision taken by Nomalanga to commit suicide might have been motivated by the lack of positive parental involvement, it also could have been triggered by the

complications of dealing with stressful emotions whilst trying to negotiate her sexual orientation (McDermott, Hughes & Rawlings, 2018). Apart from the fear of losing her second home, Nomalanga was terrified of embarrassing her family members as her aunt had clearly indicated that she was an embarrassment, even to her dead parents. It appeared that was the reason that drove Nomalanga into thinking of taking her own life to escape from her impossible situation; she had already gone through a lot of changes in her life. Firstly, she was forced by conditions at home to leave her grandmother's home. Secondly, she found a new home at her aunt's place unbearable. Lastly, Nomalanga was uncertain about her sexuality and blamed for it. All these variations have led Nomalanga to struggle to process her thoughts positively. Thus, the decision to end these challenges by taking her own life.

It is clear from the above extracts that some participants from this study endured a lot of heartache, punishment, victimisation and beating from the people who were supposed to have given support and understanding about young people's sexual identities. These extracts similarly reveal that some participants went through many trials in life apart from the struggle over clarifying their sexual identities. The following statements below from Sibusisiwe, Bongiwe and Yazile brought this point clearly to light, Bongiwe clarified, *"My uncle and aunt gave me a hiding, but my grandmother protected me, however, she asked if I'm sure I will not change in the future. It was disgusting to even listen to such nonsense"* (GI). This extract showed that, even though Bongiwe's grandmother protected her from the beating, she was hopeful that Sibusisiwe might change the way she felt in the future. Her grandmother's thinking clearly showed that she was not comfortable or understanding why Bongiwe was attracted to the girls. Bongiwe's statement further indicated that the punishment given to her was because she was seen kissing a girl under the bridge. Bongiwe narrated: *"When my uncle got home that afternoon I was called to my grandmother's bedroom, the beating and shouting started. I was scolded for shaming and putting the family's name into disrepute. All these words were from my uncle and aunts"* (PD). The decision to punish and not to seek clarity showed that Bongiwe's family members judged her. They failed to guide and offer support to Bongiwe when she needed it most.

Like some of the participants that had negative experiences, Yazile's daily experiences were double trauma. She witnessed the regular abuse of her mother by her husband. Because of the harsh living conditions at her stepfather's home Yazile decided to live home. Yazile paid heavily for the mistakes of a man who was supposed to protect her and her brothers. Not only

was she punished; her privacy was also invaded when her diary was read without her consent. Yazile's stepfather was a well-known businessperson in the community. He was expected to be helpful and supportive of his wife's children, but his lack of support for Yazile's sexuality resulted in actions belittled Yazile. He spat on her face, clearly indicating that he was disgusted and hated Yazile's sexual orientation. He associated Yazile's being a lesbian to "a man with balls". This showed that he was misinformed and ignorant about the issues of sexuality. Yazile explained how after she ran away from home her stepfather punished her: "*My stepfather came in with a belt in his hand. He belted me until I was blue on my back. I thought I was going to die. I truly wanted to die but I did not. My brothers were crying too. Seeing how I was hit, my mother locked herself in her bedroom. She was crying. I saw a side that I did not know existed in my stepfather's behaviour*" (GI). Like other participants mentioned above, Yazile's life had been traumatic, stressful and difficult to live. The excerpt above clearly indicated that her life could have been easier if her existence had been validated and assisted by enjoyable and pleasant lived experiences. Apart from dealing with navigating her life daily, Yazile's struggle was also evident in her desire to end her life. Getting beaten up for being lesbian did not only affect Yazile, but her entire household was deeply affected by the actions of her stepfather. Yazile's home was unstable with an abused mother, unsupportive stepfather and neglected children. The mistreatment indicated that both parents failed to provide needed support and caring during a delicate stage in Yazile's life. Her stepfather's lack of support left her feeling broken.



Figure 6. 1: A picture of girls that have become close to Yazile on their way to school on a Saturday.

Similarly, like other participants with negative family experiences, Zoey went through a difficult time at a young age. When she shared her life's difficult encounters with her mother one day, she found herself in an unexpected confrontation. Her willingness to talk to her mother might have resulted from the differences in her upbringing when she stayed with her grandparents and when she stayed with her parents. Writing in her diary, Zoey elaborated:

I told her that I am a girl that is interested in dating other girls. To this day, I still feel tightening in my stomach when I remember what she did. She struck me with the back hand and banged my head on the wall. I thought my head was going to explode, I wanted to cry but nothing came out. My mother swayed sideways and stared at me. She said, "tell me, but why can't I have a normal girl like every other girl in the township?" (PD)

Zoey's grandparents had brought her up in a home where everyone believed that talking about any issue was important, but her mother's behaviour was a failure of respect and love. It highlighted the victimisation and homophobic behaviour, even from their family members, directed at people who sexually identify differently. Also, it supported the notion that if one is a lesbian, one is not a normal person. Zoey's mother's behaviour revealed difficulties she had to go through in finding her true identity and being able to live her life without fearing any punishment. Zoey's experiences at the hands of her mother seemed to have left an irreparable

mark in her life. This might pose a challenge in how she would associate and make friendships with other individuals as she continues to grow.

The above extracts illustrate that some family members of the black self-identified lesbian youth in this study found it difficult to accept and support their children's sexual identity. The experiences of the participants are in line with what the research demonstrate that LGBT people experience discrimination and marginalisation in all spheres of their lives (Francis, 2017; Boonzaier & Zway, 2015). This has led to an emotional separation between families and children who did not conform to society's prescribed sexual identities (Kwiatkowski, 2010, p. 39). In this inquiry, numerous participants have been exposed to several harassment and victimisation and sometimes were punished because of their sexual identities. Excerpts above demonstrate acts of victimisation, participants being called by derogatory names different kinds of verbal slurs and cases where physical assault was used (Bhana, 2012). It is the lack of support from the families of Thembisile, Nomalanga, Sibusisiwe, Bongiwe and Yazile that seemed to exalt heterosexuality as superior to any other form of sexuality (Nagel, 2019). Based on the extracts above, it appeared as if the lives of the participants mentioned above have been lived in fear of judgement, punishment and embarrassment because of their sexual identities.

6.2.3 Dysfunctional families and hatred of difference

The hostility shown by some families to participants seemed to be an indication not of family strength but of family dysfunctionality. Findings in the study showed that abuse of substance by some participants' parents adversely affected the lives of all in the family. Most of the family members tended to be violent and harsh with words towards participants because of how they identify sexually. Zoey's parents were alcoholics and had shifted their parental duties of rearing children to Zoey. In her drunken stupor, Zoey's mother almost killed her because she is lesbian. Zoey described: *"The punishment was always done in front of my father, but he was always too weak to intervene. Whenever they were drunk or entertaining their friends, they talked about me and my unacceptable behaviour"* (PD). Sitting and observing the child being punished in front of the father speaks volumes about Zoey's father's level of irresponsibility. Mbali had a similar experience in her home although her mother did not physically abuse her, but her drug and alcohol abuse impacted Mbali and her sisters badly. Mbali explained: *"Even though I live with my mother in the same home, half of the times she does not know what goes on in my life. She is constantly intoxicated. Her addiction has made her neglect my sisters and me"* (GI). These extracts show that Zoey and Mbali's parents have failed to fully support their children

and have shifted responsibilities of being parents to these girls. As a result, the parents' behaviour impacted hugely on the younger kids, who are neglected by their parents.

Bongiwe's uncle and aunts used alcohol and demanded money from her granny to support their drinking habits. Bongiwe's uncle and aunts punished her because she kissed a girl. Her beating could have been the results of the intoxication. Because of dysfunctionalities of parents, the family home environments of participants in this study have become more chaotic and unstable. Within these conditions, participants constantly lived in fear. Some parents in this study failed to assist their children to learn and develop love and a sense of self, coping strategies for the challenges they went through daily. Because of the lack of support from participants on how to regulate their emotions, some participants tried to commit suicide a few times, to ease the pain.

In conclusion, this theme reveals two dramatically differing responses by families. Where there were existing relationships of mutual support, the revelation that a daughter was attracted to other girls was handled in a fundamentally supportive way. Where existing relationships were under strain, the revelation became an opportunity for deep and lasting division, with intense hostility towards the daughter of the family. The negative experiences of the participants highlight that their lives and rendered them hopeless and powerless (Lyonga, 2021).

6.3 Theme 2: “Understandings of (absent) fatherhood”

Given the fact that children go through many challenges as they grow up, having absent fathers impacts hugely on the lives and choices available to their children. The various stages of children's development require both parents to be present in assisting with the many different milestones and challenges that children go through (Ellis & Sims, 2022). Some participants in this inquiry stated that they have never experienced love or lived with their biological fathers from the time they were born. As a result, they sometimes questioned the contribution their fathers would have made in their lives. Sibusisiwe had this to say: *“I have been living with my mother; I had never had the love of a father before. It was not something I was used to, living with him, I grew up in the rural areas”* (GI). Balu also shared the same sentiments as those of Sibusisiwe when she states that *“Me and my father get along in a civil way because what I can say is that he has to love me as his daughter and in return I need to love him. But he does not do any of his duties that show he is my father. He is just a father because he gave me life. He does not hate me but all I have is because of my mother's efforts”* (GI). Balu and Sibusisiwe grew up from different contexts. Both participants have had excellent relationships with their mothers but have experienced none with their biological fathers. The parenting role in their lives was mainly performed by mothers as primary providers, who are actively involved in their lives. Both experienced close mothering relationships, who supported and gave love where

necessary. As girls, the mothering

process that they experienced within their homes involved among other things, being taught the appropriate behaviour, social skills and how to think about the world (Blose, 2018).

Blose (2018) understands good parenting to improve and build healthy and sound family structures. It is therefore important for children to model what their parents are doing when they are raising them. When parents display love, support and involvement in their children's lives, they become bridges to pass on the positive aspects of their relationship with their own children (Blose, 2018). Absent fathers fail to know their children's lives and the challenges they face through life. Mothers sometimes find difficulty balancing everything within the home, which might result in tensions and broken relationships because of stress (Collins, 2020). Thembisile explained how growing up without her father has impacted her life: She described: *"It was after this fight that my father decided to leave the next day. This quarrel was the last one, a memorable one. It affected everyone's progress at school. My eldest brother and sister dropped out of school because of the challenges they could not bear. The talk about our parents failed marriage from the community. Even today, I still blame myself for making my father leave home"* (PD). What Thembisile pointed to in the above extract are the experiences that her family had gone through because her father left her home.

Thembisile's father's failure to stay and to support family relationships resulted in depression and created cracks within the family. As a result, Thembisile anticipated that something big might happen to the family in the future because of the tensions amongst the siblings. The results of the strain were damaging to the entire family, since her mother is already suffering from chronic sickness because of the problems within her family that were exacerbated by the continuous fights. When Thembisile was asked about how the family is coping without her father she responds: *"We do not stay with our father but every time we want to find out about our father, she gets depressed. She stops talking to us as if we have done something wrong. This has resulted in all of us not getting along well at home sometimes and when we have arguments my brothers end up using swear words"* (GI). The whole family structure was damaged by the rift opened within the family (Williamson, 2023). Writing on the issue of the nuclear family, Kimani and Kombo (2010) emphasises that, in African culture, the assumption is that the father would oversee the family protection and to be an inspiration to the children.



Figure 6. 3: A picture of *Thabisile's* mother's lonely walk on her way to get her medicine from the clinic

Thabisile's father's behaviour and the anger he displayed in matters concerning the rearing and support of his children point to the fact that Thembisile needed to 'hide' her sexual identity so that peace and harmony were maintained in his home. The situation in Thabisile's home deteriorated and this ended up affecting the health of her mother, who started to get sickly and was continually depressed. Since fathers occupy a critical role in the development of a child and greatly influence a child's personality development, Thabisile's father seems to have hindered his children's development by failing to support them to adulthood. Not only was Thembisile's family affected when her father left her home, but the children's schoolwork was negatively impacted (Stokkebekk et al., 2019). The negative impact of Thembisile's father's absence, despite the hard work of single parenting by Thembisile's mother, might rather be seen as a cry for a secure family structure. It is therefore crucial to conclude that fathers who were absent from the family structures had negative effects on the lives of some participants (Williamson, 2023).

Velile similarly relayed her fears of memorable experiences in her diary. She described it as follows: *"My dad passed away in the faction fight that took place amongst people of different villages during the Christmas holidays. Even though my father did not support us financially when he was still alive, but he was still our father"* (PD). The above extract showed how important a close father- daughter relationship between Velile and her father might have been.

Although her father's support was not monetary, the bond was significantly felt just because he was her father. From

this relationship, Velile learnt that bonds between a parent and a child can be pure and positive without materialistic things. Some of the narratives from the participants about their experiences clearly indicated that the role of a father is contributory in the life of a child, irrespective of whether that role provides financial or physical support. This was illustrated poignantly in Velile's account about her father; he had been unable to take financial care of his family whilst he was still alive, but she also misses having a relationship with him because he was her father. It is also evident that Sibusisiwe, Balu, Thembisile and Velile's overall development could have been positively influenced by their fathers' involvement in their upbringing. Whether a father is dead, has left the home or does not get involved in the life of a child, his role is fundamental in the emotional development of a child.

In most family structures both parents are to be decision makers or leaders where children are expected to be followers of the parents. Within the South African family structure, this is not often realised, because research has shown that most children grow up without the presence of their fathers in their lives- especially in rural areas, where this applies to 55% of children aged 15 (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Evidence from the research conducted over five years by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the South African Race Relations Institute (SARRI). (Mtutu, 2019) further revealed that more than 40% of South African mothers are single parents.

To conclude the discussion about this theme, it points to the potential significant role of the fathers, a role that is however seldom taken up in a positive way by some fathers in this study. Another important thing to highlight was that the situation of absent fathers was common not only to the participants in this study, but to other children in the communities.

6.4 Theme 3: The village fails to raise a child

A community as defined by Mthembu, Wegner and Roman (2017, p. 17) is "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings". Similarly, Bettez (2013) states that communities are made up of individuals who share similar worldviews, values and moreover beliefs. Thus, communities form a background for individuals to practise and conform to their community's morals and principles. As a result, if individuals share common perspectives, they are able to be sympathetic and tolerant of each other's differences.

In this theme, most participants experienced harassment, discrimination and victimisation at the hands of community members. There was relentless pressure and expectation from the community members for participants to behave and carry themselves in a particular way. It appeared that the community members find difficulty in accepting anything or any behaviour that they believed different from the expected norm.



Figure 6. 2: *Fetching water should be an easy everyday chore, but for Thembisile it has become dangerous if a man is in sight.*

Most participants from this study have experienced negativity and unacceptance from community members. There had been participants who were exposed to near death experiences because of the community members who were unsupportive of their sexual identities. Notice Thembisile's response when I asked her how the community members treated her since they knew that she is lesbian. Thembisile explained: (Sobbing) *"I think they have a problem with me and if it were up to them, they would have banished me from the community. They call me 'isitabane' (lesbian) and ask who I am fooling with what I am doing because I am going to change (crying). One day I was almost stabbed in the chest because I am a lesbian. He missed and I ran away"* (GI). From the above extract, it was apparent that Thembisile lived in fear and anxiety since she does not know if she is safe amongst people in her community. The lack of support from the people that Thembisile interact with affected the way she is supposed to live her life.



Figure 6. 4: *A community view through Bongiwe's eyes, something normal.*

Apart from calling her names, Thembisile almost lost her life when she was accosted by a male one afternoon on her way back home from a soccer practice. This was a community member that felt the need to punish her for her sexual identity. The bad experience almost took Thembisile's right to life and to identify as she wanted. After the incident, she became withdrawn and did not want to leave her home. She stated that she had difficulty in reporting the matter to the police because of the fear of being judged. She was supported by her mother and a close friend to learn to live with the bad experience. The societal expectation of what is viewed as normal and abnormal almost cost her life.

Thembisile was not the only participant in this inquiry, who experienced negative and judgmental comments from her community because she is lesbian. Balu too had a similar experience. She explained: *"Even in the community people call me 'isitabane' (lesbian) or a 'moffie'. Many people call me that, but I do not care. People in my community judge me, but that doesn't change anything from me"* (GI). The above extracts point out clearly on how challenging it was for Thembisile and Balu to live their lives freely in their communities. Thembisile's life might be threatened because of her sexuality. As self-identified lesbian youth, Thembisile and Balu are aware that: *"when a boy is dating a girl, people do not have a problem but when a girl is dating another girl, they start asking why you are doing something wrong"* (GI), therefore, they had to model the expected heterosexual behaviour. Within this setting,

some community

members viewed homosexuality as a wrong behaviour and only expected boys to be attracted to girls or vice versa (Smuts, 2020; Camminga, 2019).

For most participants in this study, it seemed as if the prevailing social norms are regulated and maintained even through the institutions that are supposed to render unbiased service to community members (Bettez, 2013). This was most observable through Phakamile's experience in a government institution (local clinic), where she was expected to be nursed to health because she was sick. The nurse that assisted her mistreated and mocked her based on the information she had heard as a member of the community where Phakamile lives. Phakamile described: *"I remember I once went to the clinic because I had a very severe flu. The nurse who assisted me told me she hoped I was not pregnant because it was not possible for girls to impregnate each other. I was too sick to respond to her insults. I quickly jumped down from the bed she was examining me on. I went to the next consulting room. When I left a group of nurses were standing outside giggling and pointing at me"* (PD). What the extract revealed above Phakamile's speaks to the pressures and struggles that lesbian youth are faced with in the communities, particularly those who are still very young. They are expected to show respect to elders in the communities even when their lives are in grave danger. What the nurse told Phakamile while she vulnerable seemed to have caused her double pain. The nurses' behaviour might have been intended to make Phakamile guilty and remorseful because she is a lesbian youth. The expectation of a particular behaviour from Phakamile made her feel unworthy, and to let her perceive herself as a failure for not meeting the social expectations of the nurse (Msibi, 2012).

The excerpts above reflected negative experiences of Thembisile, Balu and Phakamile within their respective communities. The lack of tolerance from these communities seemed to have a negative impact on the livelihood, safety, self-esteem and the decisions that participants in this study made about their sexual identities. Van Vollenhoven and Els (2013) reveal in their study that LGBT individuals often face prejudice, discrimination and exclusion resulting in them experiencing higher levels of victimisation and emotional abuse due to being forced to "behave" and live a fake heterosexual lifestyle. The nurse that victimised Phakamile and wanted to exclude her from health services that had to be rightfully accessible to her. It is evident from the excerpts above that communities where the participants live lacked understanding about sexual identities of lesbian youth. Thus, they used their heteronormative understanding to judge and mistreat participants because of their sexual identities (de Heer, 2021; Mortimer, 2019).

Derogatory language was

also used as a means to reject those who had differing sexual preferences in this inquiry. Thus, resulting in affected participants, who felt ashamed to live and experienced their sexuality positively and ended up subjected to heterosexual behaviours.

Mthembu, Wegner and Roman (2017) reiterate in their study that a community consists of people with diverse characteristics. However, the accounts made by participants above revealed that there was no tolerance in some community members for people who identified differently sexually. Somehow, beliefs and values that these communities upheld and took into consideration seemed to be against the sexual identities of individuals such as Bongiwe. Because of this, Bongiwe was scared to live her life freely without being viewed as though she was disrespecting the traditions that the community upholds. Bongiwe explained: *“I feel okay but the community I live in does not feel okay with me because as black people they believe in tradition, they don’t believe that a girl should date, or a boy and a boy should date. They believe that it goes against our traditions, this also hurts me at times as I must hide how I feel in my community because I might appear as if I’m disrespecting my traditions”* (GI). What was highlighted by Bongiwe from the above excerpt showed that community members were ignorant regarding the issues of Bongiwe’s sexuality. She and all those that were not in heterosexual relationships were excluded by the communities they live in. One would think that since Bongiwe was from a township and not rural context, her community would have a different approach and understanding towards her, but this was not the case within her community. Their behaviour seems to infringe on her right to choose who she engaged in relations with. She was compelled by circumstances to hide her sexual identity since the community member were intolerant towards lesbian people.

Both in the township and rural contexts there was hostile behaviour directed at participants; however, it is within these communities where participants’ sexual identities should be nurtured and molded. The negative and unfair behaviour directed to are in line with what was highlighted in the reviewed literature. The literature revealed that stereotypes and misunderstanding impact hugely on the lives of LGBT victims and their ability to speak freely about their experiences (Ellis & Sims, 2022; Lyonga, 2021). It would have been encouraging for the community members to support and assist in building the morals and principles of sexual identities of homosexual individuals. Most participants seemed to have been exposed to repressive environments and experiences which made them felt unprotected as they continued to live their lives (Francis, 2021; Lyonga. 2021; Ngcobo, 2021). To some participants, these experiences

might have led to death. In view of what the participants narrated, it is likely that their experiences would impact on how they interact, connect and choose to forge relationships within their communities.

The communities from which the participants came were shown consistently to be places hostile to girls who identified themselves differently in terms of sexuality. One of the most striking values that these communities failed to uphold is that of the culture and traditional values of Africans, that of being non-individualistic in character (Lutz, 2009). In Lutz's (2009) view, though African cultures are diverse in nature, they still display remarkable similarities. What is evident from what happened in the communities from where the participants live is failure from the people in understanding that a 'community is the cornerstone in African thought and life' (Lutz, 2009, p. 314). As Turaki (2006) puts it that "people are not individuals, living in a state of independence, but part of a community, living in relationships and interdependence." (p. 36).

6.5 Theme 4: Schools are an unsafe space

Providing a definition of a school, Berg (2007) notes that it is a complex institution with a mission and goals drawn from that society, aiming to socialise children and ensure their education, psychological and mental development. It consequently becomes imperative that its main purpose in educating should be to develop children holistically. Turkkahraman (2015, p. 382) states that, "Education is primarily a social phenomenon and activity". Education should help children to think, feel and behave in a way that should contribute to the success and personal satisfaction of the children (Turkkahraman, 2015). It is therefore expected that proper and good educational skills are key for all children attending the schooling system. For that reason, the intended goal for school-going children is to achieve knowledge, values, skills, beliefs and morals.

Based on the above definition of school, the crucial role of education cannot be understood outside a nationwide process of raising youth without having specific aims in mind. John Dewey notes in his work "The School and Society" that education will have a very important role to change and develop societies. (Turkkahraman, 2015, p. 382). School should play a key role in supporting all children, irrespective of race, age, gender and sexual orientation. In societies, where schools are situated, the education offered should be able to cater for all children; by so doing in the end, it will shape the children into responsible citizens. These societies will become better places with people that will be able to know and respect other people's rights, ideas and sexual identities.

Apart from the school being a societal institution, it is a place of interaction, friendships which are crucial for the children's future lives. Within this setting, children should learn important skills such as team-sharing, being responsibly, empathy and good manners (Turkkahraman, 2015). It is in these institutions where some of the participants from this inquiry were called names, suspended or expelled because of their sexual identities. How they identify created challenges within the school setting that nearly affected some participants' future dreams and their desire to pursue a higher education later in life. This was resulting from the fact that participants had been found to be self-identifying lesbians. Therefore, they were made to experience life adversely. Consider, for example Velile's response when I asked her about her high school experiences as a self-identified lesbian youth. She explained below:

Oh yes! I remember in my previous school one of my lesbian friends was caught with a letter to her girlfriend. She was asked to name all the other learners who were lesbians. I was the eldest among all of them as most were in grades 10 and 11. After being sent to the principal's office, we were all expelled from the school without the school notifying our parents. This experience left me scared because I did not think that I was going to be affected in my schooling experience because I was identifying differently sexually.
(GI)

As Lezotte (2008) argues, a core function of the school involves transmitting information to learners by demonstrating the presence of equity in equality. Therefore, in schools, the education offered should respond to the social and economic needs of learners and society. The above extract revealed that Velile's circumstances in her school did not take into consideration the issue of equity. She experienced punitive decisions from one person, who was supposed to have given her support regardless of her sexual identity. The support from the school as an institution of learning was critical to Velile's life. Instead, she became a victim in the hands of the school principal, who failed to treat and embraced her differences and the other girls, who identified as lesbians. It is evident that the school was unsuccessful in helping its learners to develop themselves psychologically, educationally, socially and emotionally. Thus, the school was ineffective in helping learners like Velile that are lesbians to develop their potential as fully as possible. Velile's ordeal left her emotionally damaged because of the challenges she went through.

As Cheng (2005) claims that clear contribution of a school is to give guidance and development at different levels of a child's stages. From Nomalanga's experience it was obvious that a

school sometimes places learners that sexually identify differently between a rock and a hard place in terms of experiencing life within the school premises. Nomalanga explained how her experiences caused her problems at school. She explained: *“When the news about my sexuality got to the principal’s attention, my aunt was called and she told the principal that I was a problem child, she had told me to stop behaving like a boy, but I continued. I was suspended from school for 14 days and could not write the mid-year examinations. The principal stated that I needed to clear up my head and when I come back to school, I should behave like a girl that I was”* (PD). Nomalanga relied more on the support she got from her aunt in her everyday survival. When her entire world was turned upside down, her aunt was the one person who was supposed to have supported her in front of the school principal, but she did not. From the extract above, the school principal and Nomalanga’s aunt saw her sexuality as unwanted behaviour that needs to be corrected by punitive measures. Her aunt considered her a problem child because she failed to desire to understand her sexual identity. If she had been willing to support Nomalanga, she should not have been judgemental towards her. The experience at school and at home left Nomalanga petrified. The principal’s statement communicated that he saw sexual identity as a performance that had to be corrected at any given time. Nomalanga’s experiences illustrated the interweaving of challenges she experienced at home and at school, which created a problem for her to continue effortlessly with her studies.

Participants in this study highlighted that most of their negative experiences have taken place within the schooling setting. Like other participants mentioned above, Sthabile’s schooling experience impacted badly on her daily encounters, stating, *“When I arrived at school they didn’t want to hear or understand that I’m lesbian, especially because the school is in the rural area. Some of them wished they could do something bad to me, they would tell that to my friends all the time”* (PD). Sthabile was new in the school, but she was faced with judgement before learners and teachers could create an opportunity to know her better. Furthermore, it was possible that she found it difficult to adapt in an environment that was not conducive to receiving her. The hatred from some people within the school setting was so severe that Sthabile thought they might physically harm her. Sthabile’s problems at school did not end with teachers and learners; even the managers of the school interfered with her sexuality. Sthabile and her classmates were involved in a voluntary school project; they were wrongly accused of taking sexual advantage of younger learners and subjected to humiliation in front of other teachers: She elaborated: *“The principal heard about that; the first four members of the committee were summoned to his office. Attending the meeting were the School Management*

Team (SMT), the teacher liaison

officer and the teachers' union site stewards. Only when we got into the office did we realise how big the issue was about our involvement in the projects" (GI). Once a rumour about the committee's involvement with learners was out, the school should have investigated the rumours that were circulating instead of calling for a disciplinary meeting. Most teachers present in the meeting seemed to have concluded that the committee members were indeed taking advantage of the young learners, considering the utterances they made when the principal was talking. His argument was that they broke the school's code of conduct by being involved with other girls at school.

Sthabile explicated: *"The principal further indicated how disappointed he was to hear that we are lesbians. How we had planned to take advantage of the grade eight and nine learners and to have sex with them. As he was talking some teachers were cooing, others nodding or shaking their heads" (PD).* This excerpt highlighted how the school principal used his position to foster discipline and to punish learners without thorough evidence and the root cause of their case. The school principal's practice also reflected an authoritarian leadership style, where he was able to make huge accusations without finding out what truly transpired in those afternoon English extra-lessons. However, immediately after a detailed account from Sthabile, he had to reverse his decision. His leadership was irresponsible when it came to issues concerning the welfare of all his learners at school. If it were not of Sthabile's assertive nature, the four committee members could have been punished, suspended or expelled from school indefinitely.

As noted earlier, participants stated that their lives and experiences were difficult at school. Some of the participants felt scared to walk freely within the school premises fearing for their lives. Bhana (2015) views schools as unsafe spaces in South Africa. Likewise, this inquiry reveals that participants were exposed to unsafe environments daily in schools. Sibusisiwe clarified: *"School is not a safe place because whenever they (people) see that you are lesbian they always criticise you and ask if you are serious about the life of dating other girls or is it that you are just having fun that will end when you later in life need to get married. I feared to be alone during break times" (PSS).* This extract explicitly suggests that Sibusisiwe had to constantly try to be on the lookout for her safety. What the extract illustrated was that Sibusisiwe might spend her entire secondary education feeling unsafe because of the situation she found herself in every day. Asked if there were specific places that were more dangerous to her, she stated that the most dangerous spaces for any lesbian learner to be in during the day. Sibusisiwe responded: *"Yes, there are spaces where I don't feel safe. By the school toilets and*

sometimes in our class even when it's break time, and I am with my girls talking or doing whatever. You sometimes fear going to the toilet because of what might be said or done to you" (PSS). Often, according to the Sibusisiwe, the toilet looked safer when it was during the contact times, but during the busiest times, the break times, it became more unsafe for her to be out and walk freely. Sibusisiwe believed that as a lesbian her vulnerability and victimisation were 'inevitably' because of her sexual identity (Prock & Kennedy, 2020). Since she lacked support and protection that was often granted by being in school with her peers. She felt unprotected and exposed to all forms of violence, including sexual violence, and therefore, she lived in fear of sexual victimisation (Ngidi, 2020, p 183).

In conclusion, this theme reveals that schools have failed the participants almost completely in providing a safe environment for them to pursue their studies. The narratives evidenced how schools get away with institutional practices that are clearly at odds with policy, as it well highlighted in several instances of the participants' exclusion and complicity in homophobic teaching practices. The theme further highlights the gap between law (the Constitution) and reality as it happens in schools.

6.6 Theme 5: "Use the boys' toilets because you are boys": the teachers' perspective

The impact that teachers have on their learners is significant and is expected to have lifelong effects on their achievements and their lives, in particular (Longobardi *et al*, 2018). Wentzel (1994) also highlights the countless aspects of interpersonal relationships that teachers and learners have that might have the potential to influence learners' academic motivation. Teachers automatically become influential role models in developing their learners, by building and nurturing self-esteem and self-confidence through several official and non- official lessons (Wentzel, 1994). This therefore means that the teachers' role in a school setting is to equip and teach learners life lessons that will fuel success beyond the classrooms. It is imperative for teachers to connect with learners so that they can reach their maximum capacity and excel in every sphere of their lives.

According to Osher *et al* (2020), learners' interest academically is mostly driven by teachers' characteristics and the reinforcement they receive in class. The reality is that not all teachers are role models or want to impact positively the lives of their learners. Some teachers find difficulty connecting, motivating and developing a learner holistically or uttering positive comments, the lack of which may result in immeasurable damage to an individual learner. Many participants in this inquiry have experienced negativity from their teachers because they

were ridiculed and victimised because they identified as lesbians. The teachers' behaviour suggested that years later after the learners' bad experiences in schools, some of the learners could struggle to develop themselves holistically. According to Osher et al. (2020),

relationships that are reciprocal, attuned, culturally responsive, and trustful become positive developmental force between children and their physical and social contexts. Thus, it is imperative for teachers to connect with learners so that they can reach their maximum capacity, therefore, learners might excel in every sphere of their lives.

Participants in this study experienced negativity from their teachers as they were ridiculed because of their sexual identities. One of the negative experiences was evident in Mbali's response about what happened to her with the teacher in her school. She explained: "*It hurts a lot when a teacher calls you "usikhotheni" (useless thing) for no reason. They also remind me regularly that I fail because I am confused whether I am a boy or a girl. They would use me as an example when they are talking to other learners about good behaviour. For this reason, I hate school*" (GI). The above excerpt showed the impact that derogatory words could have on the life of a young person. Significant relations between teachers and learners are built through the support and motivation that teachers provide whether learners are doing well or are struggling with their schoolwork. Mbali seemed to have struggled with her schoolwork and failed to progress to the next class. For a teacher to demoralise her when she has low self-esteem was discouraging to Mbali. The teacher's behaviour seemed to indicate noncommitment and unacceptable behaviour towards her work. If the teacher had given a positive comment, it might have produced a positive determination that would have enabled Mbali to work harder to pass. For Mbali, the experience was a stressful incident which resulted in her deteriorating love for school, which was the opposite of her intended objective for attending school.

Equally, Sibusisiwe had the same view about the teacher who made her schooling experience tough because she identified as lesbian. She explained: "*I have more challenges at school, one-day Miss B, once called me and scolded me in front of the class. She told me to stop what I was doing because it was not correct and I was going to outgrow it, but I was puzzled, how can I stop who I am?*" (PD). From this incident in class, Sibusisiwe experienced humiliation from her teacher before her classmates. The teacher's open confrontation in class was evidence to the fact that people who engage in same-sex, lesbians in particular, are denied the opportunity to live their lives naturally. During the confrontation described in the extract above, Sibusisiwe was not asked to speak to the teacher privately about her sexuality. Rather, it was the teacher who felt the need to scold, judge and come to conclusion about how she would outgrow her sexuality. Her sexuality was compared to a piece of cloth that could be outgrown and be discarded easily. Sibusisiwe had a few such horrendous experiences at school. Miss B,

her class teacher, openly spoke about Sibusisiwe's sexuality in class and stated the immorality of her sexuality. She elaborated: *"My Science teacher gave a lesson on how bad it looks when girls want to change what God had given them as a gift. He stated that at times he wondered why those girls would want to live sinfully. He laughed and stated that people behaving that way had to be disciplined or rather be expelled from school because they set bad examples for other learners"* (PD). From the extract above, there was evidence that Sibusisiwe's Science teacher hated lesbian learners. As an educated Science specialist, he understood that sexuality has nothing to do with God and gift but rather with sexual orientation. For him to laugh and be humorous in class at the expense of Sibusisiwe was harsh and embarrassing to Sibusisiwe. The teacher's behaviour presented him as a morally correct and justified his beliefs as the "only truth".

Phakamile too, was exposed to an unprotected and frustrating schooling environment in her school. Her friends and her were harassed at school because of their sexual identities. She elaborated: *"Yes, I have seen a lot of teachers judging me and other girls, they don't like us because we lesbians"* (GI). The above extract exhibited how lesbian learners are not solidly supported and embraced by some teachers at Phakamile's school. Zaba detailed a similar but more traumatising experience than other participants that are mentioned above. Zaba's and other learners' rights were infringed upon. Zaba explained: *"One teacher told us to use the boys' toilets because we are boys. He waited for us outside the door to make sure we use it. We felt humiliated and degraded in front of other learners"* (GI). Being exposed to such humiliating experience, especially at school and at the hands of a teacher might have been traumatising to Zaba and all those learners who are lesbians. The experience was an agonising torment that left Zaba and her friends devastated. She stated that she stopped enjoying school after that ordeal.

The oppressive acts of humiliation by the teacher not only perpetuated fear and blame for lesbian learners, but highlighted the challenging environments lesbian learners suffer every day because of their sexual identities (Allen, 2023; Okanlawon, 2021; Saxey, 2020). Zaba explained how her ordeal negatively affected her schooling experience. She elaborated: *"I nearly left school, I was away for two days, I really contemplated it. How was I going to carry on with my classes?"* (PD). Zaba's experience typified the vulnerability, victimisation and humiliation that some participants in this inquiry went through in the spaces within and around their schooling environments (Ngidi, 2020). Equally, Nomalanga shared her mortifying experience with a teacher before other teachers and learners that took place by the school gate.

Talking about the experience, she elucidated: “*Another*

teacher stated that ever since I came to their school, I have taught other girls to join me in this “thing”. Everyone who was by the gate laughed. I was devastated by the teachers’ actions. I was shamed and humiliated in front of other learners” (GI). Nomalanga’s teacher validated the normalised victimisation and harassment of a particular group of learners at the school (Okanlawon, 2021; Ngidi, 2020), and the behaviour has become an everyday part of the school culture.

Sharing her negative experiences as a lesbian learner that were perpetuated by teachers, Nomalanga mentioned specific male teachers that treated her badly at school. She explained: *“Teachers, more especially male teachers, are against me. I don’t know the reason maybe it is because they don’t like me, they say I think I am a boy and have balls in my stomach” (GI).* From the above extract Nomalanga did not only learn that she was disliked by her male teachers because of her sexual identity. Her experience with some of the teachers at school displayed deep hatred. The teacher’s comment about Nomalanga having balls was embarrassing and dehumanising. Her life in such a repressive environment might have contributed to an emotional and withdrawn state she found herself in.

There is conclusive evidence that participants in this study have been exposed to more suppressive environments that were not only threatening their educational life; to a greater extent some of their talent was also affected (Tankersley et al. 2021; Daniels, 2019). For example, Phakamile explained how she was almost shuttered, and her talent destroyed one afternoon during the school choir practice. She gave a detailed diary entry on the day her choir mistress treated her in the presence of the school choristers: She explained: *“I love singing and I am a great singer, I am a tenor/alto singer. I wanted to sing in the school choir, but one teacher asked me why I was there because I am a ‘umfana-ntombazane’ (boy/girl)” (PD).* The extract indicated the vindictiveness of the teacher towards Phakamile without taking into consideration how her utterances might harm her. Firstly, the teacher’s question suggested that singing had anything to do with whether one is a boy or a girl. Secondly, Phakamile was a well-known singer and the whole school knew that. Lastly, the terms boy/girl gave a picture that Phakamile might have two sets of genitals. This incident confirmed the assertion by Osher et al. (2020) stating that schools as institutions should be self-motivating, multileveled, multifaceted contexts where learners’ development and every stakeholder, policies, structural setting, culture, and student qualities are geared to inspire each other.

Not only did the teachers violated the rights of lesbian learners at some school, even a principal suspended and/or expelled learners. What is evident from the participants' daily schooling experiences was that some teachers that harassed, humiliated and used derogatory names to lesbian learners in schools. The damaging behaviour was often perpetrated by the teachers whom the participants knew and trusted. For example, in a focus group discussion with the participants, they mentioned how they sometimes became victims of sexual violence, assault and name-calling by their family members, teachers, schoolmates, people they knew from their communities.

Most teachers in these schools are revealed to have been directly complicit in the harassment of the participants in this study, with a few other teachers playing a more supportive role.

6.7 Theme 6: “You are not competition; you need to be reminded that you are a girl”: other learners

The relationships that learners develop at school are key in learning and development and in providing a web of support or peers (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). As Osher and Kendziora (2010) highlight, relationships are fundamental human needs that are necessary for school-going learners. It is within the classroom setting that most of these relationships are established and developed. It is the positive classroom environments and support that will allow learners to be emotionally holistically ready and effective for teaching and learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2010). Participants in this study believed that the culture of learning from one another was going to be possible when every learner was contributing towards each other's well-being at school.

Sharing her narrative, Sibusisiwe was concerned about the lack of support from other learners at her school. She gave a detailed account of how there was an increasing rate of insults and derogatory names that were directed to her in passing by some learners at school. Relating a personal experience, Sibusisiwe explained: “*There is one boy at school every time he sees me, he shouts, hey lesitabane lesi, kumele uhambe la eskoleni. Kufanele ashawe lona*” (*Hey, you lesbian, you need to leave school. We must beat this one*)” (PD). The above extract revealed how Sibusisiwe's experiences at school left her feeling terrified. The boy's words could easily have incited violence that would have been directed to Sibusisiwe inside or outside her school.

Her life might have been in great danger if the boy had had an opportunity to meet Sibusisiwe alone in an unsafe space. Sibusisiwe's peer blatantly uttered words that could have been dangerous if they had fallen on wrong ears. As a schoolmate, his support should rather have played a significant role in protecting Sibusisiwe from other people outside her school.



Figure 6. 5: Clean, apparently peaceful but dangerous veranda in Velile's high school.

Velile's experiences changed when she started in a new school in Chesterville, in Durban. Life in a township school became unbearable. She explained below:

One day during the study period I was coming from the toilets. A group of boys were standing in the corridor. As I approached them, one boy came up to me, held me and kissed me full on my mouth. That whole action paralysed me, I remained fixed on the same spot for some time. They all laughed and clapped hands, cheering him for kissing me. They followed me to my class passing hurtful remarks. The boy who kissed me said he hoped his kiss would bring me back into my senses. They said I was not their competition; all they needed was to remind me that I am a girl. I cried that whole afternoon even beyond school on my way home. Life at school has become unbearable.
(GI)

The above extract confirmed how some boys felt threatened by learners who are lesbians at school. In South African schools, most lesbians find themselves in challenging circumstances

where they are exposed to many unacceptable behaviours (Bhana, 2015). It was easy for the

other boys to judge Velile and to remind her that she is a girl, as if she forgotten that. Velile's experience is in line with Collins' (2013) description of how boys frequently exercise their power and authority through physical and sexual violence against learners considered as weak (Ngidi, 2020). As a girl who identified as lesbian, Velile was committed to her studies and to academically develop for a brighter future. She struggled to adjust to her new township life and her victimisation every day in her new environment. Firstly, she considered being at school dreadful because of the horrifying experiences her schoolmates had exposed herself to. Secondly, other boys cheered him on as if what he did was correct, deserved applauding and had to be openly celebrated. The other boys' actions proved that they were complicit with what happened to Velile in full view of other learners and did not scold or try to stop their friend. By not challenging or stopping what happened to Velile, the other boys normalised homophobia. Additionally, statements such as eliminating competition gave the impression that Velile's sexuality was a threat to heterosexuality. This kind of harassment indicated that Velile's presence in her school was suppressive, and she suffered from the hands of her schoolmates without any support from them.

Learners were thus also, without any intervention by the school to protect participants, constantly violating the bodily and emotional integrity of the girls in the study.

6.8 Theme 7: "Behave properly, as expected in our culture"

Phakamile described how her school principal used culture in trying to stop her from having a relationship with another girl. The principal's attitude towards her issue left her helpless. She elaborated below:

The principal ordered me to stop any relationship I was having with S'fanele because I was modelling bad behaviour to other girls at school. He emphasised that as a Zulu girl I should behave properly as expected in our culture. The principal told me my grandmother would not have approved of my behaviour. Seeing me turning into a 'isitabane' (lesbian) would have broken her spirits. How was I going to have children? I was told I would be damaged goods if I continue behaving like boys. (GI)

The above extract suggested that the school principal held a belief that, as a Zulu girl, Phakamile should get married and bear children for her husband. Failure to do so would suggest that she would have failed her dead grandmother and caused her spirit not to rest peacefully. Secondly, as a Zulu woman, Phakamile was expected to behave correctly because that would

afford her an opportunity to get a husband. Finally, if she continued to openly display her sexual identity, no man would marry her as she would be seen as ‘damaged goods’. Thus, she needed to redeem herself. The pressure from the principal failed to take into consideration the fact that Phakamile was still a young girl, who was not looking for a husband or a family. She was a school to learn and experience life as she grew up.

Linked to the excerpt above, and embedded in cultural belief, was Mbali’s grandmother’s outburst about her sexuality. Mbali explained: “*After the meeting, my grandmother thought I was going through a phase in my life. She told me that she hoped I would outgrow ‘that lesbian thing’ soon before it ruins my life*” (GI). What the above extract demonstrated was that if Mbali openly continued to live her life as she wanted, that would ruin her life. In addition, Mbali’s grandmother spoke of Mbali’s sexuality like a fashionable trending outfit that will lose its popularity once the fashion expired. Mbali’s grandmother used statements such as “... *nothing like that had ever happened in her family*” (PD), Mbali’s grandmother perpetuated the normalised belief about culture and Zulu traditions which further made it impossible for Mbali to lead a normal life.

Kheswa (2012) views the complexity of socio-cultural beliefs such as religion and traditions as factors that at times become challenges associated with sexuality. Some participants had been exposed to situations where family members suggested that special ceremony to be organised as a form of cleansing for being lesbian. Though culture and traditions are crucial factors in understanding one’s individual identity, sexual significance and practice is the responsibility of the individual, not of the entire family (Cerezo et al., 2020; King, 2019). Bongiwe was confronted by some family members who thought that there were measures that could be put in place to correct her sexuality. She explained: “*I don’t think everyone will accept me. For example, yesterday, they were meant to do a ceremony to kind of reverse my “lesbianism”, so when I was forced to start this process, they said I am not pure because I am a lesbian*” (GI). Bongiwe expressed an immeasurable fear of not being accepted by some of her family members because some thought her sexuality was not pure. The belief that a traditional ritual or ceremony might reverse her sexual identity, something that could be easily cured by slaughtering a cow or a goat to reverse, was a cause for concern for her (King, 2019). Bongiwe, like other participants in this inquiry, is judged as contaminated and unclean. Her family further showed that they did not understand what Bongiwe went through by failing to accept that she was born a lesbian and no amount of reversals would change her sexual identity.

Similarly, Velile's family demonstrated the same thinking as Bongiwe's about her sexual identity. She explained: *"At home when my family was around for my brother's ceremony, they said that a ceremony needs to be done for me because if they put "isiphandla" (Zulu bracelet) on me I will change. I haven't changed even today"* (GI). The above excerpt is in line with what Kheswa (2020) states about the view and judgement that is sometimes directed to people who practice same sex. Kheswa (2020) further states people who are identified differently sexually are considered to be cursed or bewitched when their sexual expression deviates from the broader societal expectations (p. 132). For Kheswa (2020), such practices are shared in numerous contexts worldwide, including South Africa. The significance of *isiphandla* for a Zulu person is to create some kind of connection with ancestors. In reality, achieving this connection through slaughter or through the *isiphandla* did nothing to change Velile's sexuality.

This theme highlights how tradition and culture was used as a hostile force to control the lives of the participants and to limit their sense of their own integrity. The participants' descriptions reveal the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. This reflects the societal enforcement of heteronormative standards that the participants had to endure daily.

6.9 Theme 8: Rejection and isolation: the cleansing of the sin

Newman, Fantus, Woodford and Rwigema (2017) declare that homosexuality is seen as a "sin" or "unnatural" in many communities and this view is founded on cultural and/or religious beliefs. This view has immensely contributed towards prejudice against LGBT individuals. Yazile grew up in a home where church services were held every Sunday. She described how one day her experience turned into a circus show. She elaborated how *"...the bishop found out that I am a lesbian and told me that I have sinned. He made a request that I should wait for four days and after being taken to the river to get cleansed. Even after that cleansing I remain a lesbian"* (PD). The extract above indicated how Yazile was discriminated against within her church by the bishop, evidence that many churches are extremely unwelcoming towards people, particularly who sexually identified differently.

Similarly, Bongiwe shared how she suffered emotional trauma in church amidst individuals she had trusted. She described her ordeal that took place one Sunday afternoon after church. She elaborated:

"...the church service all the girls were asked to remain. The elders of the church and

the pastor's wife wanted to talk to the youth. While no one had ever told me that a life of a lesbian would be easy, I was not prepared for what happened in that meeting.

Everyone was requested to pray for the evil spirits to leave my body. When the prayer ended, the pastor's wife told me to stop disgracing the church, the youth and the community. She told to end the playful phase I was in to and go back to be the God's child" (GI).

The type of prejudice directed towards Bongiwe was characterised by judgemental, humiliating, discriminating actions and negative utterances because she identified herself as a lesbian. Not only did the church people and the pastor's wife humiliate Bongiwe, but there was an assumption that prayer could assist in eliminating the 'evil spirits' that lived inside Bongiwe's body. In addition, the rationale that her sexuality was a phase made it impossible for Bongiwe to go to church again. Further to this, an argument made by the pastor's wife suggested that because of her sexual identity, Bongiwe was no longer a God's child. The church members' actions reflected a congregation that was insensitive and unsupportive towards all its congregants.

Balu's experiences amongst church-going people confirmed how unsupportive Christian people were towards lesbians in the community (Anderson, 2020; Towa, 2019). She experienced challenges at school with her schoolwork and had hoped things would be better when she left school to go home. Her suffering continued beyond her school premises, older women being the perpetrators in her case. Balu shared how: *"One woman told a group of women one Thursday afternoon, when I met them on the road. She explained to the other women that what I was demonstrating for young people in the community was "ungodly" behaviour" (GI).* Evidence from the extract validated how difficult it is for some Christian members to accept that heterosexuality is not the only type of sexuality that exists, other forms of sexuality coexist parallel to it. Balu was labelled by church-going women because she was viewed differently from other girls in her community. The experience of victimisation left her afraid, feeling unsafe and unprotected from the community members that used God to judge Balu about her sexual identity (Anderson, 2020).

Sibusisiwe used her diary accounts to pour her heart out about the incident after the church people found out from her mother about her sexuality. Her experience left her distraught because she did not expect the sermon and the preaching in the church from the congregants to be about her sexuality. She grew up in the church, attended every Sunday with her family, but finding out about her sexuality changed every relationship she had with the congregants. Sibusisiwe described: *"On the day, the sermon was about me. My heart was torn into small*

284

pieces, hearing people giving testimony that if I die, I will go to hell. That broke my spirit” (PD). The extract above specified the extent to which Sibusisiwe was victimised, which left her broken in the house of prayer. People openly judged her and were certain that her sexuality was her ticket to go straight to hell after she died. What took place in the church that afternoon changed the way Sibusisiwe viewed the church. She made a definite decision about her life and those around her. Not only did the church people judge her, but the incident translated to the community in which she lived. She elaborated: *“After the church incident, most people in the township knew about my sexuality. I was judged, girls I grew up with distanced themselves from me” (PD).* Sibusisiwe’s relations with people she grew up with became strained. She took a decision not to attend church services again. Sibusisiwe’s experiences in church revealed the depth and dangerous decisions that are sometimes taken by people around that are based on prejudice.

The extracts in this study illustrate that some participants had been marginalised by those that viewed lesbian sexuality as sinful. This is in line with what Nkosi and Masson (2017) found about the experiences of Christian homosexual university students. The findings from this study revealed that the church was not embracing homosexual students and was exceptionally judgemental. As a result, students felt rejected and isolated in the midst of church people. Most church-going people seemed to believe that the church as an institution is morally correct, any person who is not heterosexual is not accepted in their circles Anderson, 2021; Nkosi & Mason, 217).

The role of religion in these contexts, whether traditional or Christian, seems to have been consistently baleful in limiting the sense of integrity of the participants.

6.10 Theme 9: Violence, trauma and resilience

Even with the major advances and over a number of years of equality for all, LGBT people in South Africa have to bear the brunt of marginalisation and continue to experience victimisation in high numbers (Mkhize et al., 2010). The multiple levels of oppression within communities where the participants of this study live ranged from bullying, sexual violence, physical violence and harassment to exclusion. Findings presented the inherently complex and traumatic experiences that affected the participants’ teenage years. Their day-to-day discriminating experiences based on their sexual identities affected their lives and schooling (Mkhize et al., 2010). Findings showed that participants in this study were exposed to different forms of violence, and this resulted in trauma for most of the participants. According to Kaminer and

285

Eagle (2010), “when people are exposed to violence, there will inevitably be trauma” (p. 2). For example, in this study, five of the participants’ horrific experiences led them to suicide attempts. All 12 participants shared stories of how different people from their immediate surroundings tried to control their sexual identities. However, for Balu, Velile Nomalanga, Mbali and Zoey things turned out to be extremely challenging and they ended up making attempts to kill themselves. Velile described how her traumatic experiences at school motivated her to take up her life. She reported:

Life at school has become unbearable. I have tried to commit suicide twice because of the insecurities, difficulty adjusting and the torment from my schoolmates. In the last attempt I almost lost my life. I had slit my wrist and locked myself in the toilet. One tenant found me bleeding on the floor in the toilet and called the ambulance... My Life Orientation teacher has arranged for me to have sessions with the school social worker. While it is difficult sharing my life with a stranger, for the first time during the sessions I have talked about my journey from childhood to now with social worker. (PSS)

The extract above highlights how Velile’s life was extremely impacted by the circumstances within her school which drove her to try and take her own life. The extract further reveals how living under the deterring rules of the school and her community encouraged the attempted suicide (Suen et al., 2020; Cense, 2019). Being called “farm Julia” at school and adjusting to a township life came with numerous challenges for her. Also, at home, she was trying to build a relationship with her mother. These challenges might have triggered her previous trauma that made her to decide to kill herself. While her mother accepted her sexual orientation, however people in the community and in school continued to verbally abuse, harass and belittle her. What happened to Velile suggests that her schooling experiences were violent, and her day-to-day encounters might have triggered bad memories and she decided to take her own life.

Likewise, Nomalanga was physically abused by her aunt and was also exposed to different kinds of hurtful slurs. She was constantly exposed to victimisation (like sleeping outside in the cold) at home and the recurring abuse, fear of victimisation, contributed to her drinking paraffin. She wrote how she tried to kill herself, “*A month after that incident I attempted suicide by drinking paraffin, and I was punished for that. I saw myself as useless and a shame to the family*’ (PD). Nomalanga’s experiences when she stayed with her aunt were awful and she was

treated badly and scolded for things she did not do. This caused her to try several times to kill herself. Her actions suggest that she had faced challenging experiences when she stayed in her aunt's home. She elaborated that: *"Life at my aunt's home is very tough. My aunt and cousin are making it impossible for me to enjoy being a child"* (PD). She was surrounded by people who did not love nor support her. For example, she ran away from home and stayed in the streets. That environment was not safe for any child, but no family member was willing to support her, even her eldest sister. Even though she tried to do better at school, she was made to feel ashamed to be a lesbian, hence she decided to end her life.

The findings further reveal that Balu, Mbali and Zoey also had to deal with a lot of challenges and some kind of traumatic experiences growing up. Though Balu is supported by her family, she experienced difficulties with her academic work; coupled with this was the victimisation at school and in her community because she is lesbian. She described the role her mother played in her life: *"My mother cares for me. She has encouraged and supported me even when I repeated classes for three consecutive years. She is the reason why I am still alive today. I have had thoughts of taking my life many times because of the shame of being seen as stupid in my class"* (PD). Likewise, Zoey's life also demonstrated a childhood that was full of heartaches, violence and lack of parental support. The situation with her parents took its toll on her life and she had to quickly switch the roles, so that she could take care of her siblings. For instance, Zoey described her plan to kill herself: *"One day, it was a Friday evening, I decided I was going to take the rat poison, because I could not stand the beatings at home. I knew what I was about to do was wrong, but I did not want to live anymore. I took milk in a glass and the Ratex rat poison to our room. I had decided to take it that night but seeing my sisters sleeping so peacefully on their bed made me change my mind"* (PD). This extract suggests that it was discrimination based on her sexual identity that created the rift between the participants and their families, and this had detrimental impact on their lives. The painful and the shameful desire to kill themselves shared by the four participants – Nomalanga, Balu, Velile and Zoey – was also evident in the story shared by Mbali. She explained: *"The swearing from my mother pushed me into committing suicide. One day I locked myself in my room. I had stolen my grandmother's hypertension tablets and drank all of them. In my mind I was killing myself because I wanted to punish my parents and my grandmother for mistreating me"* (PD).

The participants' descriptions of how they decided to take their lives revealed that there was a pattern in the way violence and trauma had affected their lives. What was happening in their

lives suggest that their experiences as teenagers were stolen away from them because of their sexual orientation. They were made to suffer because they identified differently. Further, the above extracts highlight that “the oppression that queer youth experience impacts them in severe ways.” (Blackburn, 2004). Also, violence, victimisation, discrimination and childhood trauma seemed to have negatively affected the lives of these participants. With participants having unique youthful experiences that were characterised by different kinds of abuses by their parents/relatives at home, schoolmates and staff at school, and community members. In particular, physical violence and trauma experienced by these participants have had an impact in their decision to try to kill themselves. Therefore, the findings presented in this study demonstrate that the increased attempted suicide and self-harm reports were the results of high levels violence directed towards the participants. These findings are consistent with the literature that suggests that stress for LGBT people has an increasing impact and greater risks for depression, hopelessness, and suicidality when compared to heterosexual peers (Safren & Heimberg, 1999).

Results show that participants suffered different kinds of abuse because of their sexual identities. While some of the participants have attempted suicide, there is evidence that the adversities of the participants’ sexual identity did not result in death; the participants also develop resilience. Participants narrated that after being victims of violence and homophobia in their respective schools and communities, they also saw the need to assert their agency. They decided that they would take control and be agents of change by becoming the ones who exert power for change in their homes, schools and communities. For example, when participants were asked during the FGD about the roles they wanted to play in changing how lesbians are seen in their communities, their responses were clear and about involvement. Balu has been very strong despite everything that happened to her, her response was *“I couldn’t allow it to happen anymore. I have allowed people to decide who I am for far too long”* Also, Sthabile responded and stated that: *“I confidently believe I was born like this. It is impossible to teach anyone to be lesbian. I wish people could get more information before they say bad things about my sexuality. I am thankful to my grandmother for raising a girl that is not afraid to speak up even when the odds are against her. Now, I am stronger and want to fight back”* (PSS).

These extracts reveal how both Balu and Sthabile have chosen not to allow any person to victimise them. Though it is clear through the narratives that the participants have been allowing harassment to take place, but they were choosing not to take ‘it’ (the victimisation)

anymore. This highlights their willingness to fight back and not find themselves in a situation where they would be harassed and belittled anymore. What is evident from the participants' resilience in this study is their assertion and agency to fight against the institutions that oppress them (Blackburn, 2004), rather than changing their sexual identities.

6.11 Theme 10: Assertion and self-esteem: sport, art and healing

From their narratives, the participants in this study revealed their love for sport and art. Most participants seemed to have used these forms of sport to enable their personal agency and as a tool to lessen their negative feelings. The harassment, victimisation and discrimination they encounter at homes, in their communities and in their schools seemed only to have been numb if they lost themselves in intense physical activities. During the FGD, Thembisile reflected: *"I love soccer, it enables me to be in control of my life for a short while"* (PSS). Like Thembisile, Velile has been fully engaged in assisting young girls in the community to play soccer. *"Over the weekends I spend my spare time teaching young girls how to play ladies' soccer"*. She elaborated: *"After all, that I have endured growing up, I still believe that anything is possible for the youth if they are highly involved in sporting activities rather than being observers or drowning themselves in substance abuse"* (PSS). Sthabile explains how she has *"became the best soccer player. I loved and focused on playing soccer"*. Like the other three girls, Thembisile, Velile and Sthabile, Zaba also uses soccer and dance to escape her challenging world. Zaba explained: *"I joined the girls' soccer team. I fell in love with it. I trained every Wednesdays and Thursdays afternoon. I might explore playing soccer and dancing as my hobbies during my spare time"* (PS).

My analysis suggests that these participants were able to identify and use sport in lessening the pain within their challenging environments. While the other participants used soccer to as a tool to escape their pain, Yazile and Phakamile used art and dance reduce their pain Yazile described: *"I use my dance practice sessions as a tool to escape from my past"* (PSS). Phakamile also elaborates: *"I would like to be in the performing art because I want to communicate my thoughts through my talent. I love art because I use it as a skill to navigate my everyday life in my school and community"* (PSS). These extracts reveal that participants in this study were aware of the damage in their lives that could have been caused by their repressive conditions. They used physical activities that assisted them in regulating and redirecting negative emotions. By doing so, the participants increased their coping skills and thereby enhancing their performances.

Brown (2014) defines agency as ‘the sociocultural mediated capacity to act’ This is referring to people with the desire to change their circumstances, develop the ability to change their challenging environments by being initiative by regulating their everyday difficulties. Brown (2014) further affirms that individuals with a sense of agency take control by defining the terms and conditions of desired relationships by assigning significance, significance, or meanings to things and events (p. 2). As part of taking charge of her life, Sthabile declared: *“I would want to address the issue of people using derogatory words and negative comments about lesbians because it is rude and hurtful to the other person. If one hates and cannot accept lesbians, they rather keep quiet (hide it) than say hurtful things in front of other people to show off”* (GI). The extract revealed Sthabile’s renewed motivation, willingness and her ability to take control of her life which resulted in self-growth. Sthabile’s attitude towards life resonates with the sentiments of Brown (2014), who proposes that for an individual to claim a new identity it should not be a matter of changing oneself in a new way in the present time, rather to align one’s previous life story with one’s current situation.

Also, Brown’s statement about an individual claiming new identity is also evident when Phakamile and Sthabile took on the SGB members and their school principals, during the disciplinary hearings on their conduct. They both displayed increased assertiveness and confidence when addressing the teachers. Their self-assurance assisted them to overcome their fears and allowed them to challenge their situations within the hearing (Giddens, 2023; Cooper & Olson, 2020). By so doing, they began to take charge and be in control of their lives.

Moreover, the lack of support from some families, schools and community structures seemed to have affected some participants’ dreams and aspirations in this study. Thus, being driven and setting one’s goals requires a motivated individual who is willing to make a difference. Asked what change Bongiwe would want to see within her immediate structures, Bongiwe expounded: *“For people to stop hating lesbians and support them. I wish I can have peace of mind and be able to freely go anywhere I want like any other human being. You will never find a straight person living in fear for being straight. I want to live a fearless life, reclaim my freedom because it is sad that I must constantly look over your shoulder all the time”* (PSS). Words from the extract above exhibited Bongiwe’s commitment and the desire to live a fulfilling life. Her positive attitude made her to understand that it was her duty as an individual to be assertive and start by confronting the difficult situations in her life. Some participants in this study shared their views on how they wanted to change how they were perceived as lesbian

and used their renewed views to educate their families and communities about sexual identity. Sibusisiwe explained: *“I’m ready for a happy life I have told myself that I will live a life that makes me happy. I will start by ignoring all the negative things said about me regardless of how insensitive or negative they might be. I want to be happy and live the life that is true to myself” (PSS)*. The above extract evidently illustrates that some participants have made the decisions to have a positive outlook on life.

Yazile explained that *“...if I do what other people liked I would be living a lie; I’d be living to make them happy. I want to stop living so that I make other people happy” (PSS)*. The extract above confirmed that Yazile and other participants in this study understood that leading themselves might give them back the power that had been taken from them, to live lives that they have dreamt of from a young age.

Yazile further confirmed how her healing has been assisted about a particular space she identified as a start to her healing process. She explained: *“I have found a beautiful space where I would go and look at the beautiful natural setting to think about everything that has pained me in my life. I have been through a lot; I need tranquility” (PSS)*.

Apart from all the trials, negotiating their daily lives and self-growth, findings from this chapter revealed that there is a huge desire for the participants’ motivation to reclaim their lives by wanting to change how families and communities view them. All participants have ambitions and desires to be professional, have stable income and have families.



Figure 6. 4: Yazile's sanctuary, where only beauty exists.

The participants confirmed that the positive change should start with them having hope for their future and imagining themselves reaching out to the same people who are discriminating against, marginalising and harassing them. Most participants wanted to change the stories told about their lives. The willingness for peaceful environments, families and communities, where their sexuality is recognised, was pivotal from the participants' point of view.

6.12 Chapter conclusion

Chapter six firstly, gave the meanings and understanding about the experiences of the participants. Findings demonstrate some of the participants had positive support while others were unsupported by their families. Family members and the immediate structures were frequently represented as the factors that negatively impact the lives of the youth, while the lesbian youth were portrayed as sometimes vulnerable and having to constantly negotiate their lives. What was evident with their experiences were the difficulties they faced in challenging the traditions, labels and prejudices that exist in the schooling, home and community environments. Secondly, the findings highlight the perceived insignificance of lesbian learner issues to the members of the communities they live in teachers and the belief that sexuality is not the concern of all stakeholders responsible for the up-bringing and the well-being of the lesbian learners, as well. A simple pronouncement

revealed through the findings suggest that if one is identifying differently, that should stir a level of apprehension and judgement from those that view themselves as ‘normal’. Though findings suggest that participants’ everyday experiences are impacted by other people’s choices about their sexual identities rather than theirs, their exposure to hostile environments seemed to have forced them to devise strategies for coping in their daily lives. Findings suggest that participants became agentic and did not allow their everyday experiences to be impacted by other people’s choices about their sexual identities rather than theirs. They also re-counted that although they live their lives under oppressive conditions, change in how they are viewed needs to start with them and the choices that they make, rather than being victims all the time.

Lastly, this chapter highlights the participants' efforts to build supportive communities and engage in peer mentoring which in this study is interpreted through the combined lenses of queer theory and intersectionality. The participants’ actions represent resistance against normative constraints and negative experiences and address the multifaceted nature of their marginalisation. Their strategies resonate with educational research that advocates for inclusive practices that acknowledge and support diverse identities within academic institutions. Using queer and intersectionality lenses to analyse participants narratives assisted in giving more nuanced understanding of the systemic issues that were constantly at play and the resilience strategies employed by lesbian learners. This theoretical integration did not only enrich the analysis of the data but also informed the proposed development of more inclusive educational policies and practices.

The following chapter is a reflective chapter that presents the detailed and critical processes of the researcher in shaping the outcomes of the study.

CHAPTER SEVEN REFLEXIVITY: THE PROCESS

7.1 Introduction

The motivation for this chapter is to uncover critical moments of reflexivity in my doctoral research journey by integrating my personal experience with analytical depth and it is essential for demonstrating self-awareness and critical engagement in this research. This chapter further presents my positionality as a researcher, the methodological reflexivity, the challenges I experienced, the actions I took, the positives, biases and the attitudes that I carried with me while conducting the study. I progressed from being a secondary teacher who had become concerned about the lives of homosexual learners in my school, the stories they told me about their lives and the relationship I had with my participants, as I moved into the role of being a researcher.

The challenges I faced during this process were not only because I was a teacher who was passionate about the issues of social justice, but also because I was a researcher who undertook social research that affected young people within families and other institutions in society. Exploring the experiences of young lesbian youth within the educational setting revealed that homophobia had affected all my participants in my study. After I had recognised towards the end of the process the extent of homophobic utterances and discrimination directed to the participants, I was filled with deep concern for any other lesbian youth whose stories would never be told. During the whole process of engaging in this research, I came to recognise that the experiences my participants went through were unfair, biased and uncalled for. It was difficult to accept that homophobia was very rife in society, more importantly in schools. The only way I had to challenge this is by telling the young people's stories, consequently empowering other young people who might be going through the same but did not get a chance to tell their stories. When the process started, I understood that the research process might be influenced by the participants' my subjectivity; as a result, this might also influence the research process and its findings. According to Anderson (2008) and Houghton et al. (2013), determining whether the interpretation of the participants' accounts is truly based on their account is always a complex matter. This chapter gives these accounts by not merely reporting the "facts" of the research but having to constantly construct interpretations about what I know, what I have seen, whilst at the same time questioning how I arrived at those interpretations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). It is crucial to note that, whilst I report on the process, an element of subjectivity is inevitable because of an incident that occurred during the process of data gathering. This incident raised ethical and legal implications, which as a

researcher I first felt was beyond my powers to deal with. I was faced with the dilemma of how I was going to respond to such violation of the right of the participant. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) claim that these ethical dilemmas and issues forms part of the researcher's everyday practice in qualitative research. I intend though not to be so self-analytical that this is at the expense of focusing on the research participants (Finlay, 2002).

7.2 My positionality

Examine how your identity and experiences may have influenced interactions with research participants. Consider power dynamics, rapport-building, and any biases that could affect data collection and interpretation. I was seeing innocent young girls falling victims of harassment every day at school, prompting me to do something to find out more about other lesbian youths' experiences and whether their experiences were the same as those in my school. From my own experience as a member of a school management team (SMT), each time a case of a gay or lesbian learner was reported, instead of it potentially being a matter of providing support for the learner, it was automatically assumed to be a matter of an offence committed by the learner, at which the key issue was checking how much was the 'influencing' and the 'corrupting' of the other learners by the gay and lesbian learners. Also, such behaviour was deemed a level four (close to the highest level of offence) in the school code of conduct, which could result in the expulsion of these learners. This seating was also important in helping to schedule meetings with the 'accused' learners' parents for his/her discipline. In every meeting that I attended, I was left trying to defend these learners against abuse from the teachers regarding the decisions taken because of their sexual identities. In specific other cases, the school governing body (SGB) had to be part of the meeting when dealing with cases of disciplining these learners. Despite crying and begging from parents and learners, the decision was always negative, and it was the victims who were treated with contempt and severe cruelty.

These events gave me a sense of purpose in undertaking a study that highlighted the experiences of self-identified lesbian youth in rural and township settings. Though the study was on a small scale, I know that having these young girls tell their own stories, in their own way, would make a positive contribution to knowledge produced and give voices to other voiceless lesbian youth. This study, therefore, is a platform where black lesbian youth shared their experiences as a proactive means of addressing contexts of violence, abuse and humiliation, thus promoting peace.

Providing a practical picture of how my positionality was is critical because who and what I

did during the process of this study may have influenced the outcome of the study. As it has

been mentioned above, the motivation to undertake this study was the challenges I had experienced as a teacher in a school. When addressing the issue of my positionality, firstly, I need to talk about being an ‘outsider’ researching a group that identified differently from me. The relationship between myself and the participants became crucial and posed intense ethical problems that arose during the process of data collection. Discussing the role of an ‘outsider’ in researching a marginalised group, Bridges (2001) states this should be clear and should operate under appropriate ethical consideration and on the clear grounds of human respect and caring. In other words, this means that engaging in this study should contribute to the empowerment and the understanding of the researcher and researched, and to the betterment of the societal ills within their wider communities.

Secondly, while my presence in the interview sessions felt easy to me as a researcher, because I thought participants would view me as a black South African, they did not see me as one of them because of differences of age and sexuality. At first, I reflected that similarity in those areas would create a sense of comfort, building the spontaneous relationship right after the introductions with the participants I was interviewing were made (Fitt, 2018). However, I explained that I came as a researcher, and I always wanted my participants to be comfortable around me. These concerns about age, sexuality and power difference that came with being a teacher always worried. As a result of these differences, I had to address differences and similarity in discussion before we started the interviews. Culture and tradition also posed a problem at the beginning because by the mere fact that I was an older woman, a teacher and identified differently from them, automatically compelled them to treat me as a mother by being always respectful. I emphasised the importance of calling each other on a first name basis. While calling each other by our names might seem to build an easy and immediate comfort, participants were uncomfortable calling me outright by my name. The discomfort was a result of the culture and the power relations, because of my being a teacher. In African culture, the Zulu culture to be precise, children do not call their elders by their first names. Noticing that participants would be reluctant to share information that was private and personal, that they perceived could harm their reputation, I offered to be the first one to share information about my life, challenges I had encountered growing up and about my family. I knew that my participants needed to be comfortable to share their experiences. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest the need for a rapid and necessary process for the interviewer to create positive relationships during in-depth interviews. They describe this process as essential, since it assists in building trust and respect between the interviewer and the interviewees. By

sharing my personal information and experiences about myself, I was hoping to establish a safe and comfortable environment for the participants to be able to speak without being scared to be judged.

One aspect was the participants' anxiety that, because I was a teacher, information about them might go back to their schools. That was addressed by emphasising that the information gathered through their stories would be for the purpose of the study and their name would not be used or anything that might reveal their identity. Only after going through all that process did they feel comfortable. I had to go through this process in each session. That eventually created a mutual relationship. Further, I assured them that working in the study might give them power to assist many other black lesbian youths, whose stories would not be heard. I guaranteed the participants that whatever they shared would neither be questioned nor challenged by me or any other person. After this, we were ready to start with our interviews.

Lastly, I want to highlight that no matter who is conducting research on whom, the role of researchers is to probe into the participants' lives when exploring a phenomenon. Therefore, the qualities of a good interviewer, for example, should be listening, being sensitive and compassionate about the information shared. This understanding assisted me to form the building block of my relationship with my participants. Such qualities demanded honesty, reciprocity and trust in me to be able to get the data that formed the essential part of the study undertaken. From my experience as a teacher, I know that I incorporated these qualities and abilities in my everyday engagement with learners as critical features in my career. Consequently, I believed that applying such qualities was critical during the interviewing of my participants.

7.3 Reflexivity in methodology

To explore what the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth were in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa, narrative inquiry was used as an appropriate methodology in this project to explore the experiences of lesbian youth, how they constructed and navigated their sexual identities in oppressive environments. I sought to find what their experiences were, why they had those experiences and how they went about in their everyday lives negotiating their sexual identities. It was important for me to employ the most appropriate approach that resonates with my world view whilst ensuring that the intended

objective of the research is achieved. In-depth-interviews, photo voice and diaries were used as methods of eliciting data. There was commonality between me and my participants regarding gender and race, which allowed a good relationship based on good understanding and a facilitated bond; this resulted in rich data being gathered. To do research about these lived experiences required consent from parents, legal guardians, and the participants themselves. After I was granted ethical clearance to start collecting data, I knew that taking account of my participants' views about their everyday lives and their experiences within the environments they came from could be challenging. From the start to the finish, participants encountered challenges, some from remembering the most painful moments in their lives, such as attempted suicide, punishment, and sexual assault.

Given that human beings are by nature story tellers, I engaged in this study with the understanding that the participants need to narrate stories about their lives in the way they understood and felt comfortable doing. Telling my story at the beginning of the study was to create a rapport between myself and my participants because of the sensitivity of the phenomenon researched. My ability to gather data through stories depended on the environment I created for my participants to be relaxed and comfortable. Both I and the participants had to be active listeners. Being open and transparent about our relationship was essential and the methodology used allowed the participants to be comfortable and to share their stories as they understood them.

In this project, all of us (participants and I) shared our stories amongst each other and we had many learning experiences that were compelled by the nature of the sessions that the study took. These sessions took longer than expected because of the number of sessions we took during the data gathering period. I learnt a lot from the participants' experiences, such as understanding how these youths of the 21st century viewed their world under very oppressive environments. This allowed me to understand the kind of safe spaces that the participants needed to negotiate their lives and the support they needed. I also learnt why they navigate their lives in the ways that they do. This study further assisted in enhancing the participants' critical thinking skills. In life generally, it is very crucial for a person to be a critical thinker. But even as young as they were and living in stressful and repressive settings, these participants used their critical thinking skills to defend and fight for their rights.

In this study, participants demonstrated their special responsibility to their neighbours, the other young lesbian girls who are constantly victimised based on their sexual identities, by challenging their oppressive environments. A few of the participants in this study tried to commit suicide because of the challenges they faced every day. Despite that, these young people became great resources with a very clearly defined future. The months I spent with them were remarkable because the study became a relevant link between the participants and the researcher's lived experiences. Through this study, participants were able to engage with themselves and share their experiences which was a critical point in the journey for each participant's healing process. They were also able to reflect about their purpose in life. Because of the appropriateness and relevance of the methodological design, I hope each participant's story helped other lesbian youth, who are going through the same challenging experiences.

Since the project was about exploring the lived experiences of lesbian youth, I needed to interview participants in spaces where they felt safe and comfortable to talk. Given the very high level of homophobia amongst South African people and the disturbingly high level of sexual violence in our communities (Ngidi, 2020), researching a group of black self-identifying lesbian youth required that I protected their identities as possible as I could. Understanding the extent of sexual violence and its implications for the participants, I ensured I found spaces far away from the participants' homes and communities. This decision created conducive environments for participants to narrate their stories without fearing being seen.

Uncovering the extent of homophobic attacks and abuse and how these have affected the participants was heart-breaking. At the end of data gathering I concluded that the acts of violence and discrimination will continue to affect these participants lives because South African people have a history of violence rather than of building conditions and spaces of peace, if nothing is done about homophobic violence. For me, this research process formed part of the complexity of narratives of my participants. Since their lives are a matter of growth toward an imagined future, doing such research, retelling their stories and making attempts for them to re-live their stories was the best process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

7.4 A perilous process

There was a very disturbing violation of one of the participants' rights just as was about to finish the interviewing sessions. This experience compelled me to halt this participant's sessions until she decided whether she would continue or pull out of the study. Her situation

was so bad that it affected both of us and the continuation of this data collection process was paused for a couple of months. I struggled with emotions and a sense of blame for interfering with the lives of these participants. I continually fought the feeling that somehow, I was responsible for the rape in some way. In reality, I knew the project had nothing to do with her ordeal, but the reality of cruelty and barbaric actions gave me mental and physical paralysis.

Another struggle was that I was the first person she contacted hours after her violation. I knew she was looking up to me to listen and comfort her. How does one comfort a child that has been raped because she identified differently? What gave her rapist the right to force himself on her even when she said no? What was I expected to do when I was miles away from her? These and more questions clouded my mind. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue, there are numerous unexpected situations that a researcher can encounter that may result in unexpected and adverse consequences, which are unpredictable and thus unable to plan for. When she phoned, she cried uncontrollably and kept on asking why it was her, did I think she deserved that kind of punishment? I had already involved the participant in a process of asking about her personal life, her challenges and her hopes about her future as a lesbian youth. Taking part in this project meant that she trusted me with her vulnerability about her sexuality. As she was talking, I understood that her purpose in phoning me and arranging to meet me was because we had reached a point of safety that allowed her to trust me when she was sexually violated. I had heard about many incidents of rape in South Africa, but my experience around handling this issue was non-existent. I was far away from home on a work-related commitment. What was the safest way of supporting her without further victimising her? I heard in her voice that she needed my assistance, but I did not know how much of it she was expecting from me. In between the hysterical crying, I explained that she needed to talk to me only if she felt safe to do so. I promised her that I would listen. This is one of the tenets of a narrative inquiry, for the researcher to listen first to the practitioner telling his or her story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These researchers termed this process as “the mutual construction of the research relationship”, a relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories (p. 4).

I needed to be clearer about what happened without being judgemental and emotional. I felt I needed to be strong for her although I was emotional. I tried to control my feelings because I thought they might otherwise block what she was telling me. I am not suggesting that a man and a father could not feel pain in this situation, but as a woman and mother I felt pain, because

I could understand more the pain of being sexually violated. I failed not to break down in front of her. At that point, I did not need any kind of emotional roller-coaster; but only guidance on how to support her to ease the pain I could sense from her laboured narration.

Since almost all violence is criminal, her ordeal obviously posed an ethical and legal challenge. I could not easily involve other people since I was far away; I had to seek her consent to call a close friend of mine, who was going to take over for me. That was very challenging. I explained to her that she needed assistance with transportation to the clinic, since her family did not want to assist by taking her, and later to report to the police. Our options were very limited. She initially did not want to involve the police because she feared further victimisation. I explained that she had been brutally attacked and raped; she needed both the clinic for tests and the police station to report her case. She stated that she was afraid because her perpetrator was a well-known figure in her community. My heart sank when I heard that after she had been violated, she could not seek help for her justice because her community does not support her sexual identity. I had to convince her to report it, eventually she agreed. The disclosure that she was sexually violated became an ethical dilemma because as the first person she talked to about the incident, the procedure in South African courts is to summon that person to testify as a witness in a court. In my view, my help was limited because, if I testified, that would be a breach of the researcher-participant confidentiality, and this action would have exposed the participant.

My friend took her to the clinic to report her case. This incident left no doubt in my mind that, in our country, the constitutional rights of homosexual people are violated, and nothing is done by the law to protect the victims. The participant's experience genuinely uncovered evidence of a planned homophobic attack on an innocent girl. She shared how her rapist kept on reminding her that she was a girl and not a man that she was claiming to be. The participant's ordeal highlighted the kind of moral problems LGBT people typically face on daily basis.

From her account of what happened, I could pick up from her voice that it was not just violence that pained her, but it was what was left to feel after that violence had stopped. What was evident from my participant's narration after her ordeal was not just the action itself, but a very deep sense of loss and devastation of her body and soul. Her narration about what specifically happened was this one big identifiable violation that I felt, even though I was not raped. She stated that she was fine until that gruesome experience reminded her of her previous challenges

and an afternoon when she was almost raped as she walked back home from the soccer practice. She explained how that experience had almost ruined her life. She blamed herself for all the bad things happening in her life. Hearing her blaming herself for what happened to her made me very emotional. She was too young to have had such traumatic experiences. She asked me why she had to go through so many hardships and how come her life was a struggle from one bad experience to the other. From the other side of the phone, I heard the extent of the damage the rape had caused in her life.

I made a series of calls to her from then on, to check her progress about the process of taking her medication to protect her from human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). During these calls I completely avoided the subject of the last session. Two months after her rape I made a different call. I needed to find out if she was comfortable to continue with the project. I knew it had to be spoken about because I did not want to make decisions for her. After telling her about the purpose of the call, she was silent for some time. I allowed her enough time to make her decision. Eventually, she told me that she was feeling much better but still bruised emotionally. If I still wanted her to continue interviewing her, she would be ready. She stated that sharing her horrific experience might be useful to other girls like her. I assured her that if she felt uncomfortable, I would understand, and she could discontinue with the study. When the call ended, we had agreed on and confirmed our next session. Days before that session were a living hell for me. How was I going to handle the face-to-face two-hour session interviewing her after her dreadful experience? I was scared to meet with her. The day arrived and she was there on time waiting for me.

On that day she asked if she could start by telling me everything that happened on that Sunday night. Allowing the participant to talk and share her painful experience showed me that she should be free to talk to me. I was a human being; I felt pain too. People who have been raped have described this as a worse ordeal than other violent crimes, because it makes one feel traumatized and needing to relieve the experience for as long as they can remember. During this session, the participant alluded to these words and stated that she did not know whether she could say she was a survivor or a victim, because both these terms fully captured her traumatic experience. She quickly stated that for the purpose of the session she preferred to be a survivor because her experience, painful as it was, taught her more about the dangers of identifying differently. She had heard of numerous cases of LGBT people who were raped and did not survive, but otherwise she felt that her case was different; it could have been worse.

The participant in this study appeared to have been trying to positively handle the painful feelings and memories after her rape.

The participant also told me that the difficulty was that she knew the rapist and at times she felt unsure if her experience was premeditated or was an instant thought of meeting her that early morning. The participant blamed going to the party and to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as the reason why the man raped her. She described the rape as a devastating incident, which violated her basic human right and her expectations of personal integrity to live in a safe world. She further stated how the whole experience had caused damage to her self-esteem and sense of identity, but the support she received through sharing her experience was the reason she shared her experience and was willing to continue participating in the project. She mentioned how talking about her experience was the start of her healing process. She shared how she did not want her experience to disempower her, since her sexuality had been damaged as well. Her desire to take her power back meant that she had won, despite the bad experience she went through. The participant's determination to reclaim her power appeared to be the motivation for her to heal and stop the rape incident from negatively impacting her life.

This participant revealed that the decisions she made about sharing her suffering were also influenced by her seeing the perpetrator walking free, even though she had reported the case. Her story seemed to imply that the rape victims/survivors must fight to take back their power from their offenders. The fact that, days after her case was reported, her rapist was not arrested revealed the whole issue of the recognition of LGBT people by the law in South Africa and the protection of their sexual orientation. The participant reported to the police, but because of the wide gulf between theory and practice in the application of the law (Gomes, 2009), LGBT people continue to be marginalised despite the constitution granting gender equality, gender equity and democratic rights to all South African citizens. What the participant went through is what Gomes (2009) views as a relevant example on how sexual violence against lesbian women and their discrimination go unnoticed or not considered as the subject of public debate.

Yes, I was an 'outsider', but there was no escaping from these issues of violence. To be a true researcher means I cannot avoid controversial issues, where there would be no strong emotions and no people doing wrong things to others. This project will assist in making people understand that when these lesbian youths are growing up and being called '*isitabane*' and '*moffie*', it is a way that is used by heterosexual people to police the sexual identities of those

viewed as identifying differently from then. What I understand about homophobia is that one does not need to be lesbian to be damaged by it. During the process of data gathering I encountered ongoing emotional crises when I was faced with the participants' injustices. My powerlessness to change their situation left me angry, sad, guilty, hopeless, depleted and fearful (Pio & Sing, 2016). The results of homophobic actions are harmful to both the researcher and the researched. The hatred and discrimination displayed by some heterosexual people towards LGBT people show that they are scared that they themselves can be called gay or lesbian by others, hence, the discrimination of homosexual people. They opt to humiliate and put down others to protect themselves.

In the end, we started and continued with the interviews as planned. Sometimes the sessions served as the re-activation of her traumatic experience. Whenever she shared her experiences, she would be emotionally triggered by a word, or remembrance. We would cry together, and I would comfort her by giving her a hug. She explained how sometimes these sad feelings were like the intrusions of memories of that day, how these occasionally forced her to go back and relive her horrific experience. She would sometimes sit there and stare into space with tears rolling down her face. Her experience seemed to have left her withdrawn and traumatised. She would tell me that sometimes she felt no pain but only numbness. During this time, I would hug her and felt overwhelmed by the weight of her experience. The two sessions ended up being five and many hours of emotional drain. I am happy we continued because eventually she agreed to talk to a professional practitioner. She told me it was going to be a process, but she was able to speak about it without crying. Just before I completed analysing data, I also broke down. My supervisor suggested that I also sought professional help. The whole process was deeply traumatic. Both of us went through counselling, the outlet that made it possible for me to finish this study. What I went through is what Sarason (1988) points out in his autobiography when he states that the individual well-being is deeply intertwined with community and societal contexts. He emphasises that personal psychological experiences cannot be fully understood in isolation but are profoundly influenced by the larger social environment where individuals live. This perspective became the important when in considering both personal and communal factors in understanding the participants' psychological. As a researcher it was difficult for me to make a clear distinction between my work as a researcher and as an ordinary human being going through her emotions.

7.5 Leaving our footprints

This study was never an easy one. I found myself engaged deeply in research work in the context of sexual violence, where the young lesbian youths were marginalised, vulnerable and seeking my expertise in the field where I had none. Ngidi (2020) states that there almost one million children in South Africa who report having experienced some form of sexual abuse

before turning 18 years of age. I continued with this research knowing very well that I had to insert myself fully even after that rape case because even when I knew that I could not involve myself in their personal lives, the fact that I was researching these young lesbian youths' lives meant that I was fully involved. The question was to what extent was I supposed to enmesh myself into my participant's ordeal. As a mother, human being and a researcher, I felt it was the right thing for me to become an outlet if it would ease my participant's pain. Since this study was concerned about the experiences of the marginalised group, my duty was to ensure that I finished this work. Having to listen to 12 different stories of my participants was not a task. This chapter allowed me to give a deep reflexive engagement for what it meant for me, when I had to re-live their stories, hours after I had finished interviewing them. Re-living their stories called for some kind of subjectivity because I was also fully involved in their stories. This chapter has become an outlet for me, since the whole experience of being a researcher left me involved both physically and emotionally. As a woman, the issues of safety and of harm for these participants came naturally; the decision to assist her in making the decision to report the matter seemed to follow as essential. It is the type of work that required me to be deeply connected with the processes that took place as the study progressed. Indeed, it was because of my research position that I was particularly interested in assisting my participant to seek legal help. Specifically, it became my responsibility to make her understand that her horrible experience deserved legal action and assistance from professional people. In penning out this chapter, I discovered how trauma is constantly triggered every time I had to write about my experience during the interview sessions. These emotions will remain way after this dissertation is finished. For my participants and me, parts of what we have experienced during this process will remind us of all the challenges we went through in for this work to be completed.

I end this chapter with questions that I struggled to address as a researcher (Patnaik 2013) such as, what is the influence of my personal and/or professional history on the chosen research topic? How has my positioning in terms of gender, culture and professional and/or personal background influenced the choice of methodology, methods of data collection and the process of data analysis? What influence could my emotional phase during the study have hindered the whole research process? How did my background and professionalism affect my relationship with my participants? What different roles might I have played while working together with my participant? Was I competent enough to achieve the intended objectives of this study?

This journey was not just a brief and rapid explanation of the whole process of this study, but an in-depth scrutiny of my role and that of my participants in the construction of new knowledge, detailing how I arrived at some choices, and how the resulting knowledge is instrumental in shaping the world. This is in line with Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) view about how stories have formed everyone, and they should be used to make new fictions, new narratives (p. 1) As such, undertaking this research was not an event, but a process. Allowing my voice to be heard through this rigorous process of entering in this research and negotiating my positionality throughout this dissertation validated the inter-subjectivity paradigm of qualitative research work. The issue of how I met and came to know the participants can raise concerns and can also affect the whole project. The relationship created with the participants was significant and constituted a fundamental element of how the whole process was to be conducted. My identity as an old 'straight' researcher and a teacher was associated with power dynamics because the participants perceived me as someone different from them in numerous ways. My presumed positionality due to these layers called for a constant check of how these layers might influence and affect how the project was received by the participants and the importance of creating well defined relations when creating the new stories.

Additionally, my engagement with lesbian learners first highlighted the pervasive challenges they encounter, including discrimination, marginalisation, and a lack of representation within the school and society. These observations have emphasised the necessity for educational environments that are both inclusive and affirming of diverse sexual orientations. Second, the use of queer theory became key in highlighting the need for challenging normative constructs of sexuality and gender, to advocate for the deconstruction of heteronormativity within educational contexts. This perspective will help in encouraging the recognition and validation of diverse sexual identities within the schooling system and promoting an educational culture that respects and affirms lesbian learners. Third, intersectionality assisted in understanding how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, intersect to create unique experiences of oppression or privilege for participants in this study. For lesbian learners, this means acknowledging how their sexual orientation, in conjunction with other identities influences their educational experiences and the navigation of their sexual identity. By intertwining personal reflections with these theoretical frameworks, a more nuanced understanding of lesbian learners' experiences emerges. Last, applying queer theory and intersectionality intended to foster curricula and institutional cultures that celebrate diversity.

In conclusion, combining personal insights with theoretical perspectives facilitated a holistic approach that will support lesbian learners, ensuring educational environments that are equitable, inclusive, and conducive to the well-being and success of all learners.

7.6 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I described the process of engaging in this research work. It revealed how emotional, consuming and draining this study was for my participants and me. Both I and my participants had to navigate our lives for the betterment of the intended objectives of the study. In general, this chapter outlined how close to the problems of the participants a qualitative researcher is, the emotions and traumatic journey that constitute these experiences. In this chapter, I discussed how dependency and mutual support connected all of us when the circumstances demanded that. Although the aim of this project was not to reveal the shocking and painful conditions that some of the participants went through, the authenticity of their misery and grief of their stories made them who they are. To write about how they navigated their lives daily, bore tension at home, escaped expulsions at school and faced ridicule in their communities, demanded a deep engagement of how all these factors would have affected both the process and the end product of the study. Since the participants' lived experiences explored in this study are their own personal stories, told in the way they understood, it became crucial how these experiences were captured and analysed as the participants' lived experiences within their contexts.

The next chapter presents a detailed summary of the findings of the study and the significance of the study.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in township and rural contexts, in KwaZulu-Natal and why they have these experiences, given the widespread homophobic violence reported by scholars within different education settings (DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Knotts & Grigorio, 2011). The focus of the study was informed by the increased homophobia within schools and in society. I was also interested in conducting this study because, as a teacher in an all-black public school in the township for the past 13 years, I spent most of these teaching years surrounded by teenage girls. During this period, I witnessed black lesbian girl learners being victimised by some teachers in school. Some had to leave school because of their different sexual identities, resulting in some cutting short their education journeys. Prioritising black self-identified lesbian school-going youth was important, because black lesbian youth in South Africa are caught in a tight space, in which patriarchy, through power and control, exerts its force over these girls. This study therefore sought to highlight this by choosing to focus on black South African youth who identified themselves as lesbian. My concern about identity was crucial since research has revealed that identities are not simply “free-floating” but are controlled by numerous factors, such as being able to access resources, and also by social structures, such as the school, the family, the community and the state, which become key factors in regulating practices, either formally or informally (Connell, 1987; Youdell, 2005).

I chose township and rural contexts because I was motivated by the perception that these contexts are more homophobic compared to urban locations (Reygan & Lynette, 2014); Tucker et al., 2014; Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Nel & Judge, 2008; Muholi, 2004). My intention was to understand the nature of the experiences in what I thought was likely to be a very homophobic environment. Also, as argued in Chapter Two, there is a paucity of studies that detailed the lived experiences of black lesbian youth in South Africa; this study was relevant in seeking to gather the accounts of their lives as informed by their social, cultural and personal experiences.

In this chapter, I firstly outline the study's main findings according to the original research questions of the thesis. Secondly, I give sections on the significance and recommendations of the study. Then, the final section presents the conclusion of this dissertation.

There were three critical questions which I intended to answer when undertaking this research. These research questions were motivated by the continued violations of LGBT people at the hands of men, who often affirm their masculinity through violence in trying, it seems, to prove that lesbian women and girls were women, not men (Matebeni, 2011; Pakade, 2013). The study was directed by these three critical research questions. Below, I discuss how each of these research questions have been answered through the findings of this study:

1. What are the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts, and why do they have these experiences?
2. How do black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities?
3. What are the various ways in which black self-identified lesbian youth negotiate their sexual identities?

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm which values multiple interpretations, and which was appropriate in providing important insights into my phenomenon. This was a qualitative study, linked to the qualitative approach. I used narrative inquiry, because I wanted to understand and inquire into experiences of the lesbian youth. I sought to present the young people's lived experiences from their own perspectives. In particular, I saw this methodology as suitable when addressing the issue of complexity of the issues of sexuality and the experiences of the lesbian youth.

Toward addressing the intended objectives of the study, 12 black self-identified lesbian youth of school going age in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa, were interviewed. Data was generated using in-depth interviews, photovoice and diaries to address the research questions. The participants also engaged in focus group discussions as a process of photo presentation. In addition, thematic data analysis was used, and the themes and sub-themes were developed from the generated data.

8.1.1 Research question one

What are the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth schooling in KwaZulu-Natal township and rural contexts, and why do they have these experiences?

In Chapter Five, detailed descriptions of the participants' lived personal experiences are outlined in storied form. I utilised narrative inquiry, which allows for stories to be told, since they serve as powerful vehicle to bring forth people's lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013). Through the participants' stories, it was revealed that their lives are interconnected to numerous social categories and their experiences varied depending on their spaces, such as homes, schools, churches and in their communities. Participants' narratives further revealed many hostile experiences they have encountered in their lives' paths. Some of these experiences have been very challenging such that some of the participants nearly lost their lives.

The findings of this study suggested that these youths have had painful and dehumanising experiences, consisting of different forms of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence based on their sexual identities. These experiences were either verbal or physical violence from family members, schools and communities. Most negative attitudes towards the lesbian youth were rooted in misunderstanding of what their sexual identities meant, cultural and religious beliefs and perceptions about homosexuality as unnatural or 'un-African'. Findings suggested that it was mainly because of powerful and dominant notions of culture and religion circulating within the various spaces where the participants found themselves and the history of complicated imperialism relations that South Africa has inherited during and after apartheid (Hoard, 2000; Msibi, 2010; Tucker, 2009) that they had such negative experiences. The findings revealed what Msibi (2010) calls the legacy of apartheid and the articulated ideas about sexuality in South Africa that still exist. What was common and experienced by participants that served as a unifying factor for them was the imposed injury of dignity upon them, as a result of their sexual identities. Because of the complexity and the history of LGBT work, the participants' experiences revealed that their pain and suffering did not only emanate from poverty or their powerlessness, but from their how their sexuality was viewed, as invisible in the communities where they live (Makhaye, 2019). Participants in this study were prevented through societal structures from openly expressing their sexuality; as a result, they were denied full moral citizenship, dignity and self-worth based on their sexual identities (Makhaye, 2019).

The discrimination of the participants “took the form of violence which was generated by prejudice and hatred” (Judge & Nel, 2008, p. 89).

In addition, it became clear in this study that the participants were continually victimised by their parents, schoolteachers, schoolmates and community members. Their sufferings often went unnoticed and sometimes were not reported to the police authorities because they feared secondary discrimination. In one case where their abuse was reported, the perpetrator was never charged because of the connections they have with police officials. Perpetrators often blamed the participants for violence and discrimination because they saw the participants as disgraced and misbehaving youth; occasionally they were even accused of teaching other youth to behave in the same way. Findings revealed that some participants feared using healthcare facilities, attending churches, or even seeking help and support from their community members because of further harassment. Instead, some endured their pain in silence and became withdrawn and suicidal, putting their lives at risk for depression.

Despite the South African Constitution being one of the most recognised constitutions in the world pertaining to sexual rights of the LGBT population, findings of this study indicate that there is a huge discrepancy in terms of the practical promotion and safeguarding of these rights. Participants in this study were aware of their constitutional rights, but they were not free to exercise and communicate their feelings freely. Their constitutional rights were infringed upon, and it seems like not much has been done by relevant stakeholders to address the violence and discrimination of LGBT youth based on sexual identity, especially those from poor communities. If discrimination and harassment of these participants based on their sexual orientation is not addressed in all social structures, this might rob them of the opportunities available to all South African citizens. The participants need to be free to voice their concerns and engage in relationships of their choice. In sum, the findings in this study showed that experiences shared by the participants revealed that the participants are still marginalised and not accepted in the communities they come from. It is evident that some people have both the motivation and the implicit permission to discriminate or to be violent toward any homosexual people if it suits them. Therefore, participants in this study were socially excluded and they experienced high levels of violent attacks and discrimination; these experiences have shaped how they lived their lives in many different contexts. It can be argued that the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts were extremely negative and violent in nature and cannot be separated from what Matebeni (2013) describes as the broader

context of high levels of sexual violence and violence directed against women specifically. Thus, the participants needed to constantly be aware of their surroundings and negotiate their identities.

In addition, the findings revealed that victimisation of participants took place in many settings such as schools, churches and public settings, where they sometimes faced expulsion from homes, schools and churches. The participants explained how they occasionally failed to report injustices they encountered from these settings because they feared continued discrimination based on their sexual identity. Apart from finding themselves in oppressive environments, the participants stated that the aim of discrimination was to bring shame on them and to diminish their characters. The participants' stories clearly revealed that shame, humiliation, stigmatisation and guilt contributed to the withdrawal episodes and suicidal attempts that some participants attempted in the quest of self-punishment. Sexual violence is a violation of fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, to be free from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and the right to bodily integrity, dignity and self-determination (Bauer, 2020; Moore, 2019).

Though the findings of this study revealed that participants experienced hardships every day of their lives, there were few participants whose families were supportive of their sexual identities, even within homophobic communities. This support was offered and experienced at the participants' homes, however, outside these environments, these participants often had to fend for themselves and were forced by circumstances to defend who they are. The participants pointed out that they were enthusiastic about the support they received from some of the family members, because they only experienced a fraction of safety within their surrounds. The evidence is that, despite some degree of support from a few of their family members, the sexuality of the participants was constantly seen as a threat to the social order (Amnesty International, 2001). These participants were quick to point out that the support they received did not mean that there were fewer challenges and a warm embrace of their sexuality everywhere they went. What it meant was that stigmatisation, discrimination, and social marginalisation and exclusion continued to impede their access to the families they love, the schools they wanted to attend, the churches of their choice, and, most importantly, the freedom to exercise their rights about sexuality.

What factors seem to have led to this abusive treatment? From the findings, it was clear that township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa have ideas about sexuality that are heavily entrenched in patriarchy and that place strong emphasis on culture and tradition. The participants were blamed for bringing shame to their families and to dead parents and for disobeying cultural and traditional norms by engaging in same-sex relationships. They were, for example, asked how they were going to fulfil their cultural expectations of marrying and having children if they were engaging in same-sex relationships. Christians, on the other side, understood engaging in a same-sex relationship as an ‘ungodly’ act. Anyone who is viewed differently needs cleansing and purging of the evil spirits. Culture and religion appeared to have been used to oppress participants in this study, attempting to force them to change their sexuality and become “straight”. From family members to teachers and Christian people, a lot of justifications were used to validate oppression and discrimination of lesbian youth, such as that it is un-Christian, un-African and a white disease (Makhaye, 2019). This is in line with Cong & Wu (1998) assertion that individual identity development is dictated by the principles of the larger society’s values, and, as such, sexual minorities are marked as abnormal and unaccepted. In this case, both culture and Christianity tend to regulate and police sexual identities. According to Msibi (2010), both these institutions generally support and uphold patriarchy. For these participants, both culture and religion were used as regulatory systems which produced normative behaviour and in the maintenance of normative behaviour (Msibi, 2010). Findings confirmed that black lesbian youth in South Africa schools are still caught up in environments where patriarchy, through power and control, wields its force over the participants’ lives.

A frequent reason given for the abusive mistreatment by those who carried it out was that they were trying to be boys. The indignation seems to have been thus around the violation of gender expectations, that they were wrongly claiming male entitlement, to which they had no right. At this point the borders between homophobia and sexism became blurred; it was not only their sexuality that was a problem, but their apparent refusal to accept their assigned gender identity. This, it was immediately assumed, had to be disciplined; indeed, that would entail, in some cases, formal disciplinary hearing.

8.1.2 Research question two

How do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities?

Understanding how black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities called for the complete acknowledgement of the regulatory regimes that operate within the societal structures such as families, schools and churches, that silenced and managed those who identify differently from the perceived norm. In this study, participants were of school going age. All 12 of them have mentioned how they realised that they became aware that they were different from other girls from an early age. Though participants did not yet have the right terminology to capture what it meant for them to be attracted to the same sex, they mentioned how at the first sign of difference they embraced it. Bongiwe explained: *“I first noticed that I was different from other girls at home when I was doing grade nine. I always felt comfortable being within girls’ company. I did not think much about this feeling at first. It was easy for me to talk to them about everything concerning love. Boys pursued me and asked to date me, but I did not like them ((GI).* For Bongiwe, discovering the existence of difference gave her a sense of identity because understanding that she did not like boys affirmed and justified her sense of being different from other girls. Sthabile also explained her confusing discovery: *“I told my younger uncle that I was confused about my feelings for girls. He told me that it meant that I was a lesbian. I had heard that word before, but I was it not clear what it meant for me. I got into the internet, searched for the information about being a lesbian. From then onwards I confirmed to my uncle that indeed I am a lesbian” (GI).* Most of the participants understood their sexuality became clearer as they understood their feelings about what it meant to be attracted to other girls. Findings revealed that participants were highly attuned to their sexuality, though they feared harassment. In their narrated stories they explained that they did not have to ‘hide’ their identities to keep themselves ‘safe’ but demonstrated confidence as a way of responding to challenges.

The findings also pointed to several challenges regarding their sexual identities. They encountered hostility, victimisation and fear at homes, schools and communities, but despite these challenges, the participants were not fearful to express their sexuality openly. In challenging homophobia, participants in this study revealed that they had been verbally abused, sexually violated and had been discriminated against, but they chose to increase their adaptability to their oppressive situations by taking back the power from their abusers.

Although many of the participants experienced harassment and threats of violence in their community, they also developed strategies to manage their safety in public spaces. In keeping

to their cultural and religious determined expectations of responsibility and respectability, the participants did not conform to the discriminatory rules and regulations that are set up within schools and churches. They were not fearful of the results of their disciplinary hearings, even when their lives were threatened by school authorities and church members who had powers to decide about their future. Even though patriarchy was dominant in the environments where these participants found themselves (Valentine, 1992), most participants stated that they were not scared to challenge and question through in the interactions they had, to assert their sexuality, even during the times when family members, teachers and church people threatened to force them to accept the impositions placed on their lives.

The findings also revealed that, while the participants' experiences were indeed horrendous, they tried to live their lives in hope, with the conviction that their situation would change only if they became agents of change. In addition, their lives were complex and painful, and they had to bear the additional stigma of being constructed negatively as opposition to men. Every day, the participants had to continually challenge the presentation and negotiation of their sexual identities as their survival strategies. Regardless of their circumstances, the participants refused to project a heterosexual identity to conceal who they were. They went through numerous horrific experiences; despite these, the lesbian youth constructed and navigated their sexual identities in the ways that were stressful but acceptable to them.

In summary, the participants in this study were realistic about their experiences and the inequalities in many spheres of their lives. They seemed to understand that they did not need to accept a sexual identity based on their social location and the people they lived amongst, and thus they expected isolation and rejection from families and peers. The participants described how they had to make difficult decisions about leaving their families or living with families that did not support them. Some connections between family and the cultural norms made it impossible to freely live their lives because these produced enormous emotional strains based on the expectations that they had to change their 'behaviour'. Some participants described how navigating their sexual identities has almost cost them their lives and how they fell foul of dysfunctional family structures. These challenges took an emotional toll on them. For example, Bongiwe described how she felt ashamed about her sexuality and blamed herself when her father left his family. Her narrative showed the emotional consequences of growing up as someone who was not accepted by her father and felt she did not belong within her family.

Though participants revealed that they were constantly reminded about how unacceptable their sexual identities were, they managed not to conform to social norms and family norms that were intended to shape their decisions about their lives. They argued that their sexual identities were a private matter and should not be discussed publicly, therefore they did not need to be featured in public spaces.

8.1.3 Research question three

Why do these black self-identified lesbian youth construct and negotiate their sexual identities in the ways they do?

In this question, I sought to understand the reasons participants in this study construct and negotiate their sexual identities in a manner that they do. I found that discrimination continues to describe and shape the experiences of the lesbian youth in this study. Also, findings indicated that the participants felt that their sexuality within their immediate communities were the reasons why they had challenging lives. Based on the accounts the participants gave, discrimination was explicit and harsh. While their experiences can be described as challenging and varied in terms of how they happened and when they happened, the results also revealed that the participants had many experiences that were common in nature.

First, in addressing this question it is important to give an account on how the identification as lesbian is understood, in the light of the queer theory in the framework. Queer theory was utilised in this study because of its nature of rejecting categories, but rather recognizing gender and sexual identities as social constructs, multiple, and fluid (Britzman, 1997). This framework assisted in highlighting the complexity and fluidity of the sexual identities of participants in this study as the findings revealed how they performed and rendered their sexual identities as unstable (Butler, 1993). In this study, there are numerous factors that were evident that led participant to construct their sexual identity as lesbian. Circumstances surrounding their experiences showed that they needed to have an identity. Their negative experiences within their immediate surroundings pressured them to grab onto something to identify with. In protecting themselves, they found an identity for themselves that gave them a name to identify with. As individuals, they suffered discrimination and exclusion in every area of their lives. Consequently, they took and affirmed the lesbian identity to protect themselves and to give an answer to questions about who they are, despite all the challenges that came with it. Participants in this study appeared as youth that had been empowered. Swigonski (1995) describes the “act

of claiming the lesbian identity as an act of empowerment” because it “directly challenged the nature of heterosexist oppression” (p. 413); this applies well to the participants, because of the oppressive situation they found themselves in. Therefore, finding a claimed identity label was important to the participants because it was for people like them.

Also, research showed that finding this category was also important for them because they spent much of their lives as outcasts, isolated and excluded because they did not fit into any group. Since they did not fit into a neat box, they desired to feel some sense of belonging and security that they believed was going to give them an identity. I argue that participants’ desire to fit into a lesbian identity category was not fixed, but they “performed or portrayed that sexual identity as their reality” (Butler, 20004), as that made them satisfied. Therefore, in this study participants claimed and confirmed the lesbian identity to dispute the notion of “normal” or “natural” behaviour within their immediate spaces as a way to construct and negotiate their sexual identities within their social and cultural contexts.

Secondly, taking on a specific identity seems to have been a movement from confusion to a sense of relief at understanding of themselves as having an identity shared with many other people (even though the identity comes with oppression). What is evident is that participants were insistent about their lesbian identity because they found it to be something that explained to them who they are. There is evidence from the participants’ stories that suggests that they used to be confused about their sexual identities at first. How they were feeling and what they were feeling about boys was confusing and they seemed to need more clarity and certainty about being lesbian. For instance, Bongiwe had this to say: *“I had a warm and a fuzzy feeling inside my heart in a funny way that I could not explain the feeling. I did not know what it meant but I knew immediately that I was attracted to girls. I was not sure what that feeling certainly meant to me, but I loved it”* (PSS). Nomalanga also described her confusing state: *“When I was in grade nine, I told my grandmother that I thought I was different, but I was never sure in what way.”* These extracts from their narrated stories clearly reveal that the participants did not start by being certain about claiming a lesbian identity, but instead they felt different and uninterested to boys. They then wanted to find out more about why they had certain feelings, like sudden interest in girls. After finding the word ‘lesbian’, which explained and gave clarity to their confusion, they then called themselves lesbian. Sthabile statement also confirms the confusion and the definition they would give to their identity. *“I hated to be around boys, I thought it was because I did not give myself sufficient time to know them better. Later, when I*

was in grade ten, I told my younger uncle that I was confused about my feelings for girls. He told me that it meant that I was a lesbian. I had heard that word before, but I was not clear what it meant for me. I got into the internet, searched for the information about being a lesbian” (GI).

Thirdly, it was an act of empowerment, an act of self-assertion. Through their narratives, it became clear that participants faced different kinds of brutality and oppression based on their sexual orientation. They shared that they were not treated as normal human beings within their families, schools and in communities. In their opinion, this was because their sexual identity was seen as non-existent. The findings clearly showed the complexities of the participants’ sexuality in this study. Their experiences highlighted how, because of their sexuality they had to struggle with homophobic attempts that was to belittle them and to spread lies about who they were in the attempt erase them as lesbians in their communities. Despite all the complications, participants were able to challenge and asserted who they are (Lee & Kanji, 2017). There is a clear shift of how they challenged and claimed their power in some of the meetings held in schools to discipline the participants, where they were able to move from an “assumed state oppression to an open affirmed state” (Swigonski, 1995, p. 419) of being lesbians. Participants evidently displayed their activism and the fight for social justice by advocating for their rights and equality.

Fourthly, the environment denied the participants’ sexuality as valid. and they constantly had to fight for visibility and assert a specific sexual identity. The silencing and invisibility of their sexuality within their immediate environments seemed to have generated a curiosity from the participants to excel in everything they do. Participants highlighted the deafening silencing within their classrooms about sexual identities, as well as in their homes. Some participants shared that some members of their families might have known about homosexuality, but the subject was never talked about. This silencing and invisibility seemed to have invoked the desire within them to excel and to have future aspirations, irrespective of the challenges they faced, which in turn might allow them to be recognised in their communities. For example, Nomalanga, after attempting suicide, decided to focus on her work. She stated: *“After that discovery my schoolwork is improving every day. I am active during lessons, something I stopped doing long ago. I want to be a lawyer. I want to speak for the less privileged people, more particularly young lesbian girls who are shamed, ridiculed and killed because they cannot protect themselves from the communities that prioritises heterosexual relationships”*

(PSS).

Another extract from Sibusisiwe's diary stated, *"Every day I fill the void within me by motivating myself to excel in everything that I do. I have decided to join the girls' soccer team, though I sometimes get overwhelmed with schoolwork..."* Sthabile as well stated that, *"I have confidence that if I am well educated, I can have a balanced life. I fell in love with solving problems at primary school. I am now excelling at it. I am convinced that I can use my skills and knowledge to solve people's business problems"* (PD). Though participants' sexual identities in this study were perceived as immoral and invisible and were given no support, their willingness to be seen through their hard work at school and their involvement in activities within school indicate that they wanted to be seen and their silenced voices to be heard by working diligently, despite the oppressive conditions. They did this without attempting to perform their sexual identities differently to fit in the context of their environments or to accept the conditions of silence about their lesbian identities to conform with perceived images of sexuality.

Fifth, there is thus evidence that the self-identification as lesbian achieves meaningful advances for these participants, even though it does little to change the oppressive behaviour that they are subject to. Most participants credited their growth and being more secure in their identity as black lesbian youth to the challenges they faced growing up. As black lesbian youth, they had experienced homophobic violence directed to them, where their sexual identity was always a topic and overtly devalued by many. Even when sexuality was not openly discussed in class and surroundings, their sexuality was constantly given attention, as a result of the actions they received from people around them. Their oppression was systematic in nature (Butler et al., 2003) and they found themselves in the mercy of their oppressors. It is under these conditions of oppression that very strong identities were produced. It is important to highlight that participants in this study do not come from liberal society, therefore it is not easy for them to think of their identities as fluid. However, because they were being oppressed, they seemed to have started to form rigid boundaries about their sexuality. Oppression was relentless for these participants, with institutionalised and systematic harassment, discrimination and marginalisation. Therefore, the argument is that the way in which the participants construct their sexual identities is that they selected a lesbian identity as the expression of who they were, possibly constructing it in this way as a response to the oppression.

8.2 The significance of the study

The contributions made by this study are scholarly. Firstly, the argument I maintained throughout this study is that while there is a thriving body of knowledge on lesbian youth internationally, the same cannot be said for South Africa. This study responded to the paucity of this work within sexuality education, adding a township and rural perspective to research literature on the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in KwaZulu-Natal. This study allowed the insider voices of the lived experiences of the lesbian youth to be heard and shared by those who will find the participants' experiences useful in their lives. Consequently, the study contributes to the body of literature that focuses on the realities of black lesbian youth and how they construct and negotiate their sexual identities.

Secondly, the findings suggest that lesbian youth in this study understood their vulnerability within unsafe spaces, but also their agency in addressing homophobia. Participants decided to get involved in campaign and awareness programs, rather than focusing on the vulnerability of being victims because they are lesbians. Although findings reveal ample obstacles, such as inequalities in the schooling environment, the lack of support from the schools and quality education in a safe environment, participants' eagerness to address their own problems has become a driving force towards healing. Through this commitment from the participants, the study unpacks the agentic potential of participants and the ability to initiate change.

The findings further indicate the presence of *Ubuntu*, the communal involvement that the participants wanted to engage in by involving the other youth through sports. Participants' desire to engage other youth through sports reflects the essence of *Ubuntu*. Notable here is the participants' reliance on their external resources and their personal agency in trying to challenge this societal issue, homophobia. Further, from the participants' standpoint, the care in communal involvement was motivated by fact that participants also used sports as a vehicle to learn to manage their pain. By organising communal sports activities, they aim to create inclusive environments that not only promote physical well-being but also strengthen social bonds and mutual understanding. Such initiatives serve as platforms for dialogue and unity, challenging societal issues like homophobia by bringing diverse individuals together in shared experiences. Moreover, the participants' proactive involvement demonstrates their personal agency in addressing discrimination. By leveraging external resources and initiating community-based sports programs, they embody the principles of *Ubuntu*, taking collective action to foster inclusivity and challenge prejudices within their communities. This approach

aligns with the broader application of *Ubuntu* in promoting social cohesion and combating discrimination. By emphasising communal involvement and shared humanity, the participants' *Ubuntu*-inspired initiatives can effectively address societal challenges, fostering environments where every individual is valued and included irrespective of their sexual orientation.

This African philosophy of *Ubuntu*/humaneness revealed how compassionate these participants were about educating the other young minds that every person, irrespective of their difference mattered. The findings suggest that participants believed in being there for others, giving support, promoting harmony, respect, humanity and responsiveness that expressed the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence (Bolden, 2014). With such values, the common thread for the participants was not the injuries to their dignity imposed by people as a result of their sexual identities, but their willingness to find strategies for addressing some of the challenges they experienced. By drawing from their pain and creatively wanting to work together in their communities, the participants in the study

identified themselves as available resources and improvised, even though no one was available for them. For example, the values that the participants will instill through sports to the other youths might assist in changing the mindsets of some of these children, who grow up in homophobic and intolerant communities. The participants' ingenuity revealed that participants in this study (lesbian youth) did not want to be portrayed as powerless and victims without agency (Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Swarr, 2012).

Thirdly, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, literature on the experiences of lesbian youth revealed that there has been violence against black women and girls in South Africa (Matebeni, 2013; Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane 2010; Morrissey, 2013; Muholi, 2004; Nel & Judge, 2008). Lesbian women and girls are not only discriminated against, but are also not seen (Muholi, 2004). However, as discussed above, the findings of this study suggest that when participants developed agency, they were actively challenging homophobia and resisting normalised heterosexuality. Participants wanted to be seen and heard. Firstly, one would expect that because of the horrendous experiences that the participants went through, they would be expected to be powerless and nurse their scars, rather they decided to show expressions of humanity and love for other youth. To these participants, compassion and the quality of love were more important in determining the effectiveness of the healthy relationships and humanity in communities. Secondly, participants, largely did not want to deny other youth full citizenship in their communities because of their bad experiences based on who they were. The findings suggest that participants understood the concept of *Ubuntu*; their actions showed that they believed that they were because of other people in their communities. Though numerous times their rights to dignity and self-worth were impinged on, they were accused of bringing shame to their families and transgressing cultural and gender norms by being in same-sex relationships, participants wanted change to start from within. They reported that it was not going to be easy for all involved in these campaigns and awareness programmes, but what mattered was that they had already started to challenge the status quo.

Fourthly, to challenge the binary way of thinking about sexualities in this study, queer theory was employed. Queer theory, a framework I discussed in Chapter Three, was used to challenge and suggest a shift from fixed notions of identity by understanding sexuality and its meaning for the participants. Findings revealed that teachers, parents and community members appeared to focus on coming up with strategies of fixing participants in this study by insisting on gender categories based on their perceptions of biological sex (DePalma, 2013). Participants were

asked questions such as “as a girl how are you going to...”; “as a girl you will outgrow this, it is just a playful phase”; “clear up your head... to behave like a girl that you are”; “when other girls started copying this thing”; “as a black girl, you are expected to get married”. These kinds of questions suggested that these lesbian learners were rigidly put into categories of sex (male and female) that have been socially constructed to represent biological continua as binary oppositions (DePalma, 2013). These findings suggest that as girls, participants were expected to carry themselves in a particular way that a male or a female was expected to. Participants resisted these binary oppositions by continually asserting their sexual identities even though they were discriminated against and also that meant constructing a very strong lesbian identity instead. According to Butler (1993), resisting these socially constructed norms constantly requires a conscious effort to deconstruct what people understand to be correct. Participants in this study revealed their desire to be known as learners who identified as lesbians, and they did not foreground the male/female binary.

Lastly, the issue facing these black self-identified lesbian youth was the difference that exists between a dominant and a subordinated group. In terms of queer theory, the intention was to minimise the inequality gap within the two groups that privileges those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual and marginalises people in the LGBT community (Lee & Kanji, 2017). Another important issue in the study was that of unpacking race, context and gender and sexuality. The study, specifically, drew on the feminist theory of intersectionality. Using intersectionality was motivated by its recognition and the importance of identifying interconnections that co-exist amongst different forms of identities. For example, using these two frameworks assisted in understanding that sexuality is a social construct and seeing that issues of identity are constantly changing and not linear. The findings revealed participants’ experiences were compounded with challenges because they were black, girls and lesbians. All these factors contributed to their realities because they seemed to connect in different spheres of their lives. Despite the challenging experiences, participants did not hide their sexual identities, though they could have done that to escape the repressive conditions they found themselves in. They discussed their efforts collectively during the focus groups and in the individual interviews to stay true to their identities because to them, being lesbian was life. Also, there was a significant effect of race that was continually used by people when speaking to the participants. For example, when they were reminded that “as a black girl, how are you...” The findings pointed out that race and ethnicity are interconnected with sexuality and gender. These intersections of race, gender, age and sexuality pointed to an unthinking knowing that

things are the way they are, except for those motivated to question them. Participants in this study understood why because of their sexual identities they encountered huge negativity and were subjected to discrimination, social stigmatisation, harassment and sexual violence within their immediate environments. The findings suggest that, within these environments, participants were systematically marginalised and were not given opportunities to live their lives meaningfully without being discriminated against.

Undertaking the study that explored the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth required using methodologies that would reveal the participants' actual experiences and how they see themselves and continue to live daily within their communities. The findings suggest that narrative inquiry was effective in capturing the "wholeness of experiences, working against dissecting identities from interactions in the story" (Berry & Cook, 2018). This methodology allowed participants to make meaning of their experiences through the stories they tell, or live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Findings of this study revealed that the process of re-storying and shifting the institutional, social, and cultural narratives was visible in the stories of the participants. The framework used and methodologies were relevant in trying to ascertain the experience of the group of people who are always marginalised because of their sexual differences. Overall, this study suggests that the oppression of the participants (lesbian youth) in this study, was directly related to the oppression of women (Pharr, 1998). The schooling experiences for these participants were compounded with challenges, intolerance and abuse with. The participants' stories demonstrated the significance of agency. While the participants did not claim to have total control over what people think or say about their sexual identities, their vulnerability was clear. There was clear evidence that participants want to live in environments where they can feel "safe". Though not all the participants attempted suicide, they all experienced their childhood lives damagingly.

The findings suggest that schooling experiences can be difficult for lesbian learners, because their sexuality may be judged and they may be ostracised by their teachers, families, community members and peers. Participants in this study experienced high levels of discrimination socially, culturally and religiously because heterosexuality is deeply entrenched in culture (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane, 2010). Being black and a girl, culturally, seemed to have automatically come up with expectations that participants needed to live their lives in a particular way. Though the findings of the study revealed that the democratic rights of the participants have been hugely violated, the participants' disposition to assume an agentic

role

demonstrates the new-found possibility of challenging homophobia, for example, by being involved in campaigns rather than presenting themselves as victims their whole lives. One significance of the study is that it demonstrates not simply oppression but also the creative ways in which a group of young people assert themselves to change the forces operating in their lives. It is important to acknowledge more than the force of oppression.

8.3 Limitations of the study

Firstly, it must be borne in mind that this study was only conducted with a small group of participants. The context was rural or township areas in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The sample size is composed of public high school going youth. The youth included are disproportionately low-income and from racial minority groups. Therefore, data gathered only came from and was limited to the 12 participants, who were black, self-identified as lesbians and attending school in this province. Consequently, generalisability of the results of this study to other locations and to a broader population of LGBT youth is limited.

Secondly, the study targeted only one group of participants within the schooling system, (which was the lesbian youth). It would have been interesting to do a case study that examines the experiences of parents, teachers, schoolmates and community members as they interact with the LGBT youth. The different cases can give views on the experiences of other stakeholders within the participants' immediate environments in relation to the issues of lesbian youth.

Thirdly, the study focused on township and rural contexts and these places are overwhelmingly poor. In these areas, youth typically walk to and back from school. Some of the participants were victimised and attacked on their way to and/or back from school. Adding a different group of participants that were from a more privileged black backgrounds (living in gated estates, attending former model C schools) would assist in exploring the degree to which the experiences of these two groups would be similar or not. This would help to develop an understanding of how economic factors impinge on the rights of LGBT youth.

Lastly, researching a sensitive topic is a challenging task, as a researcher it was difficult to completely remove myself from the stories/experiences that were shared by participants. These were extremely disturbing to take in and understand that it happened to these young girls. Many participants would break down and cry and it would affect me deeply. I also broke down several times. It is important to state that in qualitative work, we are not just dealing with people, but we are dealing with people's lives. When participants are sexually violated in the middle of

gathering data, this impacts several issues on the decisions to be taken and participants' lives. Therefore, during the sessions with the participants, I did not know how much of myself I was giving and how that would affect the data gathered. Another researcher responding differently may have generated different data.

8.4 Implications for policy, practice and further research

In this section, I present the implications of this study for policy, practice and the recommendations for further research. The findings and the conclusions drawn in this study have a few implications. Findings of this study suggest that the South African government, despite the Constitution and the South African Schools Act (SASA), has failed to protect black self-identifying lesbian youth of school going age from sexual violence and discrimination based on their sexuality. This is because the laws intended to protect South Africans have continually failed to protect LGBT people, resulting in high levels of discrimination against lesbian individuals, sexual violence and the killing of lesbian people (Arendt & de Bruin, 2006). The South African Constitution clearly requires the protection of lesbian people and prohibits any form of violence based on sexual orientation. However, the state has failed to successfully implement these policies in practical and specific ways, such as providing detailed guidelines for addressing discrimination based on individuals' sexual identities orientation, more especially at schools. What is evident is that government has, in my view, been criminally liable for its failure to implement the law that will guarantee equality and equity by promoting human rights of every South African individual, despite their sexual identification. In particular, participants in this study have been exposed to expulsions from schools and discrimination from fellow schoolmates and community members. The laws that are put in place failed to address the issues of abuse, marginalisation and sexual violence experienced by the participants because of their sexuality. These policies should have been enforced but were not. As a result, the findings of this study show that discrimination and harassment incidents are high within school settings. It seems as if the implementation of these policies has had little or no impact at all on the offenders. This has affected the participants' academic performances and opportunities. Effective implementation and clear guidelines with regard to perpetrators of LGBT people should emphasise eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation, thus bringing increased faith in the South African Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Teachers and police need to be trained and prepared to understand the contents of the documents that guide the protection of the country's citizens.

Additionally, international human rights call for states to promote and protect the human rights of LGBT people (Makhaye, 2019) might guarantee sexual minority populations respect for rights to liberty, freedom of expression, freedom from torture, the right to privacy, freedom to attain the highest standard of health and freedom from any inhuman treatment and marginalisation. While there is evidence of policy frameworks that are put in place to support LGBT people, the findings of this study suggest that there are structural factors and dominant social norms and cultures that limit these lesbian youths' full and meaningful participation (Ngidi, 2020). To enable the participants' full protection in schools and in the community at large, schools, classrooms, churches and clinics should be safe spaces, where lesbian youth are supported and encouraged to live their lives as they wish. The State should respond promptly to crimes of sexual violence and harassment and ensure that perpetrators are brought to book.

Further, the findings have implications for policies at schools, such as schools' code of conduct, bullying policy and learner discipline policy. For example, participants in this study have been exposed to very harsh and unconstitutional decisions made by the schools. Findings showed that these spaces are not safe for lesbian youth because some of these policies were completely ignored when decisions were made about the participants' sexuality. Schools need to be safe spaces for all learners, irrespective of their sexual identities by being fully and actively to support all learners. If committees within schools can create new opportunities and inclusive policies, learners such as the lesbian youth should enjoy meaningful schooling experiences and be represented in key decision-making structures without being judged based on their sexuality. Members serving in structures such as the RCL and SGB members should be trained and empowered to understand that their involvement is very crucial in supporting all learners in schools, even those who identify otherwise. Their involvement can guarantee that lesbian learners are represented during disciplinary meetings without experiencing double victimisation by being punished. Additionally, the factors that led to these disciplinary hearings should generally never be seen as disciplinary matters, but as matters where lesbian learners needed support.

8.5 Recommendations for future research

There is a need for further research that will explore lived experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth of school going age in other parts of South Africa. Though there has been scholarship focused on black youth in institutions of higher learning, to my knowledge, very limited research work has focused on school going black self-identified lesbian youth. This

study is the first research work of its kind that details the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts in KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. More studies like this are needed if the invisibility and the silencing of LGBT youth are required to be broken. This will ensure that more stories and experiences of lesbian youth are shared, and the youth are empowered even in the powerless situations they sometimes find themselves. The study will therefore contribute to the body of knowledge by addressing the currently under-researched area in South African literature.

Future research needed should be able also to include exploring the role of, and plans for engaging the communities, families and schools in changing unequal gender norms and developing individual and group agency in addressing marginalisation, victimisation and sexual violence against other marginal groups in schools and communities. Homophobia can be challenged if ‘the spirit of Ubuntu’ is revived. Reminding people in communities that they are what they are because of other people’s involvement might bring and re-awaken conscience to those people who find it easier to kill another person for being different. It is the duty of parents, teachers and community leaders and members to start these conversations at home, schools and churches, by also involving the youth in these talks. Future research should aim to do work that will strengthen the family-child relationship, so that the lesbian youth, who sexually identify differently can benefit from the support and love of both parents. Any young person needs his or her parents (legal guardians as well) to be able to understand the journey of life.

Another recommendation for future research would be to look at how sport has been used by participants in this study as a means of healing from their extreme negative experiences. This work can look at how sport can be made an element in addressing homophobia, more importantly in schools, because there is evidence from the participants’ stories in this study that sport has a potential to provide healing for those who have had bad experiences based on their sexuality. Questions asked such as, what are the areas of possible change through sports? Or is sport a significant element for healing for LGBT youth?

8.6 Implications for education

The quest to challenge the demeaning attitudes and physical violence directed to LGBT learners should be an issue for every sector in the society. Interventions that seek to transform schools and communities by challenging the dominant unequal gender norms must be

undertaken to empower every member of the community, if the intention is to provide an environment that is safe, conducive and accepting of LGBT learners. School staff, both teaching and non-teaching, should be educated and skilled in promoting and equally applying equality and equity amongst all learners in schools. Staff empowerment around the issue of sexual orientation will assist schools in creating safe environments where discrimination will not be tolerated.

Also, participants identified and mentioned inappropriate and unfair actions from school staff that contributed to their negative experiences. Participants pointed out the implementation of school policies and practices as contributory factors to homophobia they experienced at schools. The overall picture from the participants' narratives suggests that institutional practices and policies are not understood or implemented equally to cater for the needs of all learners within the schools. When addressing the issue of homosexuality, the attention for the Department of Education should be on staff training and wider school practices, for example, their ability to offer support for all the learners where it is needed, irrespective of their sexual identity.

Further, all subjects within schools should be able to tackle issues of homosexuality if it comes out during the lesson, rather than shifted as an issue for LO teachers. Whole school- campaigns and awareness programmes will enable all learners to understand issues of difference within the schools even if it is not about homosexuality, but any other form of difference. Tackling issues of difference as whole-school campaigns will assist also in informing policy documents within schools and offer support mechanisms for all learners who do not have the knowledge about different sexual orientations, disability and other issues. By so doing, the schools can create supportive environments for all learners, regardless of their race, religion, creed, ability or sexuality.

8.7 Chapter conclusion

After I finished this study, I came to the realisation that the participants in this study were unfairly judged and had terrible experiences. They have suffered the discrimination and biases of the communities where they come. Furthermore, the government has failed LGBT people generally. It is the government's obligation to protect every South African citizen, as is provided by the Constitution. It should lie in the hands of the state to implement and organise public strategies to educate all citizens within all structures about sexual diversity,

homophobia, and the results of homophobic attitudes. since the results of the study suggest that discriminatory and homophobic attitudes appeared to be entrenched in the minds of some of the South African citizens. Because of the lack of knowledge, homophobic communities continue to oppress LGBT people. I entered this research with a personal interest because as a teacher in one secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal, I thought teachers somewhere in KwaZulu-Natal were not the same as teachers where I taught. Based on this experience, I knew that undertaking this study was not going to be easy for me because of the power dynamics that would be at play and as a person who identified differently from the participants. I ventured into this research work trusting that I would achieve my objectives because of the data I would gather and analyse to complete the task.

Little did I know that through this study I would open up the wounds experienced by my participants, leaving me feeling incapable of handling the reality and discovery I encountered through their stories. I thought about quitting this research numerous times asking myself if it was worth finishing. I spent some time with my psychologist before I commenced with the last sessions of data gathering. Doing this work has changed me and has invoked within me the desire to continue working for social justice. The writing of this thesis has been both very therapeutic and reflective about my own experiences and biases of growing up as a heterosexual being in a township, how best I could have engaged my colleagues right on the spot about the way they treated LGBT learners before I did this study.

From doing this work, engaging with participants, listening, engaging with scholarly work reading and writing this thesis, I came to better understand how LGBT learners are constantly in subordinate power positions within schools and how when they are forced to abide by the school 'rules' with little or no autonomy to challenge teachers' authority. It was because of such situations that participants in this study were disadvantaged, expelled, and humiliated because no one or nothing ensured that they were treated fairly by not being discriminated based on their sexuality. The participants were discriminated against because schools had absolute powers to decide about their private matters in public spheres; the lives of these participants were almost ruined because of such decisions. If South Africa as a country wants to treat its people equally, schools, churches and communities at large should be well equipped to implement the Constitution correctly without being selective. Teachers should not teach or make decisions out of context of the country's laws in which both them and learners live, as it is the application of this knowledge through critical reflections that will allow them to accept

LGBT learners by ensuring that they uphold the Bill of Rights in their communities and at schools.

In conclusion, findings from this study suggested that homophobia remains a threat in the lives of black self-identified lesbian youth of school going age. While the study sampled only 12 participants and was conducted in only one KwaZulu-Natal rural and township, in South Africa, a few critical issues emanated and require immediate attention. Within these context, lesbian youth experienced discrimination, abuse and sexual violence within their immediate environments. As a result, this widespread homophobic violence and intolerance in communities, if not addressed fully, might have lasting implications for schooling. It is the duty of all stakeholders to work together when preparing for a brighter future for the learners to ensure that schools, churches and the community at large become places that are safe and accommodating to all who want to live in it, without any discrimination and prejudice.

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Appendix A: Consent form for participants

The participant's letter:

The participants and parents/guardians in this study were mother language speakers, therefore the letters had to be to invite participant to partake in the study and to request permission from the parents/guardian to allow participants to participate were translated into IsiZulu language. Questions in the interviews also accommodated those that did not English and IsiZulu was used to a translate, clarity and understanding.

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Edgewood Campus

Private Bag x 03

Ashwood

3605

Date: ____/____/2018

Greetings Participant

REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

My name is **Prim-Rose Makhosazane Shabane**, I am a **Doctoral (PhD)** student at the **University of KwaZulu Natal, Edgewood Campus**, situated in Pinetown. You are kindly invited to participate in my study titled: **Negotiating Identity: The experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal.**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts. During the interviews you will share your lived experiences about being a lesbian.

Participation in the study will require 4-5 sessions of interviews and participation is voluntary. You are allowed to pull out of the study anytime if you feel uncomfortable continuing. Also, by participating, you give me permission to use your responses in this study. The participants will not gain any money by taking part in this study. I will also ensure that I give pseudonyms that will guarantee anonymity and maintained. After the completion of the interviews, there will be a followed meeting where you will look at the transcribe interviews so that you can confirm that the transcription has captured your words as they were.

Name: Prim -Rose Makhosazane Shabane

Qualification: MEd

Cell No: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

The parent/guardian's letter:

The letter to the parents or guardian did not include part about participants being a lesbian. The was done with purpose to protect the participant, should it happen that at the time of participation in the study the participant would not have told the parent about her sexual identity. The purpose of the letter to the parents would be to ask for participants to take part in the study, but not to out them.

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Edgewood Campus

Private Bag x 03

Ashwood

3605

Date: ____/____/2018

Greetings Participant

REQUEST FOR YOUR CHILD’S/WARD’S PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

My name is **Prim-Rose Makhosazane Shabane**, I am a **Doctoral (PhD)** student at the **University of KwaZulu Natal, Edgewood Campus**, situated in Pinetown. I seek your permission to allow your child/ward to participate in my study titled I will be conducting with her, should you allow. She will be visited in her neighbourhood and taken to a safe place where interviews will take place.

She will be interviewed 4-5 times. No payments will be made to her or to you for her participation in the study. During the sessions she will spend with me, I will also ensure that she will not be exposed to any harm and will be returned home safely.

Name: Prim -Rose Makhosazane Shabane

Qualification: MEd

Cell No: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Parents/Guardian and Participants consent slip

I (name & surname) _____ give consent / give consent for my child/ward to participate in study.

Signature _____

Date

Appendix B: Pre-interview questions

The interview questions written below are examples of prompts or possible probing questions that might have been asked to achieve the purpose of the interview. Some of these were used to start the conversation and others as follow up questions wherever the need arose.

The first meeting with each participant started off with introductions and setting the tone for session one, which was ore of biographical information. The introduction gave participants a chance to ask me about myself also to create a conducive and comfortable environment that enabled rapport between myself and the participant. I explained where I was coming from and the reason I was there. I also spoke about the issue of confidentiality and anonymity.

SESSION 1: FAMILY AND GENERAL EXPERIENCE

- ❖ Who are you, tell me your yourself?
- ❖ What type of family do you come from?
- ❖ Where do you live?
- ❖ How long have you been staying in this place?
- ❖ Do you have siblings?
- ❖ How many siblings do you have?
- ❖ What is the nature of your relationship with your siblings?
- ❖ Do you have any other family members who are not staying with you?
- ❖ Who brought you up?
- ❖ How is your relationship with your family?
- ❖ What is the nature of this relationship in terms of being close and open about things generally?
- ❖ Do you attend school?
- ❖ Do you have friends at school, what are their names?
- ❖ Do you go to church, if yes what is the name of your church?
- ❖ How have your experiences been in church?
- ❖ Do you consider yourself different from your siblings/friends/classmates, why/why not?
- ❖ Do your parents know about your sexuality?
- ❖ What was their reaction when they found out?
- ❖ What does it mean for you to be a lesbian?
- ❖ Do you feel any different from your siblings because you are lesbian?
- ❖ Who is your support system?
- ❖ Why do you call this person your support system?

Appendix C: Second interview schedule

SESSION 2: COMMUNITY AND RACE

- ❖ Who did you grow up with?
- ❖ What type of friends do you have?
- ❖ How long have you known each other?
- ❖ What qualities do you think connects you?
- ❖ What do you think/ believe about life generally?
- ❖ How do you sexually identify yourself and why?
- ❖ When did you notice that you were “different”? How did you feel?
- ❖ When did you accept that you were different?
- ❖ Are there challenges that you have experienced because of your identity, at home, in your community or school? Explain more.
- ❖ What are some positives/negatives that have come because of your identity?
- ❖ Did you have to make any adjustments to your lifestyle after coming to terms with your sexuality?
- ❖ Who have you told about your sexuality and why?
- ❖ What was their reaction?
- ❖ How do you get treated in the community as a lesbian?
- ❖ How do you feel about being black, a girl and lesbian, living in those backgrounds?
- ❖ Do you think if you were not black, a girl and lesbian you were going to be treated differently in your community?
- ❖ What were your experiences?
- ❖ Did your experiences differ from those at school, please explain?
- ❖ Do you feel protected? Why/why not?
- ❖ Are you assisted by your community members when you experience homophobia?

Appendix D: Third interview schedule

SESSION 3: SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES

- ❖ Do you think your experiences at school are worse when/ after you come out?
- ❖ If you are already out, how were your experiences?
- ❖ Does your schoolmate know about your sexual identity?
- ❖ How do your schoolmates treat you?
- ❖ Have you experienced any homophobic (hatred for lesbian) discrimination in school?
- ❖ What was your experience like in relation to the experiences of other lesbian girls who self-identify?
- ❖ Were the experiences the same?
- ❖ Do you feel safe at school, and why?
- ❖ Have you personally experienced homophobia at school, tell me about this incident?
- ❖ How do you cope in school if you have had homophobic experiences?
- ❖ Is there support available in school for lesbian girls?
- ❖ Do you get this support from your teachers/administrators or schoolmates?
- ❖ Are there spaces at school where you feel least safe in?
- ❖ Does the school have any knowledge/information available about LGBT?
- ❖ How do teachers and administrators treat these issues when being taught?
- ❖ How do you feel about the teachers'/administrators' attitudes/reactions about LGBT?
- ❖ How would you describe the school environment as a lesbian girl, and why?
- ❖ Do you report instances of homophobia to the teachers, what/ how are their responses?
- ❖ Is the school assisting and supporting you if you encounter a homophobic related problem?
- ❖ Any other issues that you would like to raise in relation to your sexuality and your experiences in school in this interview?
- ❖ Please comment more on your relationship with fellow schoolmates and teachers.
- ❖ Do you think the school has accommodated your needs as a lesbian in school?
- ❖ If you were to change anything about your school/ your schooling experiences, what would it be?

Appendix E: Fourth interview schedule

SESSION 4: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, NEGOTIATION, FUTURE ASPIRATIONS AND WISHES

- ❖ How did sexuality emerge an issue of difference to the participant?
- ❖ How did the participant respond to this?
- ❖ What sexual and emotional experiences have the participant had since then?
- ❖ What relationships has the participant engaged in since then?
- ❖ How does the participant currently identify?
- ❖ When was this identification formulated and what factors led to its formulation?
- ❖ How comfortable is the participant with their sexuality more generally and in their living and schooling environments/and or communities?
- ❖ How clear is the participant on their sexuality?
- ❖ How has the identification changed throughout the participant's life?
- ❖ Has the participant found that she must change the way she lives her life because she is lesbian?
- ❖ What impact has the participant's sexuality had on the participant's life?
- ❖ Has the participant disclosed to other people about their sexuality? If so, who and what was this experience like? What were the responses?
- ❖ Has the participant told any member of their families and current schoolmates about their sexuality, and why?
- ❖ What fears and possibilities do the participant have in terms of their sexualities and connections to friendships, relationships, families and schoolmates?
- ❖ What does it mean to be interested in the same-sex relationship in KwaZulu-Natal township/ rural area in 2018/9?
- ❖ Where does the participant see herself five years from now?

Appendix F: Ethical clearance



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Appendix G: Editor's letter

Crispin Hemson
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
South Africa 4001

This is to confirm that I have undertaken language editing of a doctoral thesis Prim-Rose Shabane, entitled **Negotiating identity: The experiences of black self-identified lesbian youth in township and rural contexts of KwaZulu-Natal.**

[REDACTED]

30th April 2024

Appendix H: Turnitin report

Prim-Rose Makhosazane Shabane

