



**MANAGING GENDER DIVERSE AND NON-BINARY CLASSROOMS: THE
PERSPECTIVES OF TOWNSHIP SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS IN
CLERMONT**

BY

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the Discipline of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy, School of Education,
College of Humanities**

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DECLARATION

I, **Thandokuhle Mcebo Nkambule**, declare that:

- i. The research in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated is my original work.
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STATEMENT BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation is submitted with/ without my approval

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, gender diversity has become increasingly visible in education spaces, challenging traditional classroom management practices and raising questions on inclusivity and justice in South Africa. Therefore, it is undeniable that the landscape of modern education is constantly changing to meet learners' diverse needs and identities, with gender diversity becoming more widely recognised in classrooms. Most literature covers the experiences of gender diverse and non-binary learners and how educators lack training in dealing with such learners. However, there is a paucity of research focusing on the perspectives of educators regarding their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, specifically in township schools where multiple constraints are impacting the schooling environment.

Therefore, this study was aimed at exploring educators' roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school. The study was grounded by a conceptual framework that draws from three lenses: transformational leadership theory, social justice theory, and the management concept of leadership. This research adopted a qualitative research approach and was underpinned by the interpretive paradigm. Moreover, the case study design was used to study a single case for the selected school. Six participants, who were life orientation educators, were purposefully selected in this study, and the data were generated using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and were analysed thematically. Consequently, the participants found that while they are familiar with gender diversity and non-binary concepts at a surface level, they lack a more profound understanding of these topics. Participants also revealed that they tried to employ different strategies to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms but faced multiple challenges, such as bullying from non-binary learners, cultural and religious beliefs, work overload, and misgendering learners. The participants further recommended support to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms better, such as continuous training, policy reform and implementation, giving learners a voice, and raising awareness. These findings emphasise the need for change and the understanding that educators have a significant role in promoting inclusivity in their classrooms. Nonetheless, the study's limitation was that it cannot be generalised to a wider population, as it had a small sample and focused on a single school.

Keywords: Managing, gender diversity, non-binary, educators, inclusivity, transformational leadership theory, social justice theory.

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DEDICATION

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

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

I dedicate this study to the educators whose voices guide its purpose. May this study serve as a meaningful step toward understanding their role in managing gender-diverse classrooms for inclusiveness. I hope it contributes to shaping more inclusive, affirming, and well-managed classroom environments.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LGBTQ+/LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus...

DBE – Department of Basic Education

ELMP – Education, Leadership, Management, & Policy

UKZN – University of KwaZulu-Natal

KZN – KwaZulu-Natal

SA – South Africa

USA – United States of America

UK – United Kingdom

DEI – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

CDL – Critical Diversity Literacy

SASA – South African Schools Act

TLT – Transformational Leadership Theory

SJT – Social Justice Theory

LO - Life Orientation

CAPS – Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

TA – Thematic Analysis

FET – Further Education and Training

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1.Introduction

In recent years, incidents of discrimination and bullying against gender-diverse and non-binary learners have highlighted the urgent need for inclusive practices within schools (Bhana, 2014; Chisholm & September, 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Msibi, 2012). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2019) report found that more than 48% of learners in one of the provinces in South Africa experience sexual abuse and bullying in schools. For example, a recent tragic event reported by Mamba Online (October 26, 2023) involved a 12-year-old learner in a Gauteng township school who reportedly took his own life following prolonged homophobic and gender-based harassment by an educator. According to the learner's family, the educator targeted him because he did not conform to 'binary' gender norms. This tragedy highlights that educators have an impact on the safety and inclusivity of learners. Research supports the notion that educators are responsible for ensuring the well-being and inclusivity of all learners (Francis et al., 2019). However, incidents such as these reveal gaps in educators' perspectives and preparedness to handle gender diversity in classrooms, particularly in communities where traditional norms are deeply rooted. This study, therefore, aimed to explore educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township secondary school in Clermont (Pinetown District). Furthermore, this chapter discusses the background of the study, the problem statement, the rationale for the study, the research questions, and the purpose statement together with the objectives, and the significance of the study. The chapter also includes the study's methodology, an overview of the chapters, and, lastly, the definition of key concepts.

1.2.The background of the study

It is undeniable that the landscape of modern education is constantly changing to meet learners' diverse needs and identities, with gender diversity becoming a more widely recognised and essential element (Chisholm & September, 2018). As society's understanding of gender expands beyond the binary framework, schools are seeing an increase in the number of learners who identify as transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer (Kosciw et al., 2018). Kosciw et al. (2018) further outline that transgender is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned to at birth. These scholars further claim

that non-binary is a term that identifies individuals who do not exclusively identify as male or female. On the other hand, they define genderqueer as an umbrella term for gender identities that do not conform to traditional gender norms. As a microcosm of society, classrooms reflect these changes, requiring educators to be ready to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

However, research indicates that many educators feel inadequately prepared not only to support gender-diverse and non-binary learners, but also to lead and manage inclusive classroom environments effectively (Francis et al., 2019). This lack of preparedness has major implications for classroom management and educators' leadership responsibilities, as educators are often required to practice inclusive education policies and translate them into everyday pedagogical and managerial practices without sufficient guidance or support. Studies suggest that insufficient pre-service training and limited professional development opportunities leave educators uncertain about decision-making processes related to gender diversity, including learner support strategies, disciplinary approaches, and the creation of inclusive classroom climates (Jones, 2017).

Moreover, the absence of clear school-level policies and leadership direction regarding gender diversity places the burden of inclusive practice on individual educators, rather than positioning inclusion as a shared leadership and management responsibility within the school (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014). Even where inclusive policies exist, challenges often arise at the level of implementation, as school leaders often fail to provide consistent guidance, monitoring, and support to ensure that such policies are enacted in classrooms (Bell, 2019). As a result, educators may rely on personal beliefs or traditional binary norms when making decisions, which can undermine inclusive classroom management and negatively affect gender-diverse and non-binary learners. This highlights the critical role of educational leadership, school culture, and decision-making structures in shaping how inclusion is managed in practice, rather than merely articulated at policy level.

Furthermore, the experiences of gender-diverse and non-binary learners in schools have been well-documented, with many facing challenges such as bullying, discrimination, and lack of access to facilities that align with their gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2018). These experiences adversely affect their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being and can even result in suicide (Jones, 2020). Therefore, the role of educators is pivotal in creating a conducive environment that promotes the educational success and health of gender-diverse and

non-binary learners (Mkhize & Ndimande, 2021). Thus, educators are well-positioned to become agents of change in addressing gender diversity issues as they are key players in creating a positive and inclusive school culture, and it all must begin in the classroom.

Despite the growing body of literature on gender diversity issues in schools, there remains a gap in understanding the specific perspectives of educators' roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, specifically in township schools. Exploring educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity, educators' practices and strategies when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms provide valuable insights to enhance inclusive education (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). As a result, understanding educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms is pivotal in addressing gender diversity discrimination and stigmatisation. Despite these policy commitments, educators in township secondary schools continue to face challenges in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to explore educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in Clermont (Pinetown District).

1.3.Problem Statement

South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, particularly regarding gender and sexual equity (Andam & Epprecht, 2019). The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Section 5) mandates that public schools admit learners and provide education without discrimination, meaning public schools have no specifications regarding learners' gender identity and must accept learners regardless of their identity. While inclusive education policies exist (DBE, 2001), research has paid limited attention to how educators implement these policies on the ground. There seems to be a gap between policy and practice in the management of gender-diverse and non-binary learners, particularly in township schools. Schools, as institutions embedded within society, often reflect broader social norms, which in many cases remain heteronormative and resistant to gender diversity (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Consequently, educators struggle to implement inclusive practices due to limited training, personal biases, or broader societal expectations, ultimately leaving gender-diverse learners vulnerable to discrimination, marginalisation, and academic exclusion (Msibi, 2012).

Research highlights that South African schools, particularly in townships, continue to be hostile environments for gender-diverse and non-binary learners (Francis et al., 2019). Educators often lack the necessary training and support to create inclusive environments and may unknowingly

reinforce heteronormative structures (Jones, 2017; Mabokela & Mawila, 2017). The lack of clear guidelines on how to translate constitutional provisions into practical classroom management strategies exacerbates this issue. As a result, gender-diverse learners experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement, leading to higher dropout rates and negative psychological consequences (UNESCO, 2016). While some independent schools have made progress in acknowledging gender diversity, township schools remain largely unexamined in this regard. The problem I am noting is that, while South Africa presents a very progressive and transformative Constitution, it is not clear what the educators' perspectives are in terms of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perspectives of township school educators regarding their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. It focused on exploring educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities, identifying challenges and strategies of navigating gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The study further gained insights into what can be done to better assist educators in managing gender diverse and non-binary township classrooms effectively.

1.4.Rationale of the Study

My interest in conducting this study stems from my personal experience. I grew up with a family member who identifies as lesbian and encountered tremendous discrimination during their schooling days. The institutional rules were not accommodating, and she expressed that 'she', like other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and more (LGBTQ+) learners, felt constrained and unable to express 'her' true self. The school rules were not inclusive of her non-binary identity, as they only accommodated gender binary learners. 'She' was forced not to wear pants in school, and educators also bullied her for trying to be a 'boy'. The school rules were against her identity, which impacted her negatively academically, physically, and psychologically. Therefore, this mistreatment of my family member in school made me question the pivotal role that educators have to play in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Furthermore, I chose this study based on my professional dimension as a student educator; it is my professional responsibility to ensure that all learners succeed academically and reach their full potential. During my experience as a student educator in my teaching practical, I was exposed to learners from diverse backgrounds, including those who identified as LGBTQ+. I observed the challenges they faced, particularly the lack of support and understanding from

some educators, which sparked my interest in exploring this topic further. Additionally, I have observed how lack of inclusivity negatively impacted learners' academic performance. As such, this professional experience motivated me to research the educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, specifically in a township school.

My interest in conducting this study was also triggered by the gap in the literature that focuses on educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diversity in the classroom, specifically in township schools. The literature highlighted that gender diversity and non-binary identities in educational leadership demonstrate an increasing realisation of the necessity of developing inclusive school environments that meet the needs of all learners, including LGBTQ+ learners (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Moreover, Kosciw et al. (2014) noted that educators have a critical role in establishing the opportunities for acceptance and inclusion within the school community. However, there is a knowledge gap regarding gender diversity and non-binary individuals in education, especially those in township schools (Zhange, 2024). Furthermore, the study by Robinson and Espelage (2011) reported that many learners who are non-binary and gender diverse are openly expressing their identities. However, societal standards have yet to embrace their identities, especially in school environments (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Thus, schools need to prepare for such a change. DaPalma and Francis (2014) found that the South African policy portrays schools as inclusive environments. Nonetheless, it is not the case in reality; most educators are not well-informed about gender diversity and non-binary identities. Consequently, other genders are being misrepresented and excluded in schools due to a lack of adaptive leadership to the sensitive issues of gender diverse and non-binary learners in township schools, which is an issue that is quickly transpiring in our societies.

Moreover, the context of South African township schools presents unique challenges and opportunities. High poverty levels, social inequality, and historical marginalisation impact learners' educational experiences and teachers' professional realities (Singh, 2022). Gender-diverse and non-binary learners in these settings face additional layers of stigma and exclusion, making it imperative to investigate how we as educators can be better equipped to foster an environment of inclusivity and respect. Previous studies (Andam & Epprecht, 2019; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Msibi, 2012) have highlighted the prevalence of gender-based violence and discrimination in South African schools, underscoring the need for educator training on gender issues (DePalma & Francis, 2014). Furthermore, research has called for more in-depth studies into the professional development and support systems available to teachers in managing

gender diversity (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). These studies suggest a gap in our understanding of educators' specific needs and experiences in township schools, where resource constraints may further complicate the situation.

Despite the growing exposure of gender-diverse and non-binary learners, a considerable gap exists in the literature regarding educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, specifically at township schools (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). While existing studies by Msibi (2012), Francis and Reygan (2016), and Jones (2017) provide insights into the experiences of gender-diverse and non-binary pupils, and the importance of inclusive practices, there is a paucity of research focusing specifically on the experiences and perspectives of educators in managing classrooms to be gender inclusive, particularly in the context of township schools where conservative community norms may exert a more substantial influence.

According to the DBE (2020), educators play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive classroom environments that reflect the diversity of society, particularly in terms of gender diversity and non-binary identities. This study sought to explore educators' perspectives on their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms within the Clermont area of the Pinetown District.

1.5.The significance of the Study

This study explored educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diversity and supporting non-binary learners in South African secondary schools. This study also provided me with a meaningful opportunity to deepen my understanding of how educators navigate issues of gender diversity within classroom and school contexts, despite the existence of progressive constitutional and educational policies that advocate equality and prohibit discrimination. The study offered valuable insights into what happens within classrooms and schools as a whole when educators engage with gender-diverse and non-binary learners, revealing both the challenges and possibilities that accompany such efforts toward inclusion.

The findings of this study might be valuable to various education stakeholders, including educators, school leaders, and policymakers, who are committed to advancing inclusive education. For educators and school managers, the study highlights the challenges of managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. This might help them better understand how to cultivate affirming and supportive learning environments. The findings might also contribute

to shaping teacher development programmes and leadership training initiatives aimed at building educators' confidence and competence in addressing gender diversity within schools.

Importantly, the research findings might inform the development of transparent and responsive school policies that promote inclusion and well-being for all learners, as well as guide policymakers in designing frameworks that strengthen gender-sensitive educational leadership and management practices. Therefore, the study might provide concrete evidence of their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in their pursuit of gender-inclusive education. Finally, this study might contribute to the existing body of knowledge by bridging the gap between the disciplines of Gender Education and inclusive education relating to the discipline of Education Leadership, Management, and Policy (ELMP). Thus, this study positions classrooms as microcosms of society, where educators play a critical role in actively nurturing equity, empathy, and justice to create an inclusive society. By better understanding and managing gender diversity within schools, this research ultimately supports the broader vision of a socially just and inclusive South Africa, aligned with the nation's educational aims for social transformation.

1.6.The purpose statement of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont (Pinetown District). The focus was on exploring the educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities, understanding how educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom, and identifying the challenges that educators face in managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom. Thus, I was interested in gaining insights into what educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom.

1.7.Research Questions

In response to the problem identified above, the study sought to address the following focal research question:

- What are educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont Township?

1.7.1. Sub-questions

The following sub-questions were asked to support answers to the main research question:

- How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?
- How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?
- What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?
- What do teachers think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?

1.8. Research Methodology

This section reflects briefly on the research methodology employed in this study. A detailed review of the study's methodology would be discussed in Chapter 3. Flick (2017) avers that a research methodology describes the processes and methods used to discover and analyse information about a specific phenomenon, enabling researchers to achieve their objectives efficiently. Sreekumar (2023) also stated that research methodology encompasses essential elements, including the study design, data generation methods, and data analysis techniques.

1.8.1. Research Paradigm

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm, which focuses on understanding individuals' subjective meanings, perceptions, and experiences in social contexts (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This paradigm was particularly suitable for exploring educators' perspectives on managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, as it recognises that their individual backgrounds and social contexts influence educators' understandings and responses to gender diversity in their classrooms (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm provided in-depth insights into educators' perspectives on their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

1.8.2. Qualitative Research Approach

The research employed a qualitative approach, aiming to understand human behaviour and perspectives rather than quantifying data (Creswell, 2013). This approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm, acknowledging that individuals construct their own meanings and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995). A qualitative research approach was crucial for this

study, as it enabled in-depth interviews to understand educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

1.8.3. Research Design

The research design refers to the plan or method used by researchers to carry out their research and answer their research questions or objectives (Creswell, 2013). This study employed a case study research design, which provided a comprehensive understanding of educators' roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in the Pinetown District (Yin, 2012). Yin (2012) further underlined that case study research design is appropriate when the research attempts to address "how" and "why" questions. In the context of this study, the case study design allowed me to use semi-structured interviews to question six participants in a selected school setting and probe them for further information. Therefore, by using the case study design, I was able to work in a natural setting and within a bounded context (Creswell, 2012), namely a selected school in Clermont township (Pinetown District).

1.8.4. Data generation

Patton (2014) defines data generation methods as the techniques used to generate data from participants. This study applied semi-structured interviews as a data-generating method. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) define a semi-structured interview as a qualitative research technique that combines predefined open-ended questions with the adaptability for exploring emerging themes, allowing interviewers to pose follow-up questions for deeper understanding. This method was carefully selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in Clermont. It also allowed me to probe my participants even further to fully capture their true perspectives.

1.8.5. Sample and Sampling method

Sampling is the process of selecting individuals for research who represent the broader population from which they were chosen (Creswell, 2013). In the context of this study, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed, which means that not everyone had an equal chance of being selected, nor did every school have an equal chance of being selected. The participants selected for this study were six Life Orientation educators from a township school in the Pinetown District. The participants and the site were purposefully chosen based on their best position to answer the study's research questions, due to the experiences and knowledge that Life Orientation has related to the study's focus.

1.8.6. Data analysis

Forman et al. (2008) aver that qualitative research data analysis includes preparing and organising data, reducing it to themes by coding and simplifying it, and displaying it in figures, tables, or discussions. In this study, data analysis was guided by the research questions and the conceptual framework guiding the study. In the case of this study, I transcribed the interviews and followed the thematic analysis approach to analyse the data. Huberman (2019) aver that thematic data analysis is a qualitative research approach that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within a dataset. This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases approach to thematic analysis, which included the following steps:

- *Phase 1:* Familiarisation with data through complete sets and identification of meanings and patterns.
- *Phase 2:* Generation of initial codes that condense data into meaningful segments.
- *Phase 3:* Searching for themes by organising codes into thematic categories and gathering relevant data.
- *Phase 4:* Reviewing themes to ensure they align with codes and are pertinent to the study.
- *Phase 5:* Definition of themes, identifying what each theme represents.
- *Phase 6:* Writing up the findings, reporting relevant themes in the final report.

1.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration is defined as a set of criteria that researchers must follow when conducting a study (Cypress, 2020). Before conducting the research, I applied for ethical clearance from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) ethics committee. I also assured autonomy in my research by gaining informed consent from all my participants, meaning that participants filled out the consent form, which stamped their will to volunteer to be a part of this study, and it was emphasised that they were free to withdraw from the study at any moment. Moreover, participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality in terms of identity and information protection through the use of pseudonyms and not revealing the school's name.

1.10. Trustworthiness of the Study

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), research should strive for a certain level of trustworthiness to ensure that the results of qualitative studies are accurate and transferable to other settings. To conduct a trustworthy interpretation of the findings from qualitative study designs, a systematic approach is used to ensure that the research has credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, reflexivity (conducted via the interpretative process) and crystallisation (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) are also considered strategies. In the context of this study, all these systematic approaches that ensure trustworthiness were followed and further discussed in Chapter 3.

1.11. Clarification of Concepts

This section shows the clarifications of the study's key concepts. The key concepts in this study are outlined as follows:

1.11.1. Educators

According to Dewey (1916), an educator is not simply a transmitter of knowledge but a facilitator of holistic development who links learning to lived experience and social engagement. For Dewey (1916), education is a democratic and transformative process, with the educator serving as a facilitator who guides learners to think critically and become active citizens in their communities. Similarly, Biesta (2010 and 2015) views the educator as an individual who facilitates learners' development in qualification, socialisation, and subjectification, assisting them in becoming independent and responsible members of society. In this study, the term 'educator' was used to describe individuals who serve as agents of change, extending learning beyond the classroom and translating their classroom experiences into reflections of society. The use of 'educators' rather than 'teachers' highlights their transformative and socially responsive role in shaping both personal and civic growth.

1.11.2. Gender diversity

Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) define gender diversity as the acceptance and affirmation of various gender identities that go beyond the traditional binary definitions of male and female. This idea acknowledges that people can identify with multiple genders, including 'agender', genderqueer, and gender fluid identities (Schudson & Morgenroth, 2022). The American Psychological Association (2015) further notes that gender diversity means that a person's gender identity, role, or expression is different from what society expects for people of certain

sex. Therefore, in this study, gender diversity is understood as a wide range concept that includes all genders and sexual identities without any form of marginalisation.

1.11.3. Non-binary Identities

Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) outline that non-binary inclusion refers to the acceptance and integration of people who do not identify solely as male or female, thereby questioning traditional gender standards and advancing a broader conception of gender. This concept challenges traditional gender norms and advocates for a more expansive understanding of gender (American Psychological Association, 2015). As a result, the concept of non-binary identities was used in conjunction with *gender diversity* to promote inclusivity and address gaps in the exclusion of identities within this study.

1.11.4. Management

Fayol (1916) describes management as coordinating and controlling tasks to ensure organisational effectiveness, while Bush (2011) extends this to education, viewing educators as managers who translate school policies into practice and create conditions for effective teaching and learning. As classroom managers, educators not only maintain order and implement curriculum but also care for learners' emotional and social well-being (Van der Westhuizen, 2013). In this study, management refers to the process through which educators plan, organise, and lead classroom activities to achieve both educational and social goals. This study further aligns management with leadership, where educators act as transformational leaders who inspire, guide, and foster inclusive learning environments (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

1.12. General Outline of Chapters

Creswell & Creswell (2018) define the thesis or dissertation structure overview as a segment of the study that summarises the research design, providing concise summaries of each chapter to facilitate readers' understanding of the thesis arrangement. The overall structure of this thesis has five Chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the study provides an overview of the study, including its background, problem statement, rationale, and significance. Moreover, this section also presents the purpose statement and research questions guiding the study, a brief methodology, and lastly, the key concepts within this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework provide an overview of the existing literature on educators' roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Several sub-themes were discussed, guided by the research questions, and the gap in the literature was also revealed. Furthermore, this section presents the conceptual framework of this study, which draws from three key perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory (Individualized consideration), Social Justice Theory (Equity, recognition, and empowerment), and Henri Fayol's Management Concept of Leadership.

Chapter 3: This chapter focuses on the **research methodology**, including the approach and design employed in this study. It discussed the philosophical assumptions underlying the study, the paradigm, and the sampling methods used to select participants. This chapter further outlines the data generation method and data analysis technique employed in this study. Lastly, this chapter also provides descriptions of how trustworthiness was ensured in this study, as well as the ethical considerations followed during the study.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents **data presentation, analysis, interpretation, and discussion** of the study, which aimed to explore educators' perspectives on their role in managing a gender-diverse and non-binary classroom in a selected township school in Clermont (Pinetown District). It also linked the study's findings to existing studies and further discussed the findings through the lens of the conceptual framework guiding the study.

Chapter 5: This is the final chapter, which presents a **summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations**. The limitations and delimitations of the study were also discussed, and the study provided recommendations for future research.

1.13. Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a background for the study, including the rationale for this research and the research problem statement. It also outlined key aspects, such as the purpose statement and research questions, that investigate educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in Clermont (Pinetown District). Additionally, this chapter discussed the significance of the study, the brief methodology employed, defines the key concepts used, and lastly, the chapter outlined the overall structure of the research. The next chapter reviews the existing local and international literature relevant to this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Introduction

A literature review is a critical, analytical summary of existing scholarly research that informs and situates a current study within the broader academic discourse (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It serves to identify what is known, where gaps exist, and how a study contributes to the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Machi and McEvoy (2016), an effective literature review not only synthesises existing work but also justifies the necessity of the current research. In this study, the literature review contextualised educators' perspectives on managing gender diversity and non-binary learners, drawing from both international and South African research.

Therefore, this chapter aims to review and analyse available literature based on educators' practices and knowledge of managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in global and local contexts. More so, it also seeks to analyse the theories that make up the conceptual framework of this study as the core blueprint guiding debates and discussions on research focusing on educators' understandings, practices, challenges, and strategies for managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. As a result, literature will reflect on the following themes guided by the research questions:

- Conceptualisation of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity
- Managing gender diversity and non-binary identities in classrooms
- Challenges educators face when managing gender diverse classrooms
- Assistance educators need to manage gender diversity and non-binary classrooms effectively
- Gaps in the literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights gaps in understanding how educators manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, particularly within township secondary school context. This chapter also discusses the conceptual framework that underpinned the study.

2.2. Conceptualisation of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity

This section presents the conceptualisation of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity with support from different literature.

2.2.1. Conceptualising gender diversity

Gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity are concepts that are closely related to each other. That being the case, it was imperative to understand both these concepts as they are core concepts of this study. Butler (2005), in a book *Gender Trouble: “Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,”* employs a post-structuralist and queer theoretical framework to critique the traditional understanding of gender, arguing that gender is not a stable identity but a performative act, historically understood and regulated within binary terms of male and female. However, Kurup and Underwood (2021) in their study, which employed a qualitative approach with 36 adolescent participants in the United States, explored traditional conceptualising of gender and noted that the new generation views gender as more than just a binary. This alludes that in recent times, gender is diverse and cannot be limited to being viewed as merely male or female. The concept of gender is vast and cannot be viewed using a single lens.

To clarify this, gender is a social construct, which is a set of meanings, norms, roles, and expectations that society creates and teaches us over time, rather than a fixed biological trait (Butler, 1990). This idea goes beyond the simple biological categories of male and female (sex) and shows that how we interpret and perform gender is shaped by culture, history, and everyday social interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). Early feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir also argued that we are not born with a fixed gender but become gendered through socialisation and structural forces (de Beauvoir, 1949). From this perspective, the traditional understanding that there are only two genders; masculine men and feminine women, reflects a socially constructed binary system that overlooks the lived experiences of those who do not fit neatly into those categories. Gender diversity emerges because people’s experiences and expressions of gender vary across contexts and cannot be reduced to binary norms; instead, this diversity reflects the fluid and constructed nature of gender practices in society (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

In addition, Schudson and Morgenroth (2022), in their study on gender development and diversity, conducted a conceptual and empirical analysis drawing on existing psychological research to challenge binary models of gender, arguing that gender is a dynamic and multidimensional construct, and highlighting that younger generations increasingly reject

binary gender classifications in favour of more inclusive, non-binary understandings. Moreover, Speechley et al. (2023) synthesised qualitative data from 1,758 gender-diverse individuals across 72 studies, applying reflexive thematic analysis. They introduced the “Diverse Gender Identity Framework”, which emphasises that understanding gender as a spectrum, rather than a fixed binary, enables a more nuanced appreciation of individual experiences and identities, reflecting the fluid and multifaceted ways people define and live their gender.

Gender diversity is relevant in education in recent times, specifically in inclusive education and classroom management (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Francis, 2019; Msibi, 2012). Gender diversity in education is often linked to creating inclusive curricula, safe environments, and policies that address discrimination (Orozco et al., 2022). Orozco et al. (2022), in their paper reviewing the sexual and gender diversity in education, outlined that educational institutions reflect the broader society; therefore, educators have a huge responsibility to ensure that schools are safe spaces for every learner to express themselves. In the context of this study, gender diversity was understood as a wide range concept that includes all genders and sexual identities without any form of marginalisation in educational spaces.

However, research highlights that, considering the reality that there are gender diverse pupils in most educational institutions, they are still misrepresented and marginalised (Singh, 2022). Cross-cultural studies show that gender conceptualisations vary widely (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Flores, 2021; Ng et al., 2025). In a study by Flores (2021) focusing on gender conceptualisation in European countries, it was found that Dutch participants associate gender with biological traits, while Italians emphasise socio-cultural power structures, complicating universal inclusivity frameworks. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) reported that there are different views on gender diversity in international countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States of America (USA), which even led to anti-gender campaigns seeking to perpetuate only traditional gender norms in society. In the USA, President Trump’s administration has made significant changes in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Ng et al., 2025). The amendment to the USA Education Act defines gender as being determined by biological sex that is revealed by genetics at birth (Ng et al., 2025). This suggests that gender diversity is compromised in the education of the USA, as they are leaning towards traditional gender norms of male and female only.

South Africa is also no exception, as similar studies portray marginalisation, misrepresentation, and invisibility regarding gender diversity (Msibi, 2012; Francis, 2017; Singh, 2022). Francis (2017) reported that many South African (SA) schools are still promoting and enforcing traditional binary norms in classrooms where educators only recognise male and female in their practices. Similarly, Msibi (2012) in his study exploring the experiences of queer youth in SA found that SA schools remain sites of heteronormative enforcement, where gender diverse pupils are invisible, bullied, and marginalised, and yet they show resilience and agency in navigating such oppressive environments. Moreover, the South African Constitution and the Alteration of Sex Description Act protect gender-diverse people, although enforcement is sometimes lacking in rural schools (Singh, 2022). For instance, a study conducted by Reygan and Francis (2015) investigated at how emotions influence educators' reactions to sexual and gender diversity in South African schools. It reported that educators were often uncomfortable discussing these issues, had inherited bitter knowledge, and perpetuated heterosexist views and homophobia. Given the increasing emphasis on LGBTQ+ rights in South African educational policy (DBE, 2023), the study implies that educators should be more aware of the role of emotions in allowing or impeding social justice efforts in education.

While the literature presents gender diversity as a progressive and inclusive concept that recognises all gender identities, the closer reading on educational studies such as Francis (2015), Msibi (2012), Ng et al. (2025); reveals a more concerning reality that there is a struggle of understanding of gender diversity. Critical gender scholars argue that schools should actively challenge binary gender norms and create space for diverse gender expressions (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2009). However, empirical studies in schools, particularly within the South African context, suggest that many educators continue to interpret gender through binary frameworks, often resulting in uncertainty or avoidance when engaging with gender-diverse and non-binary learners (Francis, 2015; Msibi, 2012). This contrast highlights a gap between the theoretical commitment to gender diversity and its practical enactment in classrooms. It is within this gap that this study is situated, focusing on educators' perspective on their roles in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a township secondary school.

2.2.2. Conceptualising non-binary inclusivity

Moreover, Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) outline that non-binary inclusion refers to accepting and integrating people who do not solely identify as male or female, thereby questioning traditional gender standards and advancing a broader conception of gender. This

concept challenges traditional gender norms and advocates for a more expansive understanding of gender. According to Levitt et al. (2024), non-binary inclusivity caters to the identities of individuals who do not identify as male or female, also known as genderqueer, gender fluid, or ‘agender’, and views their gender as a spectrum by opposing the exclusion of various gender identities in society. However, not all gender identities that do not identify solely as male and female fall under the spectrum of the ‘non-binary’ term (Schudson & Morgenroth, 2022). Non-binary inclusiveness focuses on incorporating and recognising the perspectives of people who do not identify solely as male or female. As a result, this study opted to correlate both these concepts as they seem to support each other and leave no gaps of marginalisation to those who do not locate within binary gender identities.

The concept of non-binary inclusivity has also made rounds in the education sector, where inclusivity is valued. To begin with, it seems that the concept of non-binary inclusivity is misunderstood and misinterpreted in schools. Schools are generally perpetuating binary gender norms, which only recognises male or female, and that is not in line with the school’s inclusive policies (Singh, 2022). It is critical to understand the concept of non-binary inclusivity as schools are an epitome of our society and must be inclusive to all (Schudson & Morgenroth, 2022). Monro (2019), in their literature overview of the field of non-binary and gender queer, avers that non-binary inclusivity in education is a concept rooted in transformative and social justice education. Monro (2019) further claimed that this concept promotes inclusive spaces where all identities are validated, thus challenging heteronormativity and promoting practices, policies, and pedagogies that acknowledge and support learners whose gender identities are not binary.

Similarly, Paechter et al. (2021) argue that non-binary inclusion necessitates more than permitting non-binary learners to express themselves; it demands a fundamental transformation in school culture, curriculum, language, restroom accessibility, uniform regulations, and staff training. It also necessitates the acknowledgment of gender diversity as normative, rather than as an abnormality or disturbance. The idea of non-binary inclusivity challenges binary-based norms such as sports classification, gendered seating arrangements, and role expectations in classroom settings (Monro, 2019). Thus, this is a step towards transforming educational justice, a type of learning that not only accepts but also celebrates non-binary existence (Monro, 2019). These understandings of non-binary identities have a direct implication on how educators manage learner interaction, enforce policies, and create inclusive environments.

However, numerous studies have highlighted the contradictions and tensions of non-binary inclusivity in education (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Paechter et al., 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022). For instance, a small-scale study by Paechter et al. (2021) exploring the school experiences of 18 non-binary learners across schools in England found that most educators fail to understand the concept of non-binary identities due to their personal and cultural biases, societal heteronormative standards, and lack of information regarding non-binary identities. In the UK, DePalma and Atkinson (2009) also explored how educators managed non-binary identities in classrooms. They brought attention to the anxiety and discomfort many teachers experienced, which led to silence on non-binary issues; a phenomenon sometimes known as "pedagogical erasure." USA studies also point to regional and political disparities, with schools in conservative states often refusing to implement even minimal protections for non-binary students (Kosciw et al., 2022). These scholars reveal the important role that educators play in managing non-binary inclusivity within their classrooms to create a just and safe learning space for every learner.

According to Singh (2022), South Africa's strategy for gender inclusion in education is influenced by its progressive constitutional principles; however, these principles are frequently not implemented effectively. Singh (2022) further claims that although the Department of Basic Education's Guidelines for Social Inclusion are in place, their implementation is patchy and mostly reliant on individual schools or educators. Francis and Msibi (2011) in their study involving educators and teacher trainees across South Africa, contend that many South African school educators continue to resist gender and sexuality diversity due to fear of job loss, backlash, and lack of knowledge, hence marginalising non-binary students. They further claimed that gender binaries are perpetuated by language, standardised regulations, and strict gender roles in educational activities (Francis & Msibi, 2011). Emerging research, such as that by Francis and Monakali (2021), that focused on the experiences of gender diverse youth in South African schools, reveals that gender diverse students strive on their own without any support from educators and the school at large. These scholars not only highlight learners' resilience but also emphasise how urgently institutional transformation is needed.

2.2.3. Relationship between gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity in this study

There is an intrinsic relationship between gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity. Therefore, embracing gender diversity necessitates the inclusion of non-binary identities (Gibson & Fernandez, 2018). Gibson and Fernandez (2018), in their book, gender diversity and

non-binary inclusion in the workplace, noted that both gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity emphasise the importance of recognising and respecting a wide range of gender identities. While gender diversity acknowledges the spectrum of gender identities, non-binary inclusivity focuses on integrating those who do not fit within the traditional male-female dichotomy (Gibson & Fernandez, 2018). Together, these concepts advocate for a society that respects and validates individual experiences of gender beyond conventional norms. In educational settings, this involves creating environments where all gender identities are acknowledged and respected, thereby fostering a culture of inclusivity. Therefore, understanding these notions is critical when considering educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in Clermont Township.

2.3. Managing gender diversity and non-binary identities in classrooms

To begin with, under the second theme, the classroom is an essential socialising factor in children's development, with educators influencing their ideas and classroom practices regarding gender. However, there is little research on educators' gender-role beliefs and their link to gendered classroom practices. Studies about classroom management (McCabe, 2022; Gansen, 2019), extend to primary school settings. Some research in early childhood settings in the United States has shown conflicting results, with some reflecting equitable ideas and others suggesting stereotyped beliefs (McCabe, 2022; Gansen, 2019). It seems that educators' gender-role beliefs are likely to affect their practices in managing gender diversity in the classroom.

Research aimed at exploring gender diverse issues in classrooms at Pre-schools in Australia, the United States, and Turkey has found that educators utilise gender labels in the classroom (Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Farago et al., 2022; Gelir, 2022). Farago et al. (2022, p.476) identified that in some preschools, educators used gender labels 142 times in 12 hours, or around 12 gender labels each hour. In some elementary schools, educators utilised gender designations (Farago, 2022). However, Callahan and Nicholas (2019) reported that there may be variation in the rates of gender label use, with some educators avoiding gender labels and instead employing gender-neutral language. Educators who hold more traditional gender-role beliefs may be more inclined to employ approaches that increase gender salience, such as gender labels and segregation. The research further revealed that some educators commonly employed gender categories to manage children's activities, emphasising gender as a functional category.

Moreover, research by Mayer (2017) exploring ways of building a classroom community argued that it is strongly recommended that educators demonstrate an inclusive approach by introducing their own pronouns and their gender identity and encouraging their learners to do the same. This practice promotes a climate in the classroom that is courteous and normalises the existence of a variety of gender identities. Furthermore, eliminating traditional protocols such as gendered sitting in class and gendered roles, and replacing them with activities that allow learners to identify themselves using the names and pronouns of their own choice, assists learners to feel more confident in their identities and reduces fear (Mayer, 2017). Moreover, research by Pacific Oaks College (2024) aimed at understanding and supporting gender diverse youth in education reported that schools with inclusive gender management practices report 30% lower suicide attempts among gender diverse students. As a result, educators' management practices regarding gender diverse and non-binary identities are crucial in setting the culture within the classroom.

A study by Kelley et al. (2022) focusing on the experiences, gender affirmations, and challenges of non-binary Canadian students highlights the need to consider environmental adjustments, such as providing all-gender bathrooms in schools, as an inclusive management strategy. Kelley et al. (2022) further reported that having gender-neutral bathrooms is not just an easy solution; however, the main issue is the lack of inclusion of gender-diverse students in school decision-making. They reported that students condemned their educational environment for its lack of support, highlighting biases, misunderstandings, and the exclusion of gender diversity, which are entrenched in the institutional culture and binary norms (Kelley et al., 2022). Thus, schools disregard and ignore the needs of gender-diverse students because of their views on gender, which are influenced by traditional binary norms. This causes educators to delay assisting gender-diverse students and end up making uncalculated decisions in supporting these students without including them in their decision-making.

Additionally, South African literature presents unique practices of educators concerning gender diverse and non-binary identities in township classrooms (Roex, 2012; Segalo, 2021; Nichols, 2023). Roex (2012) avers that a multitude of South African educators prioritise content delivery, sometimes neglecting the diverse gender identities of their students. This prioritisation of content above diversity may lead to environments where gender diverse and non-binary learners feel marginalised. In consensus, Serakwane and Herman (2022), highlighted that educators often lack culturally responsive classroom management approaches,

resulting in behavioural misinterpretation and the reinforcement of prejudices. In addition, they argue that educators in South African classrooms usually ignore gender diversity and inclusivity in their teaching and classroom management practices, and they focus on delivering the content to learners.

Furthermore, literature highlights that gender biases are manifested in classroom interactions (Segalo, 2021 & Nichols, 2023). Educators may unintentionally demonstrate bias towards specific genders, which can influence participation and performance in school. Segalo's (2021) study that explored the nature of learners' classroom behavioural challenges from a resilient teachers' perspectives, indicated that educators frequently allocate greater attention to boys, presuming they necessitate further support, whilst girls are anticipated to display compliance and receive punishment for assertiveness. As such, gender diverse and non-binary learners are often overlooked in the classroom. Despite inclusive policies, such as SASA (1995), which state that no person may unfairly discriminate against a learner and that all learners shall enjoy equal treatment before the law and shall receive equal protection and benefits of the law, educators are lagging in embracing gender-diverse learners in their teaching practices (Singh, 2022). Nichols (2023) notes that some principals and educators fight inclusive initiatives because of personal prejudices, creating hostile environments for gender-diverse non-binary learners. Thus, literature highlights how South African educators ignore gender diverse and non-binary learners in their classrooms, and how their classroom management skills are still lacking concerning inclusivity.

Despite many studies criticising educators' discriminatory use of language in classrooms and poor management of gender diversity, some studies advocate that educator development is essential in addressing gender exclusion in classrooms. For instance, a study by Farago et al. (2022) on educators' approaches for handling gender diversity in the classroom has emphasised the relevance of teacher training and professional development in this area. According to research (Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Farago et al., 2022; Gelir, 2022), educators who are trained in gender diversity and inclusion are more effective in establishing supportive learning environments for all children. Furthermore, research has shown that educators who actively address gender diversity and non-binaries in their classrooms can improve learners' attitudes and academic performance (McCabe, 2022).

Farago et al. (2022) also noted that by encouraging gender equality and addressing stereotypes, educators may help students develop a more inclusive perspective and enhance their overall

learning experience. Overall, educators play an important role in addressing gender diversity in the classroom by encouraging inclusion, challenging stereotypes, and fostering a supportive learning environment for all students. Only resourceful countries can manage gender diversity in classrooms accordingly (Farago et al., 2022). Countries such as South Africa are still ignorant of the issue of gender diversity (Msibi, 2012). Therefore, to close this gap, this study aims to explore the perspectives of educators regarding their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, particularly in township settings.

2.4. Challenges educators face when managing gender diverse classrooms

Research suggests that educators in public schools face unique challenges when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms (Msibi, 2012; Raygan, 2018). Some South African schools view diversity as a problem and prioritise finding alternative educational options over using inclusive teaching strategies (Msibi, 2012; Reygan, 2018; Francis, 2017). Reygan (2018), who conducted a small-scale qualitative study on the Free State educators exploring the educators' responses to gender and sexual diversity, also noted that educators' positioning is critical in social justice and anti-oppressive education, especially in the context of non-binary and gender diverse classrooms. Educators may feel uncomfortable and triggered when teaching these themes, particularly when fostering critical diversity literacy (CDL) (Francis, 2017). This alludes that the educator's role is critical in ensuring gender diversity in classrooms. So, if educators fail in that role, that may lead to exclusion of non-binary learners, which has severe impacts on those learners, such as suicide, as noted previously in the first chapter.

In addition, educators are resistant to change, especially when it comes to gender diversity issues in classrooms (Bhana, 2024; Msibi, 2012). Bhana (2014), in her study, which explored the management of the rights of non-binary learners in South African schools, argued that educators in South Africa lack management-level expertise in addressing non-binary and gender diversity issues. Heterosexist discourses and idealised notions of heterosexual marriage and norms pervade reports, with heterosexuality being the norm and homosexuality associated with sexual desires and discomfort. Msibi's (2012) work on the homophobic South African curriculum, also highlighted that educators struggle with accepting the new diverse reality in their classrooms, and they are still stuck to heterosexual norms. Consequently, this is a main challenge concerning gender diversity management in the classrooms.

Moreover, Chisholm (2017) researched transgender students' experiences in South African schools, namely in townships, focusing on how educators manage gender diverse classrooms in South Africa. According to the survey, transgender adolescents face significant discrimination and exclusion from their peers, and educators and schools are generally unable to meet their needs. The study stressed the need for inclusive education policies and practices, as well as frequent professional development for teachers and school administrators. Furthermore, Mthethwa et al. (2022) investigated the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) educators in 11 South African schools, particularly those located in townships. According to Mthethwa et al. (2022), LGBTeducators are frequently subjected to discrimination and harassment from colleagues and pupils, and many feel unsupported by school officials. The study emphasised the significance of providing safe and inclusive environments for LGBT educators and students and the need for ongoing professional development and training for all school staff.

In the same vein, Sehoole (2018) also noted that township schools often struggle with limited financial resources, resulting in inadequate infrastructure, outdated teaching materials, and a scarcity of technology. This lack of resources hampers the implementation of programs and initiatives aimed at promoting gender diversity and creating inclusive learning environments. Moreover, Chisholm (2017) argues that educators in township schools often need more training and professional development opportunities to address gender-related issues. Consequently, the lack of training leads to a limited understanding of gender equality, gender stereotypes, and discrimination. Without the necessary training, educators may inadvertently perpetuate gender biases, prejudices, or fail to provide support to students who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Township schools also lack administrative support and guidance to implement policies and programs that promote gender diversity, thus resulting in a lack of accountability and inconsistent enforcement of policies related to gender equality (Sehoole, 2018). Additionally, the absence of support networks for learners and educators can hinder efforts to create safe and inclusive spaces for all genders (Chisholm, 2017). As a result, it seems that the lack of resources and support from the government fosters gender exclusion in township schools.

However, some studies argue that educators are not ready to change their mindset on gender diversity and non-binary related matters in schools, and the lack of inclusivity is not solely about or limited to a lack of resources and policies (Burns et al., 2022; Drury et al., 2022).

Drury et al. (2022) research investigates trans-youth's experiences in physical education at Leeds in United Kingdom (UK), with an emphasis on the issues that educators confront. These scholars discovered that one of the main challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse classrooms is their deeply ingrained binary mind-set. Traditionally, education has been structured around a binary understanding of gender, where students are categorised as either male or female. This binary view often shapes educators' expectations, interactions, and teaching strategies, making it difficult for them to accommodate gender diverse learners who do not fit neatly into these categories. Educators with a binary mindset may struggle to acknowledge and respect diverse gender identities, leading to unintentional bias, discrimination, and exclusion of gender diverse learners in classrooms due to reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes (Drury et al., 2022).

Apart from this study, Burns et al. (2022), in a study concentrating on Australian educators' beliefs and comfort levels with socialising with diverse students, as well as their support for inclusive school policies and strategies, support the notion that educators are the problem regarding gender diversity. These scholars also noted that educators' binary mindsets can make inclusive learning settings difficult, especially for gender diverse children who may encounter bullying or marginalisation. Challenges to this perspective can assist educators in better supporting these learners' identities and experiences. The findings of this study show that schools do have facilities, policies, and development programmes in place for educators to strengthen their knowledge and approach regarding managing non-binary classrooms. However, educators do not practise what is in the policies and are the ones who undermine the need to learn about the management of non-binary classrooms. On one hand, educators' mindset is crucial in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. Therefore, challenging binary assumptions and biases is essential for inclusive learning environments.

On the other hand, educators are also implicated in reinforcing these challenges. The literature on educators' management of gender diversity in South African schools highlight both significant challenges and promising initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity (Reygan & Francis, 2015; Thani, 2016; Francis, 2017). One major challenge outlined by Reygan and Francis (2015) in their study that explore the role of emotions in educators' approaches to teaching about sexual and gender diversity in schools in the Free State is the tension between cultural and personal beliefs regarding gender. South Africa's diverse cultural landscape often presents conflicting views on gender roles, making it difficult for teachers to manage these

dynamics in classrooms. Some teachers struggle to balance respecting cultural perspectives with promoting gender inclusivity, which can result in inconsistent practices and policies around gender diversity (Thani, 2016).

Another challenge relates to traditional notions of masculinity and authority in rural and township schools (Msiza, 2021). Research indicates that male educators may feel pressured to assert control through authoritarian and hyper-masculine behaviours to maintain discipline (Moosa & Bhana, 2017; Msiza, 2021). This approach not only affects their own well-being but also create a hostile or exclusionary atmosphere for learners who do not conform to traditional gender norms (Msiza, 2021). Furthermore, Reygan (2019) concurs that although South Africa has progressive policies promoting gender equality in education, a gap often exists between policy and practice. This implementation gap undermines efforts to create supportive environments for gender-diverse learners.

2.5. Strategies and needs that can assist educators to better manage gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity in the classrooms

Despite these challenges, some educators have developed a range of strategies to support gender-diverse students. Managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms has become an increasingly important aspect of contemporary education. Many studies concerning gender management in classrooms (Essefa & Zeneba, 2024; Farago et al., 2022) postulate that there is a need for educators to understand gender diverse and non-binary learners and allow their mindset to change from traditional binary gender norms. Farago et al. (2022) conducted an online survey in the US examining over 500 educators in pre-schools about their gendered classroom practices. The study found that educators' gendered classroom behaviours differed depending on their beliefs about gender, making gender salient in some cases. This lends support to the Social Justice Theory, which critiques exclusionary practices by educators and encourages one to view the world with an open mind and challenge traditional binary gender prejudices. Thus, educators in the USA generally had more liberal gender-role ideas, which influenced children's behaviour and socio-cognitive development. It can be concluded that educators have a vital role in leading gender diverse and non-binary classrooms with an open mind to constant changes that are happening in classrooms and equally so in our societies.

Furthermore, a previously mentioned study of Blackburn et al. (2018) focusing on educators stepping up to advocate support for non-binary learners across the USA also notes that

educators who are seeking professional development and are committed to ensuring inclusivity in their classrooms are more likely to succeed in creating an inclusive gender diverse classroom. These scholars argued that there must be a clear link between the inclusive policies on gender diversity and practice in classrooms. Hence, it is upon educators to emancipate their minds and develop their management skills. The correlation in these research studies is that resources are available in countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia, and if they are being used accordingly by educators, classrooms will be a safe environment for gender diverse learners.

Additionally, educators should be creative when managing gender diverse classrooms especially concerning how they deliver the curriculum content to learners. Essefa and Zeneba (2024) aver that integrating gender diversity into the curriculum is another effective strategy of creating an inclusive classroom. This can be achieved by including texts and materials that represent diverse gender identities and by discussing the contributions of gender diverse individuals in various fields (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Such representation in the curriculum helps to normalise gender diversity and encourages a more inclusive classroom environment. However, these strategies are only achievable if all the stakeholders are working together in achieving the same goal which is inclusivity in education.

Research in South Africa has shown that the education system lacks resources or specific guidelines to support non-binary learners in classrooms, leaving educators without the necessary tools to create inclusive environments for all learners (Msibi, 2012; Bhana, 2014; Francis, 2018; Sehoole, 2018). The gap in recent studies regarding gender diversity management in South Africa has been the lack of training of educators regarding the subject at hand (Francis, 2018; Chisholm et al, 2017; Viviers et al., 2017; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). Nonetheless, research by Brown and Buthelezi (2020) on the perception of South African educators regarding support for non-binary learners at schools makes it clear that most South African schools are undoubtedly having resource constraints, which makes it impossible for the education sector to train educators with management skills for diversity in classrooms. As a result, there is a need for educators to change their perspectives and their practices to ensure inclusivity when managing gender diverse classrooms. Thus, this study is set to explore the educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, specifically in township schools where resources are scarce, and the background perpetuates traditional binary norms.

Moreover, one key approach is to incorporate democratic education and the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises human dignity, compassion, and interconnectedness (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). These principles can help cultivate school cultures that respect and embrace gender diversity. Additionally, research by Francis (2017) reviewing 27 studies on educators' educational programs in schools avers that providing educators with professional development opportunities is critical. Training programs can equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to challenge gender stereotypes, manage diverse classrooms, and foster positive learning experiences for all students (Francis, 2017). This alludes that training programs can equip educators with knowledge and principles of Ubuntu to better understand diversity within the classroom, leading to more inclusive classrooms.

Moosa and Bhana (2017) also argue that policies that explicitly address gender equality are also essential. Thus, schools must develop and enforce clear policies that create safe spaces and protect the rights of gender-diverse learners. Moreover, learning materials that promote gender equality and challenge traditional stereotypes can help shift attitudes and contribute to a more inclusive curriculum (Msibi, 2019). By integrating these strategies, schools can create environments where all learners, regardless of their gender identity, feel valued and supported.

2.6. Gap in Literature

Though current research provides insights on gender diversity and non-binary inclusiveness, major gaps still exist (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Paechter et al., 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022; Singh, 2022). For example, there have been few studies specifically investigating this topic of this study, which focuses on educators' perspectives of their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Furthermore, most studies on this subject come from the Global North, with little attention paid to the Global South context, like South Africa, where cultural, social, and policy dynamics could vary greatly (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Monro, 2019; Paechter et al., 2021; McCabe, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022).

Secondly, existing literature in South Africa, such as studies by Roex (2012), Segalo (2021), and Serakwane and Herman (2022), highlight how educators often overlook gender diversity, focusing on content delivery. However, few studies examine how educators in township secondary schools negotiate and implement inclusive management practices amidst structural constraints and cultural pressures. This study sought to address this underexplored area by exploring educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse classrooms in a

selected secondary school in Clermont township. Although previous studies (Msibi, 2012; Bhana, 2014; Chisholm, 2017) identify general challenges such as homophobia, lack of training, and resource shortages, there is also insufficient focus on how educators' own beliefs, emotional discomfort, and binary mindsets which impede inclusive practices (Burns et al., 2022; Drury et al., 2022). There is also limited attention to how educators experience tensions between cultural norms, school policy, and inclusive practices, particularly in township contexts. This study contributes by foregrounding the perspectives of educators on their roles in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school.

In addition, international literature recognises the importance of professional development and inclusive pedagogy (Farago et al., 2022; Blackburn et al., 2018), but South African research (Francis, 2018; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020) reveals that most township schools lack both the resources and frameworks to provide such support. Existing studies do not sufficiently explore educators' own views on the type of support they need. This study addresses that gap by exploring what township educators believe would better equip them to manage gender-diverse classrooms, aligning with Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasises capacity building and supportive leadership.

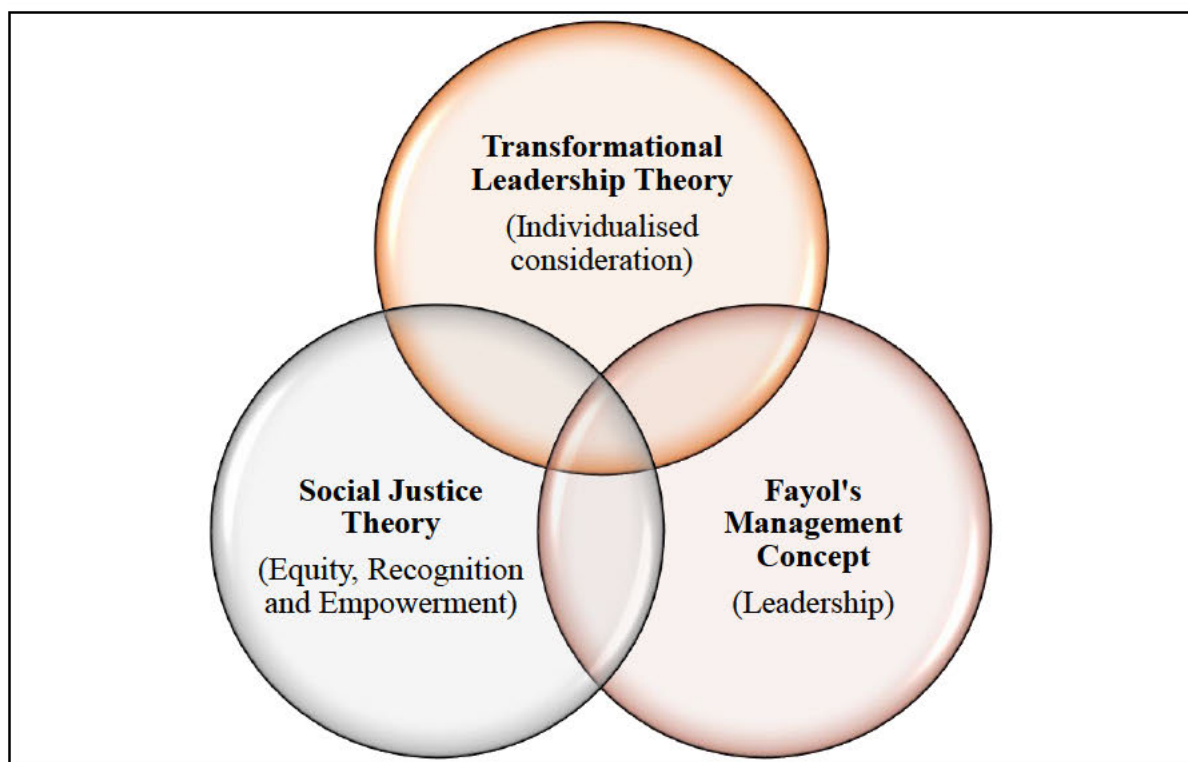
Overall, the literature reviewed in this study shows a clear gap between the theoretical framing of gender diversity as an inclusive and progressive concept and its practical enactment in school contexts (Singh, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022; Chisholm et al., 2017). While these studies acknowledge the importance of recognising gender diversity in education, they indicate that schools often continue to operate within binary and normative gender frameworks. In the South African context, research further suggests that educators experience challenges in translating inclusive ideals into everyday classroom practice due to cultural expectations, institutional constraints, and limited professional support (Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2014; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). Importantly, the existing literature pays limited attention to educators' own perspectives on their roles as classroom leaders, as well as the types of support they require to effectively manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, particularly in township secondary schools. This gap justifies the focus of the present study on educators' perspectives of their roles in managing gender diversity within the classroom.

2.7. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is a structured approach that outlines the key theories, concepts, and constructs that guide a study's inquiry (Creswell, 2014). According to Adom et al. (2018), a

conceptual framework acts as a roadmap that connects the research problem with relevant theories and literature, guiding the researcher in understanding the variables and their relationships. It helps to clarify the assumptions, boundaries, and perspectives through which the study is approached (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In qualitative research, the conceptual framework also plays a critical role in shaping the research questions, data generation methods, and interpretation of findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

This study was guided by a conceptual framework that draws on three key perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 1997), and Henri Fayol's (1949) Management Concept of Leadership. These frameworks collectively offer a comprehensive lens for exploring educators' perspectives of their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in Clermont. These theories were selected because they collectively provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand how educators perceive, enact, and manage gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity in classrooms, aligning with the research questions of the study. The following is the Venn diagram articulating the link between these three theories in this study:



Adopted from Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Justice Theory, and the Management concepts.

Firstly, Transformational Leadership Theory informs the second research question, “How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?” by offering insight into how educators can inspire change, lead inclusively, and advocate for marginalised learners through individualised consideration of learners. Secondly, Social Justice Theory underpins the first research question, “How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?” by providing a critical lens on equity, recognition, and the empowerment of gender diversity in classrooms. Lastly, Fayol’s Management Concept of Leadership supports the fourth research question, “What do educators think can be done to assist them better manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?” by offering a practical framework rooted in structured classroom management, planning, and coordination aligned with the field of Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy. Together, these theories and concepts provide an integrated foundation for understanding how educators perceive, respond to, and manage gender diversity within classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont.

2.7.1. Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985), who emphasised the ability of leaders to inspire and empower their followers beyond mere transactional exchanges. Burns (1978) distinguished between transactional leadership, which is based on exchanges of rewards and punishments, and transformational leadership, which involves motivating followers to reach higher levels of morality, commitment, and performance. Bass (1985) further developed the Theory by identifying four core components of transformational leadership: idealised influence, where leaders serve as role models; inspirational motivation, where leaders articulate a clear and compelling vision; intellectual stimulation, where leaders encourage creativity and critical thinking; and individualised consideration, where leaders attend to the unique needs of their followers. However, this study has focused on the concept of Individualised Consideration within the TLT.

The concept of individualised consideration focuses on the uniqueness of individuals and acknowledges their differences (Bass, 1985). Bass (1985) further added that this concept demonstrates that a leader should respect, support, and provide opportunities tailored to each person’s development. In this study, this concept was selected because the study focuses on educators as leaders in the classroom who are expected to share perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse classrooms. Individualised consideration was used to understand

how educators move beyond the 'one size fits all' approach and instead tailor their classroom to be inclusive and respectful to gender diverse and non-binary identities. This concept lenses the research question, which is exploring how educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in classrooms. It addressed how educators manage their gender diverse and non-binary classrooms by catering to the unique needs of learners in class.

Furthermore, educational research has widely used Transformational Leadership Theory to explore how leadership influences school culture, inclusivity, and student engagement. Shields (2010) applied this theory in a study on equity and social justice in education, demonstrating how transformational leadership fosters inclusive school environments by challenging discrimination and advocating for marginalised students. Similarly, Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) examined the impact of transformational leadership on student achievement. They found that schools led by transformational leaders exhibited higher student motivation and academic success levels, particularly in gender-diverse and under-resourced communities.

In gender inclusivity, transformational leadership theory has been used to examine how school leaders implement LGBTQ+ policies and create safe spaces for gender-diverse students. For instance, a study by Brown (2018) explored how transformational leadership strategies were employed in schools to promote gender inclusivity and found that school leaders who encouraged professional development on gender diversity significantly impacted the creation of supportive environments for gender-diverse students.

Despite its widespread application, Transformational Leadership Theory has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that the theory places too much emphasis on the leader's vision and charisma, potentially leading to over-dependence on individual leaders rather than fostering a collective leadership approach (Tourish, 2013). Others, such as Yukl (1999), argue that the theory lacks specificity in defining transformational behaviours, making it difficult to measure and apply consistently across different contexts. In the education sector, critics have noted that transformational leadership often overlooks the structural and systemic barriers that hinder educators' ability to implement inclusive practices (Gumus et al., 2018).

However, in this study, Transformational Leadership Theory analyses how educators act as change agents in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. This study has examined how educators' leadership and management practices align with transformational leadership concepts, particularly the concept of individualised consideration when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school. This Theory has also

helped to explore how educators display transformational leadership behaviours such as promoting inclusive classrooms, recognising learners' differences, and fostering a supportive learning environment.

2.7.2. Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory (SJT), introduced by John Rawls in his seminal work 'A Theory of Justice (1971),' forms the conceptual framework of this study. Rawls sought to respond to the limitations of utilitarianism, which he argued unjustly sacrifices individual rights for the benefit of the majority. Instead, he proposed a model of justice rooted in fairness, individual liberties, and equitable opportunities (Joseph, 2020). Drawing inspiration from philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, Rawls introduced two key concepts: the original position and the veil of ignorance. The original position refers to a hypothetical scenario where rational individuals select principles of justice for society without knowledge of their personal circumstances. The veil of ignorance ensures impartiality by requiring decisions to be made without knowledge of one's social position, promoting fairness and justice for all. These concepts portray what a truly just society will look like and are important to Rawls' theory of Social Justice.

Central to Rawls' theory are the Equal Basic Liberties Principle and the Difference Principle (Jharta & Devi, 2024). The Equal Basic Liberties Principle ensures equal fundamental freedoms for all individuals, while the Difference Principle allows social and economic inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged. In the context of education, these principles highlight the importance of inclusive environments where all learners, especially those who are gender-diverse and non-binary, receive equal rights, support, and opportunities (Pijanowski & Brady, 2021).

This study adopted three core concepts from Social Justice Theory: equity, recognition, and empowerment.

- Equity refers to fair access to resources and opportunities, considering individual learners' specific needs and backgrounds (Fraser, 2005).
- Recognition involves the respect and validation of diverse identities, particularly those that are historically marginalised or misrepresented (Young, 1990).
- Empowerment focuses on enabling learners to participate fully and confidently in educational settings, ensuring their voices are heard and valued (Fraser, 2005).

Beyond Rawls, scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2005) and Iris Marion Young (1990) have expanded the theory. Fraser emphasises equity of participation, arguing that justice requires both the redistribution of resources and the recognition of diverse identities to prevent systemic oppression. Similarly, Young views social justice as the dismantling of structural inequalities and the empowerment of marginalised voices. In the educational context, Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) define social justice as a commitment to equitable learning opportunities and actively challenging practices that marginalise learners based on gender, race, sexuality, or other social identities.

Furthermore, Social Justice Theory has been widely applied in educational research. For example, Francis (2019) highlights the educator's role in fostering inclusive environments by critically assessing curricula, pedagogy, and classroom rules to avoid disadvantaging gender-diverse learners. Educators, in alignment with Rawls' principles, are called to ensure learners' rights to self-expression and freedom, advocating for those who are most vulnerable in the classroom (Pijanowski & Brady, 2021). Moreover, in the South African context, Ngubane and Makua (2021) combined SJT with Ubuntu philosophy to guide higher education transformation. Their study demonstrated how both frameworks value cultural competence, equality, and the dignity of all students, affirming the relevance of SJT in local educational research.

In this study, Social Justice Theory was used to address the first research question: "What are the educators' understandings of gender diversity and non-binary identities?" The theory provided the lens for analysing how educators interpret fairness, representation, and respect within the school setting. It also supported the second research question: "How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?" By focusing on how educators implement equitable classroom practices, curriculum content, and language use, the theory enables a deeper understanding of whether these practices reinforce or challenge existing inequalities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Ultimately, by applying Social Justice Theory, this study aimed to promote transformative educational practices (Freire, 1970), encouraging educators to not only accommodate gender-diverse learners but also actively work toward changing the systems that marginalise them. This framework has enabled a critical reflection on the role of educators in creating inclusive, just, and empowering learning environments for all.

2.7.3. Fayol's Leadership Concept of Management

As one of the early adopters of the classical theory in management, Fayol defined 'management' as a resource-intensive process involving the systematic forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, coordination, and control of resources to achieve pre-defined organisational objectives (Fayol, 1949). Out of the five core functions of management, 'leadership' (which he initially referred to as commanding) focuses on the relationship between managers and subordinates in that managers are expected to guide, motivate, and align employees toward organisational goals. Although foundational leadership in Fayol's sense has been understood to imply dominance derived from a vertical chain of command, contemporary concepts rather see it as building trust, collaboration, respect, and principled actions (Wren & Bedeian, 2020). In this case, Fayol's leadership function is relevant in that it portrays the educationalists' responsibility to constructively and systematically 'manage' the classroom through policy, clarity of roles, and effective resource distribution, which are elements that help mitigate the challenges presented by gender-diverse and non-binary learners in a classroom.

Fayol's leadership-as-management concept aligns with this study's focus on management of gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in township schools and the discipline of education leadership, management, and policy. To illustrate, educators in these settings must balance systemic constraints (e.g., limited resources, cultural norms) with the need to create inclusive environments. For instance, "commanding" in Fayol's terms translates to educators 'structuring' their classroom setting to be inclusive of gender diverse and non-binary learners by commanding gender-neutral policies such as pronoun protocols, inclusive curricula, and 'coordinating' with stakeholders in the schools to promote and support non-binary learners. This translates leadership as a management role, ensuring equity is built into educators' daily practices rather than depending primarily on inspiration (Bush, 2020).

The inclusion of the leadership-as-management concept was a critical and deliberate choice in this study. Too often, discussions around inclusive education remain conceptual, lacking tangible pathways for real-world application. By incorporating Fayol's managerial function of leadership, the study has highlighted that achieving gender inclusivity in schools is not solely a matter of personal values or moral commitments; it also demands concrete, systematic action. Therefore, this concept of Leadership was very crucial in this study as a guiding lens, as it lensed the research questions, which were exploring the actions that could be taken to better manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom.

Additionally, in township school contexts, where structural constraints such as limited funding, inadequate training, and rigid institutional cultures prevail, leadership must extend beyond mere inspiration (Maringe & Moletane, 2015). It must involve the effective use of existing resources, the development of clear policies, and the establishment of monitoring systems that hold stakeholders accountable. For example, ensuring that educators are trained in gender sensitivity or that curricula reflect diverse identities requires both a commitment to justice and a capacity for operational leadership.

Framing leadership through both transformational and managerial lenses strengthened the study's focus on educational leadership and management policy. It emphasised that change is not only about envisioning better futures but about building them. It humanised leadership by acknowledging the emotional labour, political navigation, and strategic thinking that educators undertake daily. In this way, the study situated leadership as a dynamic interplay between vision and execution; an essential framework for understanding how educators can meaningfully support gender-diverse learners in township schools.

2.7.4. Linking Transformational Leadership, Social Justice, and Fuyol's Management Concept of Leadership

This study draws on a tripartite theory as the conceptual framework, namely, Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Justice Theory, and the Leadership-as-Management concept, to explore how educators in township secondary schools understand and respond to gender diversity and non-binary identities. Each framework contributed a distinct yet interwoven dimension to the overall understanding of inclusive leadership in educational contexts. Hence, this study linked the concepts of these theories to fully guide the study's focus by providing clear lenses of viewing the educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school.

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994) provides a lens through which educators are viewed not merely as classroom managers, but as visionary leaders capable of inspiring social change. Within this framework, educators understand and model inclusive practices, challenge normative assumptions, and empower learners to embrace and express diverse identities. Their influence goes beyond instruction; they ignite a sense of agency in learners and advocate for environments where every student feels seen, respected, and valued.

Social Justice Theory, grounded in the critical work of Rawls (1971), Freire (1970), and Crenshaw (1989), provided the ethical and ideological foundation for this study. This theory

called for attention to systemic inequities and the marginalisation experienced by gender-diverse and non-binary learners, particularly in under-resourced township schools (Freire, 1970). This lens also prompted educators to critically reflect on their positionalities, the power dynamics embedded within educational institutions, and the need to dismantle discriminatory practices that hinder equitable learning experiences.

Complementing these two is Leadership-as-Management, drawn from Fayol's (1949) classical management theory, which offered a pragmatic dimension to leadership by focusing on implementation, structure, and accountability. While transformational and social justice lenses focused on the why and what of change, leadership-as-management responds to the how. It also emphasised the importance of organising resources, planning inclusive policies, and establishing control mechanisms that ensure consistent and sustainable inclusivity (Shakir, 2014). The Leadership concept of Management complements the TLT and SJT by turning vision and values into actionable, sustainable change in this study.

2.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter synthesised existing literature on educators' gender-inclusive responses to non-binary and gender-diverse learners. It examined the global and South African contexts to demonstrate how inclusive education is understood, enacted, and contested across different educational systems. It also outlines the conceptual framework that guides this study.

To begin with, the chapter sets the stage by conceptualising gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity, using a spectrum approach rather than a binary lens. Throughout the literature, both international and local studies highlight the need for inclusion; however, most schools continue to marginalise learners who are gender-diverse because of deeply rooted heteronormative attitudes, reluctance from educators, and gaps between policy and practice.

Secondly, the chapter discussed how some educators approach inclusivity in classroom management. Some educators demonstrate inclusivity by using appropriate pronouns and allowing learners to express themselves; however, many still function within a binary system. Many township educators in South Africa seem to struggle with providing engagement beyond just delivering content, which is an instructional approach common in resource-deprived schools that lack adequate training and support and where entrenched personal or cultural beliefs abound.

Moreover, profound gaps in professional development, resistance from the institution, educator attitudes, lack of support structures, and other mindsets pose significant barriers to the system. International studies seem to indicate that inclusive training along with the implementation of policies, tends to have a favourable impact on the learners. However, local South African studies reveal an unrelenting disconnect between theory and practical application.

Despite these obstacles, some literature offers strategies for inclusive teaching, such as curriculum reform, staff training, and the enforcement of inclusive policies. However, these strategies remain underutilised in South African township schools, reinforcing the need for focused research on educators' practical experiences.

To anchor the analysis, the chapter employed a conceptual framework that combines Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Fayol's Management functions, specifically Leadership. These theories collectively illuminate how educators understand, implement, and are supported in creating inclusive classroom environments, especially through personalised engagement, equity-driven practices, and structured leadership.

Finally, the chapter identified significant gaps in current literature, particularly the absence of research capturing township educators' lived experiences and perspectives on managing gender diversity. The review underscores the necessity of this study to explore how educators in under-resourced South African schools perceive and enact their 'managerial' roles in creating gender-inclusive education. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed literature in relation to the study's objectives and outlined the gaps within the literature that this research sought to address. Chapter two also discussed the conceptual frameworks guiding the study. This chapter outlines the research methodology and considerations employed in this study. This includes an overview of the study's research questions and the philosophical assumptions. The section further discusses the paradigm, approach, and sampling techniques that were employed in the study. This chapter also analyses the data generation method and data analysis, the aspects of trustworthiness, and the ethical considerations of the study.

3.2. Research questions

To explore educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont, this study was centred on the following research questions:

- How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?
- How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?
- What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?
- What do teachers think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?

3.3. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm represents the foundational framework of beliefs, assumptions, and principles that guide how researchers understand reality, generate knowledge, and conduct scientific inquiry within a given discipline (Ugwu et al., 2021). It is conceptualised as "the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed" (Patel, 2015). According to Patel (2015), the research paradigm encompasses three interconnected philosophical pillars, namely: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Contemporary scholars (Scotland, 2012; Ugwu et al., 2021) also emphasise that a

research paradigm profoundly shapes every aspect of research, from formulating research questions to selecting methodologies and interpreting findings, as it reflects the researcher's worldview regarding what constitutes valid evidence and acceptable practice. Therefore, at its core, a research paradigm is the 'intellectual compass' guiding how we approach inquiry.

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm. According to Thanh and Thanh (2015), the interpretive paradigm is a conceptual framework used in social science research that focuses on understanding individuals' subjective meanings and experiences within a given social environment. It stresses the significance of social interactions, language, and culture in shaping people's worldviews (Creswell, 2013). Rather than pursuing objective truths, this approach deliberately centres the participant's perspectives, treating their interpretations as essential to comprehending social reality. Thus, the interpretive paradigm allowed for the exploration of the complex social realities and subjective experiences of educators within the school context. This approach acknowledged that educators' understandings, practices, and responses to managing gender-diverse and non-binary classes were not fixed or universal, but rather shaped by their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

In the context of this study, the interpretive paradigm was especially relevant as it recognised gender diversity and non-binary identities in township schools as social constructs; concepts which are understood and experienced differently by different individuals and groups. This paradigm enabled the investigation of how educators made sense of gender diversity based on their lived realities and contextual influences, allowing for deeper insights into their attitudes, beliefs, and everyday classroom practices. It also supported the use of qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, which were well suited for capturing the richness and depth of participants' views (Creswell, 2013).

One of the key advantages of using the interpretive paradigm was its capacity to foreground the voices of participants, thereby enabling the study to centre the meanings that educators attached to gender diversity and inclusivity in their specific school environments. This approach supported the generation of contextually relevant knowledge that contributed to more inclusive educational practices in South African township schools. Furthermore, as Creswell (2013) has argued, the interpretive paradigm aligns closely with qualitative research techniques that allow the researcher to engage directly with participants, promoting a deep and nuanced understanding of their perspectives and realities.

However, one common limitation associated with the interpretive paradigm is the issue of subjectivity and the potential for researcher bias during data interpretation (Creswell, 2013). To address this concern in the study, I employed strategies to enhance trustworthiness, such as member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, and maintaining a reflective research journal throughout the data generation and analysis process. Zahle (2024), in her study exploring bias and ‘debiasing’ qualitative data collection, suggests that researchers should debias their studies using strategies such as reflexivity and controlling personal commitments in the study. Hence, these measures were intended to ensure that participants’ voices were represented as authentically and accurately as possible, and that the interpretation of their perspectives remained grounded in their actual responses. The interpretive paradigm was deemed suitable for this study as it provided a flexible and responsive framework for exploring the subjective meanings, interpretations, and beliefs of educators in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a socially and culturally complex township context.

3.4. Philosophical Assumptions

In the previous chapter, the conceptual framework composed of the TLT, SJT, and management concept (leadership), which framed educators’ perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a township school, were alluded to. Guba and Lincoln (1988) posed the question: Do different inquiry paradigms require distinct methodologies? The paradigm and methodology are important because they have methodological consequences for research questions, participant selection, data generation instruments, methods, and data analysis. To answer their conundrum, Guba and Lincoln (1988) aver that a research paradigm is defined by the fundamental beliefs in ontology, epistemology, and axiology and how they are applied in the study.

3.4.1. Ontological Assumption

Ugwu et al. (2021) aver that ontology concerns the nature of reality and what is assumed to exist. The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by a relativist ontology, which posits that reality is not objective or singular but rather multiple and shaped by social, cultural, and individual interpretations (Cohen et al., 2018). Within this study, this meant acknowledging that educators’ understandings of gender diversity and non-binary identities were not fixed or universally agreed upon. Instead, their perceptions were shaped by their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and the particular social context of the township school.

In line with this ontological view, the study acknowledged that there were multiple lived realities among the educators, each shaped by their positioning within broader societal structures. For example, some educators may have interpreted gender diversity through a human rights lens, while others may have struggled with it due to religious or cultural beliefs. These diverse perceptions were not treated as right or wrong, but as valid expressions of how educators constructed their own realities. The interpretive paradigm thus allowed me to explore these subjective and socially embedded understandings in a respectful and contextually grounded manner (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

3.4.2. Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and its generation (Ugwu et al., 2021). Within the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is viewed as co-constructed between the researcher and participants rather than discovered as objective truth (Creswell, 2013). In this study, knowledge about educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a township school was generated through interactive and dialogical engagement during semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed participants to share their experiences, beliefs, and understandings in their own words, while the researcher asked clarifying questions and probed for deeper meaning.

The epistemological position of this study emphasised the importance of context in shaping what is known and how it is known. Knowledge was not treated as a detached or neutral product but as something rooted in specific cultural and social environments (Mertens, 2015). In the context of this study, the school's location in a township and the educators' diverse backgrounds had a direct influence on their understandings of gender diversity. The study did not aim to find a generalisable answer but rather to understand how educators made meaning of their role in creating inclusive classrooms within their school context.

I also adopted a reflexive stance, recognising that their own beliefs and identity could influence how knowledge was interpreted. Reflexivity and transparency were maintained throughout the research process, including during data analysis, to ensure that the voices of the participants were presented authentically and not distorted by the researcher's own assumptions (Lincoln et al., 2011).

3.4.3. Axiological Assumption

Axiology refers to the role of values in the research process (Ugwu et al., 2021). In interpretive research, it is acknowledged that research is not value-free and that both the researcher's and

participants' values influence the study (Mertens, 2015). In this study, I was guided by a strong commitment to inclusivity, leadership, and social justice. These values aligned with the study's conceptual frameworks Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Leadership as a management concept and were especially important given the sensitive and often contested nature of gender diversity and non-binary identities in South African schools.

From an axiological perspective, I made deliberate efforts to respect and honour the values of participants, even when those values did not align with mainstream discourses on gender inclusivity. Educators' perspectives on their practices in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a township school were different and unique due to their different beliefs and understandings. These perspectives were not dismissed but were instead examined to understand how they influenced educators' behaviour and decision-making in the classroom.

3.5. Research Approach

Creswell and Poth (2016) expound that a research approach is a comprehensive strategy or plan that directs the entire research process. It provides direction on how data is generated, analysed, interpreted, and presented. A research approach is shaped by the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study, including the researcher's view of reality (ontology), how knowledge is acquired (epistemology), and the purpose of the inquiry (Ugwu, 2021). As a result, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this study, which aimed to explore educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms at a selected township school.

Patton (2002, p.13) stated that, "qualitative research is not about counting opinions or people, but about exploring the richness, depth, and complexity of human experience." A qualitative research approach is an inquiry process grounded in the belief that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings that people attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It focuses on exploring complex social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them, rather than attempting to quantify them. Unlike quantitative approaches that emphasise numerical data and generalisation, qualitative research values depth, context, and richness in the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A mixed-methods approach while valuable in some contexts, was considered less appropriate in this study because mixed-method approach emphasises the combination of numerical data with qualitative insight (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the context of this study, the qualitative approach allowed me to engage deeply with educators, listening to their experiences, concerns,

and understandings of gender diversity and non-binary learners within their unique school environment.

Using a qualitative approach for this study was befitting concerning the phenomenon of the study. One of the primary benefits of the qualitative research approach is its capacity to provide subtle and in-depth insights into how participants perceive and respond to specific social challenges (Patton, 2002). This was crucial for my study, which aimed not to make generalisations about all educators, but rather to understand how educators in one specific township school made sense of their roles in relation to gender inclusivity. The qualitative approach gave space for personal stories, cultural reflections, and diverse viewpoints that may not have emerged through rigid questionnaires or statistical analysis. By using semi-structured interviews, I was able to allow participants to speak freely and reflectively, thus capturing the lived reality of teaching in a socially complex environment where gender norms and beliefs are often contested.

Another important benefit of the qualitative approach is its context sensitivity (Patton, 2002). It recognises that social phenomena such as gender identity and inclusion do not occur in a vacuum but are shaped by the surrounding social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). For this reason, the qualitative approach aligned perfectly with my study's objectives, as it enabled me to consider how educators' perspectives were influenced by the township setting, their backgrounds, and their own professional experiences. It allowed me to honour the complexity of their views rather than trying to reduce them to binary categories.

Furthermore, qualitative research is fundamentally participant-centred, providing a voice to individuals whose perspectives are frequently overlooked (Cohen et al., 2018). Given the sensitive and sometimes contentious nature of gender diversity in South African schools, especially in communities where cultural and religious traditions may predominate, this approach guaranteed that educators' perspectives were handled with respect and care. The qualitative technique also allowed me to develop reflexivity, acknowledging my own position as a researcher and how it may have influenced the research process.

Despite its many strengths, the qualitative approach is not without challenges. One notable limitation is that the findings are context-specific and may not be easily generalised to other schools or populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the data are drawn from a small sample within a single township school, the findings reflect only the perspectives of the participants in that specific context. However, I addressed this limitation by ensuring thick

description, providing rich detail about the school context, participants' backgrounds, and the meanings embedded in their narratives. This makes it possible for readers to determine how the findings may relate to similar contexts or inform broader discussions on gender inclusivity in education. Therefore, choosing this approach enabled me to generate precise and significant findings that are directly relevant to the realities of educators working in South African township schools, leading to a more inclusive and socially just educational conversation.

3.6. Research Design

Creswell (2013) avers that research design serves as a fundamental blueprint that directs the entire research process. It outlines how data will be generated, analysed, and interpreted to answer the research questions or meet the research objectives (Creswell, 2014). According to Cohen et al. (2018), a research design is the structure through which researchers logically and coherently link the research problem to empirical data. Similarly, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) describe it as a procedural plan that guides the researcher in collecting, analysing, and interpreting observations in a systematic way. Durrheim (2006) also highlights that research design reflects the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn.

Yin (2012, p.13) states, *“The case study design is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”*.

Guided by this understanding, this study employed a case study research design. This design is particularly suited for examining complex social phenomena in their real-life settings (Yin, 2012). A case study allows for a comprehensive and multi-dimensional exploration of a bounded system, using various data sources such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2013). In this research, the bounded case is a single secondary school located in Clermont township, within the Pinetown District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This school was purposively selected because I have first-hand experience working at the school and have noted that the school has gender-diverse and non-binary learners enrolled, and thus provides a meaningful context for examining inclusive education practices.

The rationale for choosing a case study design is that it enabled me to explore how educators perceive and enact their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, and how they navigate sociocultural norms within a township context. As Yin (2012) posits, case study designs are most suitable for answering “how” and “why” research questions, especially when the researcher has limited control over events and when the research focuses on a contemporary

issue. This study aimed to explore how educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities, how they manage them in practice, and what challenges and support systems exist to facilitate inclusivity.

3.6.1. Defining the Boundaries of the Case

An essential element of case study research is the clear identification of its boundaries. As Yin (2012) and Creswell (2013) explain, bounding the case ensures that the scope of the research remains focused and manageable. Boundaries can be defined in terms of time, place, participants, and the context within which the phenomenon being studied occurs. In this study, the spatial boundary is a single township secondary school in Clermont, characterised by unique cultural and socioeconomic features that influence inclusive education. The temporal boundary involves a data generation period of approximately less than a month, spanning two academic years of a master's degree to allow for depth and reflection.

This single case design does not aim for broad generalisation but rather for analytic generalisation; thus, drawing theoretical insights that can inform similar educational contexts. The use of multiple participants or multiple perspectives within a single case (school) enhances the richness and credibility of the findings, allowing for data triangulation, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the study.

3.6.2. Benefits and Limitations of the Case Study Design

One of the key benefits of employing a case study design is that it provides ecological validity, as the research is conducted in a real-life educational setting where gender diversity is actively being experienced. It allows for an in-depth, contextualised, and holistic understanding of educators' lived experiences, leadership responsibilities, and inclusive teaching practices in a township school context. As Yin (2018) argues that case studies are valuable when studying real-life experiences because they allow researchers to explore complex phenomena within their context.

However, a common limitation of the case study design is the limited generalisability of the findings, especially when only a single case is studied (Cohen et al., 2018). As noted by Cohen et al. (2018), insights drawn from one school may not be applicable uniformly to other settings. To mitigate this limitation, the study draws from multiple educators within the same case, enabling the generation of varied perspectives and multiple realities that enhance the richness and transferability of the findings. Furthermore, the case is not studied in isolation; it is understood within its broader social, cultural, and institutional context, thus offering insight

into wider systemic patterns that may be relevant to similar township schools. To sum up, the case study design was carefully selected for its ability to explore in-depth the complexities and nuances of educators' perspectives on managing gender diversity and non-binary identities in a real educational setting. It provided a rigorous and context-sensitive framework for understanding how inclusive practices are shaped, challenged, and enacted in a township school environment.

3.7. Sampling Method

Sampling refers to the process of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population in order to understand phenomena relevant to that population (Creswell, 2013). It enables the researcher to focus on participants who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse data related to the research questions. In qualitative research, sampling is not about numerical representation but rather the depth of information that selected participants can offer (Flick, 2014). Flick (2014) underscores that qualitative researchers aim to gather information-rich cases that offer deep insights into the phenomenon under study. In this context, sampling is not simply a methodological choice but a strategic decision aligned with the aims of the research.

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method widely used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). According to Parton (2014), purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants based on their knowledge of the subject matter, their relevance to the research questions, and their ability to contribute meaningful data. As Flick (2014, p.165) notes, purposive sampling enables the researcher to “select individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.”

Flick (2014) further argues that purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately access participants who have experience with the phenomenon being explored. In the context of this study, purposive sampling was the most appropriate strategy because it enabled me to select Life Orientation (LO) educators who were directly involved in teaching content related to gender and sexuality, as prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). These educators were thus positioned at the forefront of navigating gender diversity and non-binary identities within the curriculum and classroom environment.

3.7.1. Rationale for Purposive Sampling

The use of purposive sampling was driven by the need to engage with participants who have first-hand experience and professional responsibility related to managing gender-diverse and

non-binary classrooms. As educators tasked with delivering sensitive content around identity, sexuality, and diversity, LO educators possess unique insights into the challenges and opportunities of fostering inclusive classroom environments (DBE, 2011). Their perspectives are pivotal in understanding how inclusivity is negotiated within township school contexts, particularly where traditional gender norms and socio-cultural constraints may influence teaching practices (Francis, 2019; Msibi, 2012).

In this study, six Life Orientation educators were purposefully selected from a single township secondary school in Clermont, located in the Pinetown District. The decision to focus on educators from this school was also based on its geographical proximity to my residence, as well as my prior knowledge and familiarity with the school's context and its challenges related to inclusivity. This made it feasible to access participants and generate meaningful data within a known educational environment.

3.7.2. Limitation of purposive sampling

While purposive sampling has the advantage of selecting information-rich participants, it also carries certain limitations. One notable disadvantage is the potential for researcher bias in the selection of participants (Parton, 2014). Since the researcher purposefully chooses participants, there is a risk of subjectivity that may affect the representativeness of the data (Parton, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

To mitigate this limitation, I ensured transparency and reflexivity throughout the sampling process. Clear inclusion criteria were established, and decisions were made based on the alignment of participants' roles with the research objectives. Furthermore, by conducting semi-structured interviews with each participant, the study allowed for open-ended exploration of diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing data richness and credibility. I also maintained a reflexive journal to continuously reflect on my positionality and minimise bias in my engagement with participants (Berger, 2015).

3.7.3. Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- They were currently teaching Life Orientation at the selected township school.
- They had previously taught Life Orientation at the selected township school.
- They had experience or familiarity with teaching topics related to gender diversity and non-binary identities.

- They were willing and available to participate voluntarily in the research process.
- They provided informed consent and were open to discussing sensitive issues relating to gender and inclusivity.

As a result, adhering to these criteria, the study ensured that participants had the capacity and willingness to contribute valuable insights to the research questions.

3.8. Data Generation

In qualitative research, the process of acquiring data is more accurately referred to as data generation rather than data collection (Goldkuhl, 2019). Goldkuhl (2019) further argues that this distinction is crucial in interpretive research traditions, as it emphasises that data is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participant, rather than being extracted objectively as in quantitative studies. Flick (2017) highlights that in qualitative research, the researcher is not a passive collector but an active participant in shaping what is produced through engagement and dialogue. Similarly, Patton (2014) asserts that qualitative data emerges from meaningful encounters, with participants contributing their knowledge, emotions, and experiences to the shared research process.

By acknowledging the social and relational nature of the research context, the term “data generation” affirms the importance of context, subjectivity, and interpretation. This understanding is closely aligned with the interpretive paradigm that underpins this study. In such paradigms, data is not merely retrieved; it is generated through culturally and socially embedded processes, shaped by both the participants’ lived realities and the researcher’s positionality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Given that the current study aimed to explore educators’ perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school, the emphasis on data generation is both methodologically and philosophically appropriate.

3.8.1. Selected Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

The method used to generate data in this study was semi-structured interviews. This method is a widely accepted tool in qualitative research due to its ability to strike a balance between structure and flexibility (Flick, 2014). According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), a semi-structured interview is a guided conversation in which the researcher follows a predetermined set of open-ended questions while remaining open to exploring unanticipated themes or elaborations introduced by the participants. The structure ensures that key topics are

consistently covered across all interviews, while the open-ended nature allows for in-depth responses, reflection, and richness.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were well-suited to the research purpose, which involved probing educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school (Flick, 2014). Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that such interviews are particularly effective when dealing with sensitive or complex topics, as they allow participants the freedom to express themselves in their own terms while still addressing the core research aims. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) emphasise that interviews in interpretive research must be dialogical spaces where the researcher and participant co-create meaning. In the context of this study, this method offered the flexibility to engage with each educator's unique perspective while ensuring alignment with the overarching objectives of the research.

3.8.2. The Interview Schedule

To guide the semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule consisting of ten open-ended questions was developed. These questions were carefully aligned with the four core research questions that frame this study, which are clearly stated at the beginning of this chapter. The structure of the interview schedule was intentionally designed to create a comfortable and respectful space for the participants.

The interview schedule began with a few biographical and personal questions, such as teaching experience, subject specialisation, and perceptions of gender diversity. These introductory questions served not only to gather background information but also to establish rapport and ease participants into the discussion. As noted by Bertram and Christiansen (2014), starting with personal, less intrusive questions was a valuable strategy to make participants feel safe and willing to share. The core of the interview protocol then focused on questions that addressed the educators' knowledge of gender diversity and non-binary identities, their strategies for creating inclusive environments, challenges faced in the process, and recommendations for professional support. These questions were crafted to elicit reflective and narrative responses that could illuminate the educators' lived realities within the township school context.

3.8.3. Procedure

The process of data generation unfolded in several interconnected stages, each informed by ethical guidelines and best practices in qualitative research. The ethical considerations that

were followed will be discussed later in this chapter, but they were the first step towards generating data for this study.

Once these approvals were in place, the next step involved recruiting participants. Purposeful sampling was used to identify six Life Orientation educators from a selected secondary school in Clermont, within the Pinetown district. These educators were chosen because of their direct involvement in teaching gender, identity, and sexuality education as mandated by the CAPS curriculum. Their role positioned them as key informants with valuable insights into the challenges and strategies associated with managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Before the interviews commenced, each participant was provided with a participant information sheet outlining the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were asked to sign informed consent forms indicating their willingness to participate and their understanding of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point. This process was in line with ethical standards set out by scholars such as Moser and Korstjens (2018) and Resnik (2020), who emphasise the importance of informed and voluntary participation in educational research.

Interviews were conducted individually and in person, in private settings within the school premises to ensure participant comfort and data confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. In addition to audio recording, the researcher also took field notes to document non-verbal cues, context-specific observations, and immediate reflections that would aid in the interpretation of the data. This practice aligns with Ellingson's (2009) notion of crystallisation, which suggests that multiple forms of data enhance depth and trustworthiness.

Throughout the data generation process, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity, maintaining a research journal to record personal reflections, emotional responses, and potential biases. As Berger (2015) explains, reflexivity is essential in qualitative research to ensure that the researcher remains aware of their positionality and its potential influence on the study. This was particularly important given the sensitive and potentially contested nature of gender identity topics within the township school context.

3.9. Data Analysis

As Clarke (2017) outlines that in qualitative research, data analysis is not merely a technical procedure but a reflective, interpretive, and iterative process through which meaning is constructed from rich textual data. Flick (2014) also emphasises that data analysis in qualitative inquiry involves working through narratives, experiences, and language to generate insight into participants' lived realities. This aligns with the interpretive paradigm that underpins this study, where understanding is constructed through engaging deeply with participants' words and actions. Unlike quantitative research that seeks numerical patterns, qualitative data analysis is about revealing themes, patterns, and meaning across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke, 2017).

Braun and Clarke (2006) view qualitative data analysis as a rigorous process of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. They argue that it is not a linear process, but a recursive one, requiring the researcher to move back and forth across phases as understanding deepens. Clarke (2017) later reaffirmed this position, adding that analysis is an active process where the researcher plays a central role in interpreting data, rather than passively recording it. For this reason, the term "analysis" in qualitative work carries both intellectual and emotional labour; it demands reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and ethical interpretation.

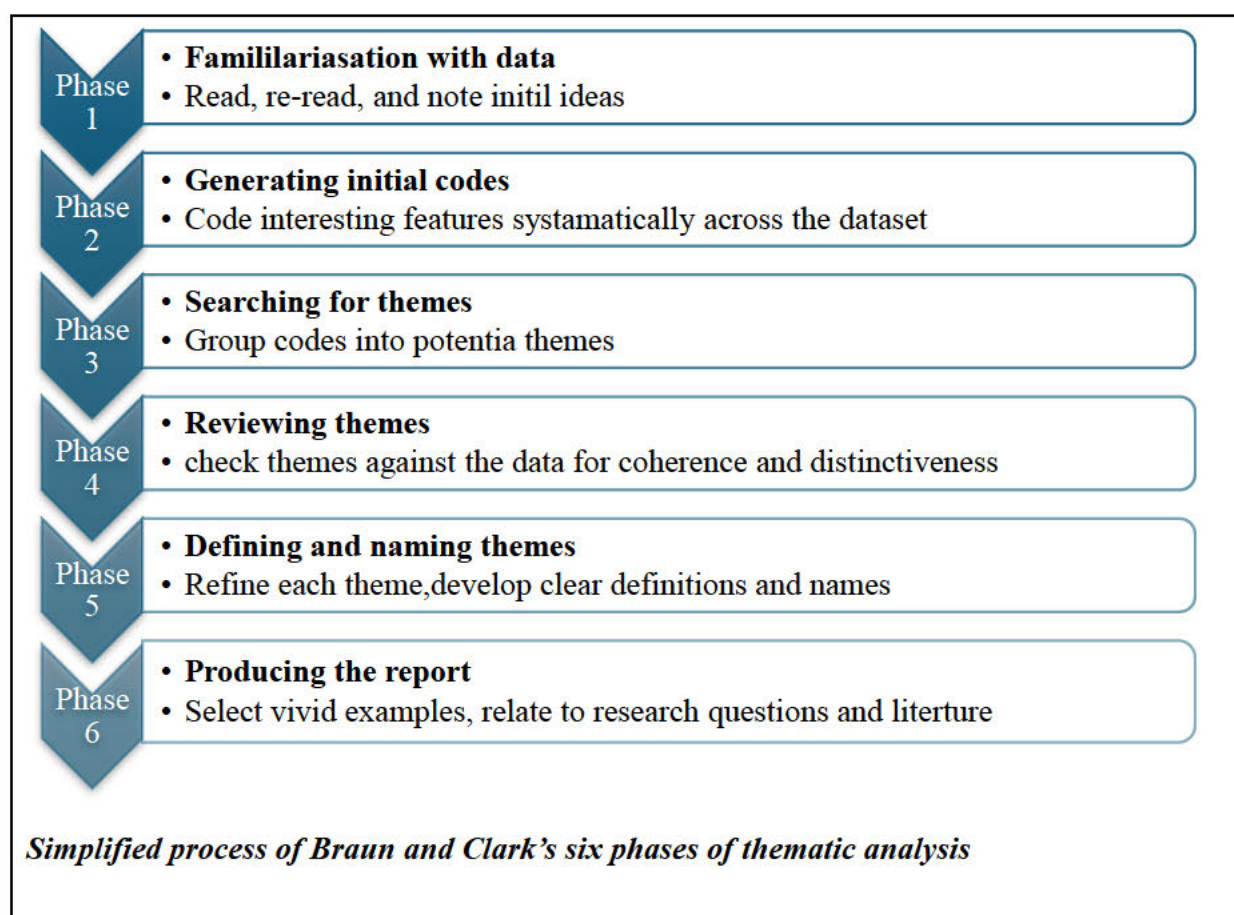
In this study, the chosen method of analysis was thematic analysis (TA), which is widely used in qualitative educational research due to its flexibility and accessibility. Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify and report themes that meaningfully capture the data in relation to the research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). It is suitable for interview-based studies such as this one, where the goal is to explore participants' experiences and construct meaning from their narratives.

In the context of this study, TA was selected because of its methodological flexibility, particularly in qualitative studies that involve interview transcripts and aim to explore subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). It allowed for both rich description and nuanced interpretation of complex issues, such as educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school. The approach is also accessible to novice researchers while remaining robust enough to support meaningful, theory-informed analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Its inductive nature made it

especially fitting for this study, where the goal was to let educators' perspectives shape the understanding of the issue, rather than imposing preconceived themes.

Moreover, this study used an inductive approach to thematic analysis. An inductive approach is suitable for research that seeks to generate meaning directly from the data without imposing pre-existing theories or frameworks (Nowell et al., 2017). Given that this study aimed to explore educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school, the inductive approach was appropriate as it allowed themes to emerge organically from the educators' own words, rather than being driven by external assumptions.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phases process of thematic analysis, as outlined below. Each phase was applied systematically and iteratively to ensure a thorough, credible, and context-sensitive interpretation of the data.



Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first phase involved immersing myself in the data. I began by transcribing all interviews verbatim. Each audio recording was carefully listened to multiple times to ensure that every word, pause, and inflection was captured accurately. After transcription, I read and re-read the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the content. The researcher further made preliminary notes in the margins, highlighting striking phrases, repeated patterns, and emotional tones. This phase helped me to develop initial impressions and allowed me to enter the participants' world, laying the foundation for subsequent coding.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Once familiar with the data, I began the process of coding. This involved systematically reviewing each transcript and identifying meaningful segments of text. The researcher used manual coding, underlining and labelling key excerpts that related to educators' perspectives, understandings, and challenges in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. These codes were data-driven rather than theory-driven, in keeping with the inductive nature of the study.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After all transcripts had been coded, I began grouping related codes together into broader potential themes. This involved examining how different codes are interconnected and how they related to the research aim. I created theme maps and visual diagrams to help cluster codes into categories. For instance, codes related to each research question were grouped according to themes formulated for each research question of this study. This phase marked a shift from descriptive coding to analytical interpretation.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In this phase, I returned to the data and critically reviewed the preliminary themes. The researcher also read all extracts associated with each theme to ensure that they formed a coherent narrative and accurately represented participants' accounts. Some themes were collapsed, others were refined, and a few were discarded due to a lack of sufficient evidence. This process was essential for maintaining analytical clarity and ensuring that each theme truly reflected patterns across the dataset. At this point, the themes were beginning to take shape as substantive answers to the research questions.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Theme

With a finalised set of themes, I began articulating the essence of each. Each theme was clearly defined in terms of what it captured and how it related to the broader story of the data. Moreover, I assigned concise and meaningful names to each theme and wrote analytical summaries for each theme, outlining its significance and relationship to the study's objectives.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved integrating the themes into the findings chapter of the dissertation. Here, the researcher selected representative quotes from participants to illustrate each theme and support the interpretations. I further ensured that the analysis went beyond mere description and included critical reflection and interpretation, connecting the themes to literature and the study's conceptual frameworks. Throughout this phase, I remained attentive to my reflexive role, acknowledging how my positionality as a researcher shaped my understanding of the data.

3.10. The trustworthiness of the study

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), research should strive for a certain level of trustworthiness to ensure that the results of qualitative studies are accurate and transferable to other settings. To conduct trustworthy interpretation of the findings from qualitative study designs, a systematised approach is used to ensure that the research has credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, reflexivity (conducted via the interpretative process) and crystallisation (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) are also considered strategies. For a study exploring educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school, the following procedures were considered:

3.10.1. Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility refers to the authenticity or plausibility of the findings as perceived by the participants. Ensuring that the meanings and interpretations accurately reflect participants' real experiences is more important in qualitative research than statistical generalisation (Flick, 2017). Several strategies were employed to ensure the study's credibility. Firstly, the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to acquire authentic educators' perspectives. As Flick (2017) notes that qualitative interviews are a powerful tool for undertaking participants' perspectives as they allow researchers to explore how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Secondly, extended interaction with participants via social media (WhatsApp) strengthened the credibility of this study. Creswell (2014) highlights that prolonged engagement with participants assists in creating trust and

ensures the reliability of findings. Lastly, member checks were conducted in which participants were requested to confirm the transcriptions and provide clarifications as needed. As it has been previously stated in this study that member checks are one of the most important techniques in establishing credibility in qualitative research and ensure authenticity of participants' voices (Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, credibility was enhanced by incorporating verbatim quotations in the findings chapter which reflected the participants' own voices. Patton (2015) notes that including verbatim quotations allows readers to see participants' perspectives directly. This approach ensured that interpretations were grounded in the data. As Flick (2017) notes, authentic qualitative work is embedded in the words and perspectives of those who live the realities being studied. Nonetheless, one limitation of credibility that was noted was the potential for researcher bias Zahle (2024), especially in interpreting nuanced data. This was addressed through ongoing reflexivity, where the researcher kept a journal and engaged in self-interrogation throughout the study.

3.10.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (Flick, 2017). Unlike generalisability in quantitative research, transferability relies on the reader's judgement, informed by rich, thick descriptions provided by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, transferability was addressed by offering detailed contextual descriptions of the participants, and the broader school environment in the township of Clermont. The perspectives of the Life Orientation educators were documented with depth and nuance, allowing readers to assess whether the findings are relevant to similar educational contexts.

The key limitation of ensuring transferability was that the study focused on a single school, which may restrict broader applicability. However, this was mitigated by the depth of engagement and transparency in describing the study context and participants, which enhances the potential for analytical transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out that offering a "thick description" of the study context enables readers to provide informed judgments regarding the application of findings to alternative contexts. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that detailed contextualisation enhances the potential for analytical transferability.

3.10.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It involves ensuring that if the study were to be repeated in a similar context with similar participants, the findings would be consistent. To establish dependability in this study, a clear audit trail was maintained. This included detailed documentation of the data generation process, transcription procedures, coding frameworks, and decision-making processes during analysis. As Bertram and Christiansen (2014) emphasise, transparent documentation allows others to follow the logic of the research process. In addition, feedback was sought from the academic supervisor and peers, who reviewed and critiqued the methodology and thematic findings.

Despite ensuring that the study is dependable, the dynamic nature of qualitative interviewing can introduce variability, particularly since responses may vary based on participant mood or contextual factors (Flick, 2017). This was addressed by using a consistent interview schedule and conducting all interviews personally, within the same time frame, to maintain coherence in approach. Each participant was interviewed individually, and I ensured that I built a rapport with participants to make them comfortable, thus generating quality responses during the interview schedule. Flick (2017) also emphasises that conducting interviews in a consistent manner and creating a trusting interviewer-interviewee relationship are crucial for producing reliable, in-depth and authentic data in qualitative research.

3.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the neutrality and objectivity of the research process (Flick, 2017). It seeks to ensure that the findings reflect participants' experiences and not the researcher's biases or assumptions (Patton, 2014). In this study, confirmability was addressed through several strategies. First, reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process, enabling me to critically reflect on my personal assumptions and positionality. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note that reflexive journaling helps researchers to monitor their own influence in the study. Secondly, the audit trail including raw transcripts, field notes, and coding decisions, was preserved to allow for future review. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that the audit trail is an essential method for ensuring confirmability, as it provides a transparent account of the data generation, analysis, and interpretation processes. Similarly, Flick (2017) emphasises that thorough documentation of the research process enhances the degree to which findings can be traced back to their sources, thereby strengthening confirmability.

3.10.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's critical self-awareness of how their background, assumptions, and identity influence the research process (Berger, 2015). In this study, reflexivity was not treated as a one-off task but as an ongoing commitment. I engaged in reflexive journaling before and after each interview, noting personal responses, emotional reactions, and shifts in understanding.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, managing a gender diverse and non-binary classroom in a selected township school, reflexivity was essential in maintaining ethical vigilance. My position as a postgraduate ensured that I was open-minded to the fact that participants provided different interpretations and perspectives of the topic than what the researcher may have intended. I was able to stop and reflect with honesty on what the participants were saying, thus being reflexive to the study's findings.

There are major disadvantages to using reflexivity to test the trustworthiness of the study. Berger (2015) outlined that reflexivity can sometimes lead to over-personalisation, where too much emphasis is placed on the researcher rather than the participants. This was addressed by maintaining balance, using reflexivity to acknowledge influence, but always centring participants' voices in the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.10.6 Crystallisation

Crystallisation is a concept that was predicated by Ellingson (2009), which encourages researchers to use multiple forms of data, perspectives, and interpretations to enhance the complexity and credibility of qualitative work. Ellingson further pointed out that, unlike traditional triangulation, crystallisation accepts that truth is multifaceted and layered. In this study, crystallisation was employed by incorporating verbatim transcripts, field notes, reflective journaling, and literature integration during analysis. This multi-perspective approach enabled a richer, more nuanced understanding of how educators perceived and managed gender-diverse and non-binary learners in their classrooms. It reinforced the view that no single story or method can fully capture the depth of human experience (Ellingson, 2009).

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration is defined as a set of criteria that researchers must follow when conducting study (Cypress, 2020). This criterion emphasises that participants should not be subjected to any harm or misleading information, and bias in the study. There must be respect,

full consent, privacy, secrecy, anonymity, exaggeration, honesty and transparency between the researcher and participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Before conducting the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Research Ethics Committee, and permission to conduct the study within a school in the Pinetown district was authorised by the Department of Education (DBE) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The research strictly adhered to ethical standards to ensure the rights, dignity, and autonomy of all participants were protected. Moreover, autonomy was respected through the process of informed consent. All participants voluntarily completed consent forms, confirming their willingness to participate in the study and acknowledging their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent, as understood in this study, refers to participants' voluntary agreement to participate after being fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, particularly in capacitating educators on the phenomenon under investigation (Resnik, 2020). Informed consent ensured that participants were aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty (Resnik, 2020).

Educators who participated in the study received detailed written and verbal information regarding the aims and nature of the study, particularly given the sensitive topic of gender diversity. Written consent was obtained before the interviews commenced. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used, meaning that participants' identities were not linked to their responses, even by the researcher. The data were generated in a manner that made it impossible to trace information back to specific individuals (Babbie, 2021).

Furthermore, confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process. As emphasised by Israel and Hay (2006), confidentiality involves protecting participants' private information from unauthorised access. In line with this, all data generated from the interviews were stored securely in password-protected files. Only I and my academic supervisor had access to the raw data for guidance and verification purposes. The research findings were presented in aggregate form, ensuring that individual participants could not be identified in the final report. As a result, these ethical principles such as informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, were central to building trust and ensuring that participants felt safe and respected, especially in a study that explores educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected township school in Clermont.

3.12. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research methods employed in this study. The chapter began by discussing the research paradigm together with the philosophical assumptions of this study. Thereafter, the research approach and sampling method were deliberated. Moreover, this section provided the systematic data generation method of the study and how the data was analysed. Finally, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this research were discussed. The next chapter offers the presentation, interpretation, analysis and discussion of findings.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter emphasised the study's research methodology, including the philosophical assumptions, paradigm, research approach and design, sampling techniques, data generation and data analysis, and the trustworthiness of the study along with ethical considerations. This chapter is the cornerstone of the presentation and analysis of the data and the discussion of findings. The chapter begins by describing the sample, followed by the simplification of the processes of identifying themes from the data. Moreover, this is succeeded by the presentation and analysis of data, as well as the relationship between the current findings and previous research.

Data were generated from 6 participants using one one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The participants were Life Orientation educators at a selected secondary school in Clermont (Pinetown district). To address the primary research question: *What are educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont Township?* The following research sub-questions were asked:

1. *How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?*
2. *How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
3. *What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
4. *What do educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*

4.2. Description of participants in the study

The participants in this study were senior and further education and training (FET) phase educators. At the time of the study, five of the educators were teaching Life Orientation in the school, and one had taught in the previous years but no longer teaching the subject in the current year. Thus, in total there were six participants for this study. The pseudonyms were used instead of the participants' real names as shown in the table below.

Table 4.1: pseudonyms and biographical information of participants

Participants	Pseudonyms	Sex/gender	Phase	Years in Teaching	Years in teaching LO
Participant 1	Mr. Jude	Male	FET	31 years	5 years
Participant 2	Miss. Dube	Female	Senior	8 years	3 years
Participant 3	Mr. Naidoo	Male	Senior	2 years	2 years
Participant 4	Mrs. Vrey	Female	Senior	18 years	15 years
Participant 5	Mr. Khan	Male	FET	5 years	5 years
Participant 6	Mr. Nkosi	Male	FET	3 years	3 years

4.3. Research questions, themes, and sub-themes

Table 4.2: Showing Research Questions, Themes and Sub-Themes

Research Questions	Themes and Sub-Themes
1. How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?	<i>Theme 1: Educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities</i> • Sub-theme 1: Gender as a spectrum • Sub-theme 2: Confusion with sexuality

2. How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?	<i>Theme 2: Educators’ Strategies for Managing and Advancing Gender Diversity and Non-Binary Inclusivity in Schools.</i> • Sub-theme1: Respect as a foundation to inclusivity • Sub-theme 2: Recognition and affirmation of learners’ identity • Sub-theme 3: Create safe and equitable learning environment • Sub-theme 4: Teacher mindfulness and reflective practices
3. What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?	<i>Theme 3: Challenges educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms</i> • Sub-theme 1: Bullying and teasing • Sub-theme 2: Misgendering • Sub-theme 3: Policy gaps and lack of school support • Sub-theme 4: Cultural and religious beliefs • Sub-theme 5: Time constraints due to heavy workloads
4. What do educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?	<i>Theme 4: What educators think can be done to assist in better managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms</i> • Sub-theme 1: Clear policies and implementation • Sub-theme 2: Continuous educator training • Sub-theme 3: Empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness

4.4. Discussion of themes

The themes presented in this section were developed from participants' responses to the interview questions, which were aligned with the research sub-questions driving this study. Four main themes were identified, each theme interlinked to the research questions. Moreover, within each theme, several sub-themes emerged.

The following theme emerged from the participants' responses to the first research question: How do educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities?

4.4.1. Theme 1: Educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities

This theme explored how educators understand and interpret the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities. It focuses on their personal definitions of these terms, as expressed during the interviews. When participants were asked to explain gender diversity and non-binary identities in their own words, their responses reflected both similarities and differences shaped by their experiences and perspectives. These understandings were organised into sub-themes, which included viewing gender as a spectrum and confusing gender identity with sexuality.

4.4.1.1. Sub-theme 1: Gender as a spectrum

When asked about their understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities, the participants reported that gender is not limited to binary identities of male and female; instead, they understood gender as a more fluid, varied, or 'in between.' This view appears across several participants and was expressed in both conceptual terms and in practical ways. Participants said they manage learners who do not fit within binary expectations. The participants saw the link between these concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities, which was that, although they are different concepts, they are concepts that are closely related in terms of inclusivity in gender and being able to cater for a variety of genders within the classroom. The following comments were made by the participants when defining gender diversity:

Mr. Nkosi:

"Gender diversity is about the variety of gender identities, whether in a school context or in society in general. These days, people are not only male or female. There are identities within the LGBTQI community, people who do not only identify as male or female, but are somewhere in between, or still in the process of identifying themselves. So, gender diversity means that within one space we are dealing with males, females, and people from that wider group."

Similarly, Mr. Khan uttered that:

“For me, gender diversity means recognising that not everyone fits into the same box. People can express their gender in different ways, and all those ways should be respected. It’s about fairness; treating boys, girls, and those who identify differently with equal dignity.”

While Mrs. Vrey also said:

“Gender diversity means including and representing different genders in an environment or workplace. It is about recognising all gender identities, whether male or female, and ensuring that they are represented.”

Ms. Dube provided a clear understanding of the term gender diversity. She stated that:

“Gender diversity refers to various ways in which people experience and express their gender; it is the way people want to be seen in terms of their gender.”

While Mr. Jude outlined that:

“Uhm, in terms of gender diversity akona ukuthi umuntu uyi male specifically (it is not that a person is a male specifically) so a person can be both or prefer to be any. It is just that we (educators) must accept that person is that gender that they prefer or portray.”

“So, gender diversity says we accommodate whoever comes no matter what gender they portray, even if it is male or female, so it depends on that person. As educators, we must accept.”

This finding showed that educators generally understood gender diversity as the recognition of multiple gender identities that extend beyond the traditional binary of male and female. They emphasised fairness, respect, and inclusion, seeing gender diversity as a way of accommodating the different ways individuals express and identify themselves. Their responses highlighted an awareness that classrooms must be spaces where all learners, regardless of their gender identity, are acknowledged and treated with dignity. While the wording differed, the collective message reflects an appreciation of gender as fluid, flexible, and inclusive. They further showed that their understanding of gender diversity was closely linked to the recognition of non-binary identities. The following are the participants’ voices regarding their understanding of non-binary identities:

Mr. Jude:

“For me, non-binary identity is about understanding that it’s not my place to decide whether a learner is male or female. Each individual has the right to express and identify themselves in any way that feels right to them. My role as an educator is to respect how they present themselves and not expect them to behave a certain way based on how I think they should be.”

Ms. Dube also averred:

“Non-binary in my own understanding if a person is not a male or a female, that person may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, all those other genders that are do not fall under male and female. It is the way a person describes themselves in terms of their gender.”

While Mr. Naidoo uttered that:

“Non-binary diversity was a very difficult term for me as I was confusing it with gender diversity, but you know in class we have learners who do not want to conform to being a ‘he or she’, they do not want to say. So non-binary diversity refers to a wide range of genders that do not identify as he or she.”

Mr. Khan:

“Non-binary identities are for people who do not see themselves strictly as male or female. Some identify as both, neither, or something in between, and sometimes their gender identity changes over time, which is often called gender fluid. Many non-binary people prefer pronouns like they/them.”

Mrs Very had a straightforward explanation of the concept non-binary identities:

“I think it refers to someone who is not male and also not female. You cannot easily tell whether the person is male or female, because they do not identify as either.”

On the other hand, Mr. Nkosi provided a very detailed explanation of the term non-binary identities:

“The word “binary” refers to male or female, right? So, if someone is non-binary, it means they do not belong to either of those categories. They are in the process of identifying themselves. They may belong to one of the letters in the LGBTQI community, which is still being researched and better understood. My understanding is that non-

binary people don't fall into the male or female categories. They are still identifying who they are."

Collectively, these findings suggested that the participants demonstrated a clear understanding of non-binary identities as a direct challenge to the gender binary, thereby affirming the concept of gender as a spectrum. Their definitions consistently framed non-binary as an identity existing outside the male/female dichotomy, with several participants, such as Mr. Nkosi and Mrs. Vrey, providing an explicit exclusionary definition, they explained this term by providing the opposite of what it is. Mr. Nkosi said that *"binary mean male and female, so if someone is non-binary, it means they do not belong to either of those categories."* Crucially, this rejection of binary categories is coupled with a strong emphasis on autonomy and self-identification. Mr. Jude's assertion that *"it is not your place"* to draw lines, alongside Ms. Dube's and Mr. Khan's focus on how a person *"describes themselves,"* underscores the principle that an individual's position on the gender spectrum is self-determined and must be respected socially.

Furthermore, the responses revealed an appreciation for the diversity within the non-binary spectrum itself, recognising it as a multi-faceted construct rather than a monolithic third category. Mr. Khan articulates this nuance by referencing identities that are *"both, neither, nor something in between,"* as well as introducing the concept of *gender fluidity*. This understanding extends to practical social recognition, as evidenced by the discussion of *they/them* pronouns and Mr. Naidoo's observation of learners rejecting *"he or she"* labels. While minor connotations with sexual orientation persist, the participants see gender as a broad spectrum of possibilities, not a simple choice between two options of male or female.

Overall, these findings suggested that educators recognise both gender diversity and non-binary identities as concepts that challenge the strict male/female binary. While gender diversity was explained in terms of including a variety of genders in a given space, non-binary identities were described more specifically as identities that do not conform to either male or female. The two concepts, therefore, share a close connection in the way participants understood them. They both point towards gender as a spectrum, emphasising inclusivity and recognition of identities beyond the binary.

Moreover, these findings are in line with literature that views gender as a fluid and dynamic concept rather than a fixed binary. Butler (2005), for instance, argues that gender is not a stable identity but rather a performative act shaped by social and cultural norms. The way participants in this study emphasised self-determination and autonomy reflect Butler's notion that gender

is constructed and performed rather than biologically predetermined. Similarly, Fausto-Sterling's (2019) work challenges the rigidity of binary sex and gender categories, proposing that gender should instead be understood along a continuum. This aligns with Mr. Jude's assertion that "it is not your place" to draw rigid lines around gender, as well as with Mr. Khan's and Mr. Nkosi's descriptions of non-binary identities as falling outside the male/female divide.

Empirical studies also support the participants' view of gender as a spectrum. Kurup and Underwood (2021), for example, found that adolescents increasingly reject binary understandings of gender and prefer to see it as more diverse. Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) similarly argue that gender is a multidimensional construct, and that younger generations increasingly identify with non-binary terms such as "agender," "genderqueer," and "gender fluid." This resonates with Mr. Khan's explanation that some individuals identify as "both, neither, or something in between," and with the emphasis on gender fluidity. Likewise, Speechley et al. (2023) proposed the "Diverse Gender Identity Framework," which explicitly conceptualises gender as a spectrum that captures the fluid and multifaceted ways people live their identities. Therefore, the finding of the present study echoes this global trend towards spectrum-based understandings of gender.

4.4.1.2. Sub-theme 2: Confusion with sexuality

However, this study also reports that some participants confused the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities with sexuality. In their responses to the questions asked related to gender diversity and non-binary identities during the interview schedules showed that some participants still understand these terms within the sexuality ideology of only male or female. Instead of distinguishing between gender identity (how one experiences and understands their gender) and sexual orientation (who one is attracted to), several educators equated non-binary or gender diverse identities with being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Others continued to frame the concept within a strict binary lens, recognising only male and female, which also revealed gaps in their conceptualisation of gender diversity. This confusion is evident in several participants' words:

Ms. Dube directly linked non-binary to sexuality:

"Non-binary in my own understanding if a person is not a male or a female, that person may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, all those other genders that do not fall under male and female. It is the way a person describes themselves in terms of their gender."

Mr. Naidoo admitted to struggling with the distinction between gender and sexuality:

“Non-binary diversity was a very difficult term for me as I was confusing it with gender diversity, but you know in class we have learners who do not want to conform to being he or she, they do not want to say.”

“It is difficult in class because as soon as you see someone wearing a trouser, you call that learner a boy or refer to him as a male not knowing that they do not conform to binary gender identities, therefore it is very difficult dealing with such classes.”

Mr. Jude, when defining gender diversity, expressed:

“Uhm, in terms of gender akona ukuthi umuntu uyi male specifically (it is not that a person is a male specifically), so a person can be both or prefer to be any. It is just that we (educators) must accept that person is that gender that they prefer or portray.”

He elaborated further when discussing non-binary identities:

“To respect learners, we must treat them based on how they show themselves, not on how we think they should act. No matter if a person identifies as male, female, or non-binary, they should always be accepted. In real life, though, there may be times when things are unclear and need to be carefully managed. For example, if a male learner feels uncomfortable using the boys' toilet and asks to use the girls' toilet instead, it can easily cause confusion about gender and sexuality among peers and staff. When this happens, I try to be sensitive by making sure the room is safe and private for the student before letting them use it. My main worry is not about the toilet itself, but about making sure that all learners feel recognised, valued, and safe being themselves at school.”

Mrs. Vrey provided a definition of gender diversity that reproduces a binary frame:

“Gender diversity means including and representing different genders in an environment or workplace. It is about recognising all gender identities, whether male or female, and ensuring that they are represented.”

The research findings revealed how this confusion plays out in practice. Mr Jude's response demonstrates how educators, while eager to support learners, often conflate gender identity with sexuality. His use of phrases such as “prefer to be any” frames gender as a matter of personal choice or behaviour, rather than as a valid identity. Mr Jude noted the confusion of gender and sexuality when he made an example of a male learner by sex. He said a learner may

be uncomfortable using the boys' toilet because 'they' are non-binary in terms of 'their' gender, which confuses teachers and learners in school. This example by Mr Jude demonstrates the confusion of gender and sexuality. Similarly, Ms Dube's explanation equates non-binary identities with gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations, showing how sexuality is mistakenly used to define gender. Even Mrs. Vrey, while promoting inclusivity, reduced diversity to male and female categories, excluding non-binary identities. These examples show that educators are willing to accommodate learners but lack the clarity and language to distinguish gender identity from sexuality. This confusion creates the risk that learners may feel misrepresented or only partially supported, despite educators' excellent intentions.

Looking more broadly across the data, it becomes evident that some participants were familiar with the terms gender diversity and non-binary identities, yet their understanding remains incomplete. Rather than drawing on theoretical or professional frameworks, they explained these concepts through personal experience and everyday assumptions. In doing so, they often collapsed gender into sexuality or framed it strictly in binary terms. While they acknowledged that some learners do not identify as male or female, they struggled to categorise or describe these learners beyond heteronormative frames. As a result, learners were frequently viewed as male or female, even though they identify as non-binary. This pattern suggests that educators understand gender diversity and non-binary identities through the lens of their own lived experiences, rather than through a more theoretical or informed understanding. Such a lack of knowledge limited their capacity to fully affirm and include non-binary learners in the classroom, even when they intend to be supportive.

In addition, these findings aligned with those of Butler (2005), who argues that gender is not a fixed trait but a performative act, historically constrained within binary categories of male and female. This theoretical perspective helps explain why educators, such as those in this study, default to familiar binary or sexuality-based categories when confronted with less familiar identities. Similarly, Eckert and Podesva (2021) emphasise that rigid binary frameworks (male vs female, straight vs queer) fail to capture the fluid and multifaceted nature of gender, leading to connotations such as those expressed by Mr. Jude and Ms. Dube.

In the South African context, Francis (2017) and Msibi (2012) found that schools often collapse all forms of gender and sexual diversity into the category of homosexuality, which limits educators' understanding of diverse identities like non-binary. Reygan and Francis (2015) further noted that educators frequently respond with discomfort or uncertainty to gender-

diverse learners, resorting to binary or heteronormative assumptions much like those reflected in Mrs. Vrey's definition. Internationally, Paechter et al. (2021) found that educators in the UK often conflate gender with sexuality due to cultural biases, while DePalma and Atkinson (2009) described this as "pedagogical erasure," where collapsing identities avoid complexity into simplified categories. Schudson and Morgenroth (2022) also highlight that gender must be understood as multidimensional and dynamic, not reducible to binary categories or conflated with attraction.

Consequently, this literature supports the findings of this study by showing that the confusion expressed by participants is part of a broader global and local challenge. While educators are willing to be inclusive, their lack of conceptual clarity risks misclassifying learners and undermining their efforts to promote inclusivity. The findings expose the need for educators to be more knowledgeable on such issues, which is the aim of this study. Also, these findings can be viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework guiding this study.

As a result, these findings align with the Social Justice theory, which states that social justice is based on redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser, 2000). These terms speak to how people feel about having control over their lives and making decisions (Fraser, 2000). Musara et al. (2021) further expanded on the idea that social justice theory should enhance opportunities for self-growth and expression and encourage people from diverse groups and those who have been marginalised to participate in decision-making by giving them a voice. In this study, educators demonstrate an emerging recognition of gender-diverse and non-binary identities in their classrooms, as they explained these concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities as existing beyond the binary identities of male and female. This partial recognition signals that educators are beginning to see and accept learners who are gender diverse and non-binary, and that they have been misrepresented and widely excluded by the school.

Additionally, the lens of equity further helped to explore how educators' understanding of the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities shapes their inclusive practices in the classroom. Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo (2012), in their study discussing the concept analysis of Social Justice argue that equity goes beyond treating every person equally, it requires adjusting practices to ensure that everyone regardless of their identity is included fully with dignity. In this study, this equates to educators expressing the importance of treating everyone 'fairly' regardless of their gender and acknowledging that there are gender diverse and non-

binary learners that need to be accepted and included within the school context. To illustrate, Mr Khan even said, “*treating boys, girls, and those who identify differently with equal dignity.*” Even Mr. Jude demonstrated that equity is crucial in ensuring inclusivity for all learners in class in his response when he emphasised that his worry is about all learners feeling ‘*safe, valued, and recognised*’.

This notion suggested that educators strive to go beyond merely ensuring equality in the classroom. They also try to ensure that those who were marginalised are seen and given attention according to their own needs. This aligns with the concepts of equity advocates, who advocate for adjusting practices to ensure that everyone is included and represented. In this case, Mr. Jude tried to ensure that gender diverse and non-binary learners are accommodated in terms of using bathrooms comfortably while also not hindering those students who are binary genders. This finding reflected a socially just impulse among educators in their understanding of gender-diverse and non-binary identities.

4.4.2. Educators’ Strategies for Managing and Advancing Gender Diversity and Non-Binary Inclusivity in Schools

In the interviews the participants revealed several strategies that they use to manage gender diverse and non-binary classrooms for inclusivity. Firstly, the study found that participants emphasise respect as a key value in managing gender-diverse classrooms. Secondly, educators recognise and affirm learner diversity in their classrooms, which leads to managing their classrooms for inclusivity. Furthermore, the study also surfaced that, participants create a safe and equitable learning environment to those learners who are gender diverse and non-binary as they are mostly marginalised, thus managing their classrooms for inclusivity. Lastly, this study also found that educators use mindfulness and reflective practices to accommodate gender-diverse and non-binary learners in their teaching and classroom management. All these findings were consolidated into sub-themes, which are presented below.

4.4.2.1. Sub-theme 1: Respect as a foundation of inclusivity

The study found that respect is a foundational element of inclusivity when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Some participants revealed that they use respectful language and learners’ names to address gender diverse and non-binary learners in class, thus ensuring inclusivity. Other participants highlighted that they address discrimination in class and reinforce respect for gender diverse and non-binary identities in the classroom. While others indicated that they also respect the identities of those learners who are gender diverse

and non-binary in the classroom. To support this finding, the following comments were uttered by some participants:

Mrs. Vrey said:

“I try to create an environment where all learners feel respected, whether male, female, or non-binary.”

“...I also make sure I know my learners well and build relationships with them, because respect is very important.”

While Mr. Khan averred that:

“I make sure to pronounce learners’ names correctly because that small act shows respect for who they are. Calling learner by their names help you in not misinterpreting their gender even if you are assuming whether a learner is a boy or girl because of the school uniform they are wearing.”

Mr. Naidoo also added that:

“I use respectful language in class when I come across such learners. I mostly use their names to avoid such. I also do not speculate on what gender a learner is, I see them as learners, and I respect their Identities. You will find that a learner dress in a boy uniform in school due to the code of conduct, but you will find that a learner is not a boy, he does not identify as a male and does not like to be referred to as a male, you must make means to talk to that learner and try to understand him and what he would prefer to be identify as.”

“...Sometimes, when a learner wants to be addressed by a different name or pronoun, I try to respect that privately first, and then slowly introduce it into the classroom if they’re comfortable, just so they don’t feel exposed or targeted.”

Miss Dube noted:

“First, as an educator, I ensure fairness to everyone and have respect towards every learner which helps me in creating a healthy learning environment.”

“... So, respect, equality and a good learning environment are important in my class, no one is important than the other in my class. If someone has a point, I listen to them

regardless of their gender and their view is also important and deserves as much respect as everyone in the classroom.”

Mr. Nkosi on the other hand reported that:

“I make sure I stop any discriminatory behaviour, especially towards people who don’t fit into the usual male or female categories. I ensure that all learners respect each other regardless of their gender.”

“...As a teacher, I am mindful of how I speak to them when disciplining them (non-binary learners). I also ensure that the rights of those I lead are respected.”

These findings suggested that educators place a strong emphasis on knowing all their learners in the classroom and understanding their uniqueness, particularly in terms of gender, as observed in this study. Knowing all the learners in class allows educators to use their names whenever they are addressing those learners who are gender diverse to not confuse or misinterpret their identity. While some educators also prohibit discriminatory behaviours from other learners who show disrespect to those who are non-binary and use respectful and mindful language when disciplining gender diverse and non-binary learners. This reflected a deliberate effort to create an inclusive classroom environment where every learner feels seen, acknowledged, and respected regardless of their gender. The use of respectful language also shows that educators as classroom managers view inclusivity as something enacted daily through respectful language, interaction and classroom relationships.

The findings are in line with the study of Petronelli and Ferguson (2022), who demonstrate that correct pronoun and name use is not only a matter of goodwill but a practice that can be deliberately taught, reinforced, and sustained. Their study showed that inclusive language is a skill that educators can develop and maintain, suggesting that what participants in the present study already practise can be extended more broadly through targeted training. This supports the study’s argument that inclusivity should not be left to individual discretion but embedded within teacher education and professional development, ensuring that all learners experience the dignity of being addressed respectfully.

Similarly, Mayer (2017) outlined ways to set up gender inclusivity in classrooms. One way Mayer (2017) highlighted for implementing gender-inclusive practices in classrooms is that she strongly suggested educators must demonstrate their own inclusivity by using their own pronouns when discussing their gender identity and encouraging their learners to do the same.

This perpetuates respect for gender identities within the classroom, which is in line with what this study has found, which is that educators respect all the gender identities of learners in class whether they are binary or non-binary identities.

On the other hand, Omercajic and Martino (2020) argue that inclusive practices, such as respectful address, are at the core of gender-inclusive policies in schools. However, these scholars argue that policies often remain on paper and are not always implemented in the classroom. This creates a useful point of contrast because educators participating in this study talked about respectful address strategies that occur every day in their classrooms. This respectful address approach of ‘knowing all your learners and using their names’ is adopted by educators using their own knowledge and classroom management practices and is not stipulated by the policy. However, Francis (2023) reminds us that many South African learners still face misgendering, discrimination, and the pressure to conform to binary expectations. This difference highlights the importance of educators using respectful language. When educators do this, they are not only following best practice, but they are also actively opposing a school culture that often exclude or silences non-binary and gender diverse identities. Therefore, the findings of the study are in line with evidence from a few existing studies and also offer an alternative perspective found in South African studies.

4.4.2.2. Sub-theme 2: Recognition and Affirmation of Learners’ Identities

The participants when reporting how they manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms also revealed that one of the key strategies educators use to manage gender diverse and non-binary classrooms was to recognise and affirm gender diverse and non-binary learners as they are. When asked about the strategies that they use when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, participants regularly emphasised that learners should be acknowledged in terms of their own identities, rather than being forced into traditional binary identities. Some educators also noted that their role as leaders is not to prescribe gender identities but to accept, affirm, and accommodate gender diversity in their classroom, regardless of their background beliefs. The following are the verbatim quotes from the participants:

Mr. Nkosi said:

“I accept everyone for who they are and embrace all gender identities within the diversity of my classroom and school. I accept learners for who they are and allow them to be themselves in class. If I don’t, then I would be infringing on their rights. So, it is

important to accept people for who they are, give them space, and avoid discriminatory practices.”

Mr. Khan also stressed recognition as the main strategy he uses in class:

“...I also recognise that learners can express their gender differently from what I am used to, which is male or female. So, my strategy is to accept them and treat them equally in the classroom. I also I give them an opportunity to respond to questions in class so that they do not feel excluded due to them being different maybe when we are engaging in class. They must feel that their way of being is not an issue here. ...In a township school, these steps really help because many learners come from homes or communities where they don't always feel seen or valued.”

Mr. Jude expanded by noting:

““For me, it's about not drawing the line and saying, 'I see you as a boy, so you must behave like a boy.' It's not my place to do that. A person should associate themselves with the gender identity they are most comfortable with. So, the strategy I use is to just treat them the way they portray themselves, whether they identify non-binary or not, I accept and embrace their identity. What matters is that they feel seen and respected for who they are.”

Miss Dube emphasised the following:

“The strategy I use is talking to them one on one of trying to understand them better because they are very good at hiding their feeling. when you sit down with them you will be shocked when they tell you their stories, some say that their parents are not accepting them for who they are, some are depressed for being unseen in school, and they are going through a lot, and I feel like we are not there for them. I ask them what they need to feel accepted and free and how do they really feel then we can take it from there. I let them know that we recognise and accept their gender and they must not feel ashamed for being who they are in the classroom and the school premises at large.”

“...It starts with us as educators and parents at home. If you are treating them differently, then when they see that they are different and become uncomfortable about their gender and themselves, they hide their gender and character in school, which impacts their wellbeing and even academics in school. But if you treat them the same way as others that's when they realise that there is nothing wrong with.”

These responses from the participants highlighted a different perspective on how educators manage gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The findings suggested that township school educators framed recognition and acceptance as central to their role, not only as a professional responsibility but also as an ethical commitment to learners' rights and dignity. This finding suggests that educators perceive themselves as gatekeepers of inclusivity; their decisions to accept or reject learners' identities have a direct impact on whether those learners feel safe and valued at school. What stands out is that participants such as Mr. Nkosi and Mr. Khan went beyond general statements by framing acceptance as part of their philosophy of leadership and fairness in practice. Their recognition of learners' right to "be themselves" shows a willingness to disrupt binary norms, even if only in simple, everyday ways.

These findings also revealed the profound vulnerability of gender-diverse learners in township schools, especially when Ms. Dube described how some learners face rejection at home and carry that pain into school spaces. Her reflection of talking one-on-one with those learners highlights that recognition in school is not merely symbolic but can be life-affirming for learners who may otherwise feel unseen, silenced, or depressed. In this way, educators' strategies of recognising and accepting learners serve as both a classroom management strategy and an act of social justice in contexts where stigma and discrimination are common. What this implies is that while educators may lack an understanding of gender diverse and non-binary identities, their instinct to centre recognition and affirmation becomes a powerful form of support. It reflects that inclusion begins with validating learners' existence and giving them space to belong. At the same time, it also highlighted the urgent need for schools to move from individual acts of recognition to more systematic strategies that institutionalise acceptance, so that learners are not dependent only on the goodwill of a few supportive educators.

The findings of this study, which show that educators recognised and accepted learners' gender diversity and non-binary identities as part of their management strategies, resonate strongly with those of Kelley et al. (2022). In their work with transgender and non-binary youth in Canadian schools, Kelley and colleagues reported that learners' well-being and sense of belonging depended largely on whether schools acknowledged and validated their identities. Educators' recognition, such as accepting learners for who they are and allowing them space to express themselves freely, was identified as a key protective factor against marginalisation (Kelley et al., 2022). Similarly, in this study, participants such as Mr. Nkosi and Mr. Khan emphasised acceptance as a central strategy for creating inclusive classrooms, thereby affirming that recognition of learner diversity is essential in fostering safety and inclusion.

In the South African context, Bhana (2022) examined how educators navigate trans and non-binary identities, shifting between misrecognition and recognition and discovered that some educators confuse gender identity with sexuality or adhere to religious and cultural binaries, while others intentionally aim to accept and affirm the identities of learners in their practices (Bhana, 2022). This contrast reflects the findings of the current study, in which participants demonstrated both conceptual confusion and a practical willingness to support learners, as previously discussed in the previous theme. Ms Dube's focus on understanding learners' personal challenges, such as familial rejection, aligns with Bhana's claims that educators' acknowledgement can mitigate the discrimination learners encounter in other contexts. Recognition serves as both a management strategy in the classroom and a mechanism for social justice, addressing learners in their vulnerable situations and ensuring inclusivity.

Additional evidence supporting this finding is presented in the work of Singh and Bipath (2024) with South African early childhood educators, who found that reflective workshops prompted educators to reconsider their assumptions about gender and implement more inclusive classroom practices. Similar to the participants in this study, those educators began to accept and acknowledge that not all learners conform to binary expectations, and that inclusion requires the acceptance of learners' diverse expressions of gender. Haitembu and Maarman (2023) demonstrated that schools that explicitly promoted acceptance of gender-nonconforming learners resulted in educators being more likely to recognise and acknowledge these learners in their daily practices. Overall, these studies support the finding of the current research, stating that recognition and acceptance, even when based on incomplete or partial understandings, are essential steps in fostering classrooms where gender-diverse and non-binary learners can feel a sense of belonging.

However, it is also important to point out the difference in the findings of this study and the findings of the overall studies mentioned previously. Research, such as Kelley et al. (2022), indicates that recognition often requires significant institutional and policy support. In contrast, this study reveals that township educators primarily relied on their own initiative to accommodate learners. This difference shows that even while educators in this study showed real concern and recognition, their efforts are nonetheless lacking since they aren't always supported by institutional backing or professional training. In other words, recognition exists at the level of individual educators, as seen by Nkosi's and Dube's responses, although it is mainly motivated by personal commitment rather than structural change. This demonstrates

both the resilience and the constraints of the findings, which is that recognition is occurring, yet it is taking place within the uneven and constrained contexts of township schools.

4.4.2.3. Sub-theme 3: Creating a safe and equitable learning environment

The interview responses of participants further found that the participants echoed the importance of creating a safe and equitable classroom environment as another key strategy for managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The participants spoke about the importance of treating all learners fairly, and ensuring that no learner is made to feel different or excluded on the basis of their gender identity. Participants in this study focused on building a classroom atmosphere where every learner is valued and feels safe with their own uniqueness, and this includes binary and non-binary learners. Some participants outlined that promoting equality in class goes beyond just acknowledging gender diverse learners; it also requires a balanced classroom culture where opportunities for participation and recognition apply to all learners in class. Here are the comments made by the participants that support this finding:

Mr. Jude commented that:

“As a classroom manager, I try to make sure that every learner feels accommodated, no matter how they identify. As I said before, sometimes you find that a learner identifies as male but feels shy to use the boys’ restroom. In such cases, I allow the learner to use the girls’ restroom, but I first make sure that it is empty so that everyone feels safe and comfortable. For me, it is not about which restroom they use; it is about ensuring that all learners can use their freedom and feel accepted in the school environment. I do this because I believe every learner deserves to be respected and to feel that they belong. As a manager, I always try to balance the needs of both binary and non-binary learners, managing the class in a way that includes everyone without leaving anyone behind.”

In the same vein, Miss Dube noted that:

“In my classroom, I promote equality and fairness regardless of gender. For example, sometimes girls may disrespect boys, and when the boy reacts, the girl starts crying, and as educators, we often take the girl’s side and punish the boy. I try to be mindful of that and treat everyone equally. The same applies when I have gender-diverse learners in my class, I make sure not to give them special attention to the point where other learners feel excluded or think I am closer to certain learners. For me, respect, equality, and a positive learning environment are key. No learner is more important than another.”

Everyone's voice matters, and I make sure that every learner's opinion is heard and respected, regardless of their gender or how they identify."

Mr. Naidoo also noted that:

"...I try to create a safe classroom where everyone will be free and comfortable with their identity in class. All learners must feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, do not favour anyone but support those who are discriminated and need support."

"...Because I can see that times are changing and learners are more expressive now. In my classroom, I try to create basic ground rules at the start of the term that promote respect for everyone. I say things like, we respect each other's names, identity, and differences."

While Mr. Khan noted a different strategy that supports and ensure inclusivity in class:

"I involve learners in creating classroom rules. This makes them feel ownership and ensures the rules are fair to everyone. This strategy helps me to create a culture of equality in my class and so we punish those who break our rules. So, this create a classroom environment that is positive for all learners even those who are non-binary."

Mrs Vrey said this bold statement when asked about the strategies she use for inclusivity in class:

"I give them support regardless of their abilities or backgrounds."

"I support those learners' who feel unseen in my class (non-binary) by creating a classroom environment where every learner is seen and equal. To me every learner is the same no matter where they come from or their identity, I treat everyone the same and avoid being bias."

To make meaning of the findings, participants reflected that educators regarded equity, safety, and support as fundamental strategies for managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. It is notable that they framed equity not only as treating learners equally but also as addressing the needs of individuals traditionally recognised within binary categories, along with those who identify as non-binary and gender diverse. Mr. Jude's comments illustrate this balancing act, as he addressed practical challenges, such as restroom access, in ways that prioritised safety and dignity for non-binary learners while also considering the comfort of other learners. His emphasis on *"managing the whole class without leaving anyone behind"* reflects a commitment

to inclusivity, ensuring that every learner, irrespective of gender, is acknowledged within the classroom community.

Some participants also emphasised the necessity of ensuring that no learner feels invisible or isolated. Ms Dube cautioned against neglecting non-binary learners while also advising against overly concentrating on them, indicating that fairness involves recognising the equal worth of all individuals. Mr Naidoo emphasised that he creates a supportive classroom where all learners feel safe and comfortable with their identities, irrespective of how they identify. Mrs. Vrey emphasised that she ensures that every learner is regarded as equally important, regardless of their background or identity. These perspectives indicate that equity and affirmation are not merely theoretical concepts but practical elements that influence learners' experiences of belonging within school environments.

Moreover, Other participants, such as Mr. Khan and Mr. Naidoo, connected creating a safe and equitable learning environment to the way they managed their classrooms. Mr. Khan described how he involves learners in co-creating classroom rules, which he believes encourages fairness and shared responsibility. This reflects a move away from strict top-down authority towards a more collaborative form of classroom management, where learners themselves contribute to building an environment of respect and equality. In a similar way, Mr. Naidoo explained that because learners today are more expressive, he starts each term by establishing ground rules that emphasise respect for names, identities, and differences. His approach shows an awareness of the changing social climate and a deliberate effort to affirm diversity and protect learners from exclusion. Together, these responses from the participants illustrate how educators actively work towards creating a supportive and equal environment in their classrooms.

To sum up, these responses indicate that educators perceived inclusivity as inherently linked to the creation of supportive and equitable environments. They regarded equality as both a principle and a practice, ensuring fair treatment for learners, supporting marginalised individuals, and guaranteeing that no learner feels inferior to others. This indicates that township educators are starting to conceptualise inclusivity as a collective responsibility to guarantee safety, belonging, and fairness for all learners.

It is also important to note that the finding that educators in this study seek to create a supportive and equal environment for all learners strongly resonates with international studies. A study by Kelley et al. (2022) discovered that learners' mental well-being is closely related to how they are treated in school. Learners felt safer and more accepted when educators recognised their

identities, treated them properly, and created welcoming classroom environments (Kelley et al., 2022). This is similar to what the participants in this study said about how they handled the needs of both binary and non-binary learners (Mr. Jude), how they made everyone feel like they belonged (Mr. Naidoo), and how they made sure that all gender identities were treated equally (Ms. Dube and Mrs. Vrey). These examples demonstrate that equality and support are not mere intellectual concepts; they are practical actions done by educators that significantly influence learners' experiences in the classroom.

Moreover, a study by Zhange and Mohangi (2024) examined gender and sexually-diverse learners in rural South African schools, getting comparable findings. Educators' intentional attempts to recognise learners, create supportive classroom environments, foster positive classroom cultures, and protect marginalised individuals were key to learners' resilience (Zhange & Mohangi, 2024). These actions frequently occurred in the absence of explicit policies, underscoring educators' individual dedication to equity and inclusion. This is in line with the current study, where participants stressed the need to avoid bias, foster justice, and make sure that no learner is "left behind," no matter what their gender identification is. Establishing equitable learning environments is thus recognised as an ethical obligation that supports learners' dignity.

A regional study by Haitembu and Maarman (2023) also observed that in Namibia, educators frequently served as the main advocates for equality, establishing safe environments for gender non-binary pupils despite insufficient policy direction. This supports the findings of this study, such as Mrs. Vrey's intervention in supporting learners who feel excluded, and Mr. Khan's careful balancing of the classroom dynamics to ensure everyone is treated fairly. Haitembu and Maarman (2023) also talked about problems, like not enough training and cultural resistance, which showed that teachers' efforts can be weak without help from the system. Therefore, these studies all demonstrate that educators' efforts to create and maintain an equal and supportive environment are crucial for the well-being and inclusion of their learners. Educators play a significant role in creating a school environment that fosters a culture of support and inclusion, regardless of learners' identities, whether through their everyday classroom practices or their broader commitment to fairness.

4.4.2.4. Sub-theme 4: Teacher mindfulness and Reflective practices

The participants stated that they are mindful of the language they use and the disciplinary practices they employ to ensure that they uphold learners' dignity in their classrooms. They see

inclusivity as part of their moral and professional responsibility as leaders. The participants emphasised their teaching methods, particularly how they incorporate gender diverse and non-binary learners into their pedagogy to effectively manage gender diverse classrooms for inclusivity. The participants made the following comments:

Mr. Nkosi shared that:

“... I also prepare my lessons carefully to avoid examples that could discriminate against them (non-binary learners). Coming from a rich cultural background, I must be honest, I used to discriminate against such people. However, through university and academic exposure, I have changed, and I am now very cautious about what I deliver in class. I censor my language to be inclusive. This growth, as a student, teacher, and leader, has helped me now to navigate gender diversity in the classroom.”

Mrs. Vrey also averred on the use of inclusive resources in class as she said:

“I use diverse resources and adapt my teaching strategies to accommodate everyone in the classroom. Using diverse resources, such as showing videos to demonstrate the real-world content on such a sensitive topic, in my classroom. This helps in ensuring that all learners understand the topic and no one is discriminated against during my teaching.”

“Also, I educate my learners about diversity. I teach them that being lesbian or gay does not mean someone is sick; they are human beings just like everyone else. for example, I don't assign projects based only on gender. I ensure that groups are balanced in terms of males and females, and I give everyone a chance to participate. I also make sure not to exclude learners who are gay or lesbian, and I always try to treat everyone equally.”

While Mr. Khan emphasised code switching as an inclusive strategy:

“I adapt my teaching by using both isiZulu and English, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. This helps learners understand clearly. This clearly helps in township schools to ensure that all learners understand what I am teaching by codeswitching the languages. Some learners may not understand this when communicated in English but understand such topics better when they are taught in their language which in this case is isiZulu.”

Mr. Naidoo also uttered a strategy of freedom of expression when teaching:

“We don’t have student-led clubs focused on gender diversity yet, but I’ve noticed that when learners have freedom to express themselves in class activities or discussions, like writing assignments or life orientation lessons, they sometimes open up. So, I try to make space for that expression.”

Lastly, Mr Jude noted the importance of incorporating such topics when teaching:

“I try to incorporate topics of gender diversity when I am teaching. I do not necessarily have the entire lesson on that, but I do teach them about such diversity in terms of gender, class, and culture from time to time during my lessons. I tell my class that their religion, beliefs, culture, which is binary, does not define other people; they must acknowledge that we are different and respect the change in society.”

These responses from the participants indicated a different impression of how educators use mindfulness and reflective practices to manage gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The findings show that educators are cautious not to discriminate against gender diverse and non-binary learners when preparing and delivering their lessons. Even though they come from different backgrounds such as cultural background, they try not to be discriminatory in their teaching, as Mr. Nkosi noted that he used to discriminate against such learners previously when teaching due to his background. However, more exposure and experience in his endeavours helped him to be inclusive in his pedagogy.

Moreover, the findings showed that educators try to incorporate such topics of gender diversity in their teaching as an inclusive strategy in class. When teaching, educators try to educate learners about the concepts of gender diversity as it can be seen in Mr. Jude and Mrs. Vrey’s responses. This demonstrated that educators are willing to teach other learners about non-binary identities and make them aware of these identities as normal, thereby promoting inclusivity in their classrooms.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the findings revealed that educators incorporate expression into their teaching strategies. Educators allow learners to be themselves in class and allow for every learner to participate in activities that may be done in class regardless of their gender. This is seen in multiple participants’ responses such as Mrs. Vrey, Mr. Naidoo and Mr. Jude. This alludes that, educators cater for diversity in their teaching approach and even when assessing learners in groups they ensure inclusivity by mixing genders including non-binary

identities. Consequently, no learner would feel less during teaching and learning, and this will maximise participation of all learners and expression of their identity in the classroom.

Nonetheless, the finding also portrayed code-switching as a tool educators use to be inclusive in the classroom. One participant reported that he codeswitches from English to isiZulu when teaching such sensitive topics to learners. This means that educators cater for diversity not only in terms of gender but also in terms of language itself to ensure that learners understand the content that is being delivered. Therefore, inclusivity goes beyond just delivering the content, as educators ensure that learners understand the content and they are not limited or discriminated in any way in the classroom.

The findings that emerged from this research align with what scholars have long argued, both in South Africa and internationally. The participants such as Mr. Nkosi reported being careful when planning and delivering their lessons. This is similar to what Wight (2010) saw in his research on gender-inclusive practices. Wight (2010) provides a detailed account of how educators, in his study, became increasingly reflective and cautious in their word choices and representations to prevent the reinforcement of bias. This means that being careful isn't always a sign of doubt; it could be a sign of a growing awareness that helps educators move towards more inclusive and cautious practice. Similarly, Poteat et al. (2021) emphasised that educators are more likely to create lessons that protect learners from marginalisation when they have positive attitudes towards gender diversity. Kelley et al. (2022) also argue that educators who are careful and deliberate about how they present classroom material make transgender and non-binary learners feel safer and more accepted.

In a South African context, a study by Francis (2025) highlights how educators engaged in queer and trans activism bring such issues directly into the classroom, not as an extra-curricular activity but as part of regular lessons. This resonates with the study's finding on how educators, such as Mr. Jude and Mrs. Vrey, actively incorporate topics of gender diversity into their teaching. This indicated that the participants in this study are actively involved in ensuring that their teaching approaches are inclusive, thereby creating a supportive environment for all learners. Wight (2010) also provides examples of educators incorporating gendered perspectives in the classroom, such as including women mathematicians in lessons, to demonstrate to learners that diversity is normal and something to be proud of. In the context of this study, this corresponds with what the participants said about incorporating gender diverse and non-binary identities in their lessons to promote inclusivity.

The initiative of allowing learners to freely express their identities, as observed in this study, further strengthens the parallels between the research findings of this study and the existing literature. Allowing learners to be themselves in class, as described by participants like Mr. Naidoo, ensures that inclusion is not only theoretical but lived in daily classroom practices. Kelley et al. (2022) also found that when educators validate learners' identities and voices, it enhances their sense of belonging and contributes to their emotional well-being. Likewise, the practice of using gender-mixed groups, as participants reported, aligns with Wight (2010) and Poteat et al. (2021), who both note that intentional structuring of collaborative activities reduces segregation and fosters equitable participation across gender identities.

Moreover, one participant also noted the use of code-switching to isiZulu as a strategy for managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, which highlights the importance of ensuring that diversity extends beyond gender to language. McKinney and Tyler (2024) effectively demonstrate how (trans)linguaging tactics facilitate learners' engagement with complicated and sensitive subject in significant ways, while simultaneously validating their linguistic and cultural identities. Translanguaging is when learners use languages they know in a flexible way to learn and understand new content (McKinney & Tyler, 2024). This shows that being inclusive is not only about representation; it is also about making sure that all learners, regardless of their identity, are able to grasp and participate with the curriculum, without being held back by language difficulties. Overall, it can be stated that this study's findings are aligned with relevant existing literature in South Africa and globally.

On the other hand, it is crucial to note that looking at the findings through the lenses of the study's conceptual framework deepens the understanding of how educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom. As previously stated in Chapter 2, the concept of individualised consideration focuses on the uniqueness of individuals and acknowledges their differences (Bass, 1985). So, TLT is specifically evident in the way educators in this study portray the quality of leadership in ensuring that each individual is recognised and accepted for their uniqueness. The concept of individualised consideration is clear here, as educators reported that, as leaders, they move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and instead use strategies that cater to different gender identities in their classrooms. A noticeable example is when Mr Nkosi reflected on how his cultural background used to discriminate against non-binary learners but later shifted his approach to be inclusive and cater for variety in terms of gender identities in the classroom. Therefore, the educators in this study accept and recognise gender-diverse and non-binary learners, going further to be inclusive by

employing teaching strategies and appropriate language that ensure all learners, as their subordinates, are represented and individually considered.

The findings also align with the SJT, particularly in relation to the concepts of equity, recognition, and empowerment. Fraser (2005) emphasised equity, which involves redistributing resources and recognising diverse identities to prevent systematic oppression. Similarly, in this study, educators were willing to empower gender-diverse and non-binary learners to ensure fair recognition of all learners. Educators highlighted that they incorporate topics on gender diversity and create a supportive and equal environment for all. However, while some educators believe in equality for all identities in the classroom, equity is a more appropriate concept for this study because educators recognise that non-binary individuals have been excluded and are committed to uplifting them through inclusive strategies that empower gender-diverse and non-binary learners. This study identified strategies that ensure the representation of non-binary learners, utilise appropriate language to address gender-diverse learners, and foster a supportive environment for all learners, which collectively provide clear evidence of equity, recognition, and empowerment. Thus, equity, recognition and empowerment are very crucial lenses framing this study under the Social Justice Theory.

From the perspective of Fayol's management concept, particularly the principle of commanding/leadership, educators' strategies reveal leadership in action. Commanding, in this sense, is not about control but about guiding the classroom to function as a fair and respectful space. For instance, educators in this study reported the setting of ground rules, ensuring mixed-gender participation, and addressing learners in ways that respect their identities, all of which reflect a deliberate exercise of classroom leadership. In this way, educators command their classrooms not by reinforcing traditional hierarchies but by actively creating an environment where inclusivity is the standard. Additionally, some of Mr. Khan's code-switching practices, for example, demonstrate an educator's leadership in ensuring that content is understood by all learners, thereby showing attentiveness and authority in maintaining equitable access to knowledge. Overall, these theories, when considered in conjunction with the findings, demonstrate that inclusion in classrooms with gender-diverse and non-binary learners is not a coincidence, but rather the result of intentional leadership based on respect, fairness, and empowerment.

4.4.3. Challenges educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms

In this theme, participants disclosed several challenges they face when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Some participants reported that bullying and teasing are the common challenges in the classrooms in the context of gender diverse classrooms. While other participants expressed concern about misgendering students who are gender diverse and non-binary in their classrooms, they also noted that they face policy gaps within the school. Moreover, participants revealed a bit of resistance from their cultural and religious background, which is one challenge that stands in their way when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, and also the issue of time constraint due to heavy workload, which makes it difficult for educators to be inclusive in terms of gender diversity and non-binary identities.

4.4.3.1. Sub-theme 1: Bullying and teasing

Participants consistently identified bullying and taunting as the primary challenges faced in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Participants expressed concerns over the bullying and teasing of gender-diverse and non-binary individuals by classmates identifying as binary genders, both in the classroom and across the school. During the interview schedule, the participants highlighted bullying and teasing as significant challenges in their classrooms. Their responses were as follows:

Mr. Nkosi commented on this with frustration on his face:

“One challenge is that some learners in the class tease and bully others. As a teacher, I must step in and discipline them in front of everyone. If I don’t, that behaviour will continue in the classroom and even in the school. This can make learners who are discriminated against feel silenced and excluded.”

Mr. Khan also commented that:

“The biggest challenge is the comments from other learners. Sometimes they tease without realising the impact. For example, a learner might say, ‘Why are you dressing like a boy?’ or ‘You’re acting like a girl,’ in a joking way.

Mr. Naidoo with a sigh of concern also said that:

“Non-binary or gender-diverse learners are often called names, laughed at, or even excluded during group activities. sometimes the bullying is subtle like stares, whispers, or side comments and it’s difficult to police every moment.”

“...In class you find that other learners are calling non-binary learners with derogative terms such as ‘isitabane’(gay), ‘you are gay’, ‘you are lesbian!’.”

Miss. Dube also added:

“I had a case where a learner came to me crying to me (educator) for being called by a derogatory term ‘isitabane’ (gay) by other learners. And you can see that this learner is a soft ‘boy’ and he usually hangs out with girls, so he was bullied for such and was called gay by mostly male learners in class. That's when I realised that learners also notice that a non-binary person is a bit different from them (binary learners) and act differently than what they expect.”

Mr. Jude also showed his challenges that he faced in class when managing such classrooms:

“The problem is that learners are still immature in a way in class so they would make disruptions and make fun specifically on the topic related to gender, they would want that non-binary learner to be precise whether she a female or he is a male.”

To make sense of this verbatim, it is noticeable that most participants shared the same sentiment that bullying and teasing gender-diverse and non-binary learners present a major challenge in their classrooms. The comments illustrated that binary learners frequently ridicule, question, or exclude peers who do not conform to traditional gender categories. This behaviour often manifests as observable bullying, such as name-calling and derogatory remarks, as well as subtle acts of exclusion, whispering, and mocking. The educators' reflections indicated that these behaviours stem more from a lack of understanding and exposure than from individual malice. In this context, teasing serves as a mechanism for learners to regulate differences and uphold their notions of what is considered “normal.”. Collectively, these practices reinforce non-binary learners’ sense of being “different” and contribute to their marginalisation within the classroom space.

More so, this finding illustrated the multifaceted nature of bullying. It encompasses not only visible insults but also manifests subtly through whispers, glances, or social exclusion. This layered nature of bullying makes it difficult for educators to address it directly, as not all harm is visible or easily punishable. This form of bullying frequently seems to result in non-binary learners feeling isolated, silenced, and lacking in confidence, especially during the initial months of the school year when peer groups are still developing.

In essence, this finding means that bullying and teasing of non-binary learners are not merely “classroom discipline issues” but are reflections of wider societal attitudes towards gender diversity. The classroom becomes a microcosm of these struggles, where ignorance, cultural beliefs, and peer dynamics intersect. For educators, the challenge is not only about stopping the immediate acts of bullying but also about navigating deeply ingrained social attitudes while protecting learners who are most vulnerable.

The findings are also supported by various studies on the challenges faced by educators in managing gender-diverse and non-binary learners. The findings align with the work of Francis and Monakali (2021), who contend that South African schools are predominantly unprepared to support gender diversity, frequently fostering hostile environments for learners who do not adhere to binary gender identities. The authors emphasise that misgendering, ridicule, and exclusion are common experiences for numerous nonbinary learners, indicating that the issues identified by educators in this study reflect a broader systemic failure. Research by Francis and Reygan (2016) illustrates that the lack of discussion regarding gender and sexuality in school curricula deprives learners of the necessary language and frameworks to comprehend diversity, which in turn facilitates teasing and the regulation of individuals perceived as different. The present findings support this argument by demonstrating how teasing and joking serve as mechanisms through which learners uphold and defend binary gender norms.

Moreover, the layered characteristics of bullying identified in this study correspond with existing research on peer aggression within South African educational institutions (Botha et al., 2012). Subtle forms of bullying, including exclusion, gossip, and derogatory labelling, can lead to long-term emotional damage, even in the absence of physical violence (Botha et al., 2012). The educators' observations reflect this reality, as they noted that subtle forms of bullying frequently go unnoticed, complicating disciplinary actions while remaining equally harmful. This underscores the continued presence of a concealed culture of harm that jeopardises the safety of non-binary learners in educational settings.

4.4.3.2. Sub-theme 2: Misgendering

Misgendering is another challenge identified by participants regarding the management of gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Several participants said that they occasionally refer to non-binary learners using binary identities with which they are familiar. One participant reported that even learners struggle with misgendering non-binary learners in class. Here are the verbatim quotes by the participants supporting this notion:

Mr. Nkosi laughed out of his confusion on misgendering and said:

“Another challenge is addressing learners correctly. Sometimes I get confused and end up calling a gay learner a “boy” or “girl,” based on how they present themselves. This can cause offence. I try my best not to discriminate, but sometimes it is difficult when I don’t know their preferred names or identities.”

Mr. Khan also pointed out that:

“In class, it becomes difficult always keeping up with the fact that the learners are gender diverse, so I end up calling non-binary learners by what I am used to, which is calling them by ‘my boy or my girl.’ Sometimes it’s something that just happens unintentionally in some cases.”

Similarly, Mr. Naidoo indicated that:

“Another challenge is using learners’ preferred names and pronouns. Sometimes a learner might come and say, ‘Sir, I want to be called this name’ or ‘I go by they/them.’ Also, we’re not always informed, so we end up misgendering them; not out of disrespect, but because we genuinely don’t know what to say.

“...And other learners also struggle with this, some refuse to use the learner’s chosen name or pronouns, which can cause a lot of tension.”

The findings on misgendering reveal that educators are often caught between good intentions and systemic gaps. What stands out to the researcher is that the confusion they describe does not come from hostility, but from a lack of training, policy, and practical guidance on how to address gender-diverse learners. When educators default to calling learners “my boy” or “my girl,” or use names based on appearance, it is not necessarily meant to harm, yet it reproduces binary ways of thinking and denies learners the respect of being recognised on their own terms. To me, this shows that misgendering is less about educators’ ignorance and more about a lack of knowledge and the schooling system that has not adapted to acknowledge gender diversity in everyday practice.

To add, the findings also showed the difference between intent and impact. While educators often explained that they did not mean to offend, the learners at the centre of this experience still feel unseen and invalidated. Being repeatedly misnamed or referred to with the wrong pronouns undermines their dignity, makes them feel unsafe in class, and signals to their peers

that their identities are not important. This makes misgendering not just a small slip of language, but a form of everyday marginalisation that takes away at learners' confidence and sense of belonging. To me, the weight of this finding is that what seems minor to an educator may in fact be deeply harmful to a learner.

Finally, these findings also made clear to me the heavy burden placed on educators who are left to improvise solutions. Whether it was addressing pronouns, managing peer teasing, or regularly using and remembering learners' pronouns and names, they often navigated these issues without guidance. While some made caring choices to protect learners, the lack of consistency creates confusion and sometimes further exclusion. This highlighted both the courage of educators in their efforts to do their best and the urgent need for systemic support, training, and clear policies. Without this support, misgendering would remain a persistent challenge that not only frustrates educators but also compromises the safety and dignity of non-binary learners.

The findings under the subtheme 'misgendering' are not new to the research world; many scholars have shared the same sentiment as this study. This study revealed that educators commonly misidentify non-binary learners as belonging to a single gender when they do not. This finding illustrates the difficulty educators face in addressing this issue within the classroom. In the same way, Kelley et al. (2022) found that transgender and non-binary learners' well-being is affected less by intentional hostility and more by normal school activities that don't support who they are. Furthermore, Omercajic (2020) posits that the absence of clear school policies often leads educators to use binary language in their responses, thereby perpetuating exclusion. Taken together, these studies and the present findings indicated that misgendering arises not just from ignorance but also from broader systemic gaps that hinder educators in addressing gender diversity.

However, some studies indicate a gap between educators' intentions and their actual impact on learners. Kosciw et al. (2022) found that the repeated use of incorrect pronouns or names, even unintentionally, diminished learners' sense of belonging in the classroom. Poteat et al. (2021) also found that teacher support reduced bias only when it was constant and aggressive. McQuillan (2023) further argued that, in the absence of professional development, educators must rely on existing resources, which may result in inconsistent and occasionally damaging practices. These studies share a similar notion with the current findings, which show that misgendering negatively affects learners, who experience daily exclusion, while also placing

educators in a challenging position, as they confront issues without enough training or institutional support.

4.4.3.3. Sub-theme 3: Policy gaps and lack of school support

Many participants during the interviews outlined that they lack support from the school in terms of assisting them in better managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. This lack of support, as previously argued in the last paragraph, puts educators in a very challenging position where they have to rely on their knowledge and experiences to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, thus posing more challenges to educators. The participants also mentioned that they depend on general school policies, which are guided by the DBE, but these policies do not explicitly address gender diversity and non-binary learners. Some participants emphasised that the school is aware of non-binary and gender-diverse learners, but they currently do not see the need to change their approach or the importance of addressing gender diversity. Here were their initial comments:

Mr Jude disappointingly said:

“The school does not really support us when it comes to managing gender-diverse learners. They are aware of such situations, but there are no clear policies or proper guidance on how we should handle them. So, we just follow the same school rules and try our best with what we have.”

Miss Dube similarly stated that:

“There is not much support that we receive from the school when it comes to gender-diverse learners. Even though the school acknowledges that non-binary learners are there and their numbers are increasing, the school has not done enough to support them. I don’t think the school sees the importance of addressing their issues and feelings. Some of these learners may appear happy and free, but deep down they feel unrecognised and excluded. Others are even afraid to speak in class because they fear being judged. So, even though we recognise them, there is really no proper support given to them.”

While Mr. Naidoo also noted that:

“I won’t say we get support from the school, like the support that is based specifically on the issue of gender diversity, but we do get general guidance on how we are supposed to treat the learners and how to manage our classrooms accordingly. For example,

school leaders often remind us that we must treat learners fairly, with dignity, and create a safe space for them. They tell us, as class educators, that we must ensure our classrooms are accommodative. This doesn't always come with specific tools or training for dealing with non-binary or gender-diverse learners, but it's more about encouraging a respectful and caring environment."

"...In our school we don't really have formal structures or support programs for LGBTQ+ learners, but I think sometimes the support starts with just one teacher being available and non-judgmental."

Mr. Khan averred that:

"We also don't have official programs or lessons that talk about these topics. The support we do have mainly comes from the policies that are there to guide us and the principal, but their focus is usually on general behaviour and learning difficulties, not specifically on gender issues."

Mr. Nkosi explicitly said that:

"The school has no clear policy addressing gender diversity. We simply adhere to the Department's general guideline, which emphasizes respect for all learners but does not specifically address gender identity issues. As a result, the way gender diversity is managed depends on each individual teacher, which creates inconsistency and challenges."

The participants' comments showed an ongoing tension between recognition and support. Despite the school acknowledging the existence and increasing visibility of non-binary learners, educators emphasise the lack of significant institutional support for this acknowledgement. Mr Jude's statements showed this contradiction when he said that the school is "aware" of non-binary individuals and fosters general respect, but educators are completely responsible for dealing with this issue of diversity. This shows that educators personally recognise gender diversity without any real school support. Learners are "treated the same" as others, but their specific needs are still not met. This means that recognition might become shallow and useless if there are not any clear regulations in place to support educators in handling situations in gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

While, Miss Dube's response gives deeper emotional significance to the lack of assistance. She discussed the underlying problems non-binary learners who seem free but really feel left out

and silenced are experiencing. Her insight reveals how the absence of school policies supporting non-binary learners leads to real-life impacts such as learners dropping out, fearing judgement, and silencing their voices. What stands out to the researcher is how her remarks show how policy silence hurts non-binary learners. It is more than a policy gap; it leaves educators in a difficult position. This interpretation showed how failure at the institutional level affects learners' confidence, involvement, and well-being in the classroom. The interpretations also illustrate the ambiguity of the school policies; their aim is to ensure that all learners are included, but they suppress certain learners at the same time.

The perspectives of Mr Naidoo, Mr Khan, and Mr Nkosi revealed how schools rely on broad policies that emphasise fairness and dignity but fail to address the specific realities of gender diversity. Their voices pointed the “policy inconsistency”, where educators are expected to create safe and inclusive spaces without the necessary tools, training, or frameworks. Mr Naidoo’s remark that support often “starts with just one educator being available and non-judgemental” highlighted the heavy reliance on individual goodwill rather than institutional responsibility. Similarly, Mr Khan’s admission that existing school programmes overlook gender issues and Mr Nkosi’s observation that “the school has no clear policies” exposed how educators are left to navigate these challenges alone, often inconsistently. What becomes clear is that while schools may pride themselves on treating all learners equally, equality without equity leaves non-binary learners vulnerable. The educators’ frustration and concern show their willingness to support these learners, but without systemic guidance, their efforts remain limited.

These findings are in line with what Ubisi (2022) identified in his study that sought to analyse queer protective school policies for LGBT+ youth within the South African context. Ubisi (2022) argues that even though there are strong policies for LGBT+ learners on paper, schools frequently fail to put them into practice. Participants in my study shared this feeling of stress. They said that even though the school is “aware” of non-binary learners, they do not do much to assist them in a structured manner. This leads to what Ubisi (2022) calls “symbolic recognition,” which means learners are noticed but not recognised in their daily school experiences. The difference between policy and practice makes things unclear for educators as well as learners, and empathy and personal interpretation substitute the place of systemic policy guidance.

Russell et al. (2021) emphasised that inclusive and equitable policies, along with focused professional development, student alliances, and an inclusive curriculum, yield significant improvements in safety and well-being for nonbinary learners. My participants reported getting only general reminders to "treat all learners with dignity" and lacking specific resources or training for managing gender-diverse and non-binary identities in the classroom. Their accounts confirmed Russell et al. (2021) argument that general approaches are not enough and that educators require explicit preparation to intervene confidently and consistently. Individual attitudes, such as educators' empathy and their non-judgemental approach, create a dependency that causes the quality of support to vary widely, leaving many learners marginalised. Therefore, there is a need for schools to refine their policies to be specific to guide educators in creating inclusive environments for all learners.

These patterns are not unique to gender diversity. Research on inclusive education more broadly in South Africa also shows that teachers often feel overwhelmed and unsupported when asked to accommodate diverse learners without training or resources (Sepadi, 2025). This resonates with my participants' concerns that non-binary learners are left "pretending to be happy while dying on the inside," as schools do little to create policies that address their needs. Taken together, the literature and my findings revealed that equality is not enough when not accompanied by equity-driven frameworks, and this places a heavy emotional and professional burden on educators while leaving non-binary learners vulnerable and marginalised.

4.4.3.4. Sub-theme 4: Cultural and religious beliefs

Three participants indicated that their cultural and religious beliefs become a challenge when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. The participants further explained that their beliefs only recognise binary genders which are male and female, and this creates a challenge when they encounter learners who identify as non-binary, as it conflicts with their own beliefs. However, participants did highlight that they do try to accept and accommodate all learners as they are. Moreover, participants noted that this challenge affects many educators in the school, particularly because most of them are from Zulu culture and identify as Christian by religion, making it a complex issue for these educators. Here were their comments:

Mr. Nkosi highlighted that:

"It is really difficult. Many educators have their own cultural beliefs and some religious beliefs which are against gender diversity, and it makes it difficult for them to support those learners who are non-binary. So, they just continue using traditional binary

norms but for me, I just include them and accept them so that they don't feel discriminated against."

Mr. Khan strongly emphasised that:

"I've observed in my classroom that it is often a challenge to manage gender diverse learners due to cultural and religious backgrounds. As a Zulu and Christian, I grew up believing that there are only boys and girls. I even teach my own children that a boy must dress as a boy and a girl must dress as a girl. So, this becomes a challenge when I have to manage such situations in my classroom."

Mr. Naidoo also showed concerns about his cultural beliefs and religion when he said:

"...Coming from different cultural and religious background, it is difficult to support gender diversity because this thing is new to us and against what we believe in. But I do accept every learner as they are."

Participants' accounts illustrated how cultural and religious beliefs frequently pose challenges for educators managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. For many, deeply held values around gender are rooted in traditions and faith, where gender is understood strictly in binary terms, which are 'male' and 'female'. When educators encounter learners who identify beyond this binary, they face a personal conflict between what they have been taught to believe and what the school space demands of them as professionals. Mr Nkosi, for instance, reflected on how difficult it is for educators to openly support non-binary learners without feeling they are betraying their religious and cultural values. This struggle highlighted the quiet struggle educators carry while wanting to be inclusive yet held back by beliefs that frame gender diversity as unfamiliar or unacceptable.

Additionally, Mr Khan said that growing up as a Zulu Christian reinforced ideas about male and female roles. However, his response also had a conflicting tone between the values he still taught at home and the reality he cannot disregard in the classroom. This illustrates how cultural and religious beliefs, while central to educators' identities, sometimes make it difficult to reconcile their roles as custodians of tradition with their professional duty to nurture and be inclusive to all learners.

At the same time, the participants did not express outright rejection of gender-diverse learners. Instead, they acknowledged their efforts to accept and accommodate learners, even when such efforts went against their beliefs. Mr. Naidoo, for example, admitted that gender diversity felt

"new" and contrary to his values, yet he still emphasised his choice to respect learners for who they are. This suggests that while culture and religion remain significant challenges in the classroom, many educators are navigating a middle ground between personal beliefs and professional ethics. The voices of these participants reflect a broader tension in schools, which is that educators want to do right by their learners. However, without institutional support or cultural shifts, they are often left to navigate this conflict on their own.

The participants' perspectives on the tension between their cultural and religious beliefs and their professional responsibilities aligned closely with Bhana's (2022) study investigating how primary school educators understand gender identity and gender expression. Bhana (2022) found that many South African educators misrecognize or conflate non-binary identities with sexuality, largely because their cultural and religious worldviews only recognise male and female categories. This is similar to Mr. Khan's story of a learner who was punished for not conforming to dress codes based on binary gender norms. The educators in this study described struggling to reconcile their upbringing with the need to affirm non-binary learners, just as the teachers in Bhana's research felt constrained by faith and culture.

Rossouw's (2024) work also supports these findings by showing how educators' religious beliefs often shape how educators approach inclusive teaching. In Rossouw's (2024) study, educators reported either avoiding topics of gender and sexuality diversity or handling them with discomfort because of their faith backgrounds. This is strikingly similar to Mr. Nkosi and Mr. Naidoo's responses, where they admitted to internal conflicts but still made efforts to accommodate learners. In both studies, educators expressed a desire to do right by their learners, yet found themselves caught between personal convictions and professional duty.

At a broader level, Francis et al.'s (2019) five-country study highlights how school cultures across Southern Africa often marginalise gender-diverse identities, with policies and institutional practices reinforcing binary norms. The study by Francis et al. (2019) contextualizes the participants' concerns that many educators in their schools, who are predominantly Zulu and Christian, struggle with gender diversity due to shared cultural and religious beliefs. The regional evidence confirms that the challenges described are not unique to one setting but reflect systemic issues across township schools in South Africa, where a lack of training and clear policy support leaves educators to navigate these complex realities on their own.

4.4.3.5. Sub-theme 5: Time constraints due to heavy workload

The participants revealed that the workload pressure is also a vital challenge that they face when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. Participants stressed that they have numerous duties as educators, including lesson planning, teaching, marking, administrative tasks, and assessment, which can be overwhelming and take away time from effectively managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. One participant even stressed that the issue of overcrowded classes also adds to this workload pressure and makes it difficult to recognise all gender diverse and non-binary learners' concerns in the classroom. Below are the verbatim quotes of participants' own words to this challenge:

Mr. Nkosi sighed and stressed that:

"Currently, as we are speaking, I am overwhelmed with work, making it difficult to find time to fully understand gender diversity and non-binary learners in my class, as well as to reach a point of complete acceptance and understanding of gender diversity. So, whenever there are issues in my classroom, it becomes a challenge to navigate and solve those challenges, though there are not many, but as far as inclusion is concerned, we try to include all learners, though the way we do it is using binary norms such as the school code of conduct, which only caters for males and females. So, there is no time to fully engage on such matters, and I personally focus on my job of teaching my students, and I assess my students fairly regardless of their gender identity."

Mrs Vrey also emphasised the workload pressure that she is facing in her classroom:

"To tell you, there is a lot that we have to do as educators in terms of planning, teaching, marking, assessing, and on top of that managing classrooms. So, most educators are focused on finishing the syllabus, and we tend not to focus much on gender diversity issues as they are not common in our classrooms."

Mr. Naidoo stressed even more issues related to time constraint as he said that:

"To be honest, many of us just focus on teaching, covering the syllabus, and making sure our learners pass. However, in doing so, we often overlook their emotional and personal growth. This is something schools don't always prioritise, especially in township schools where we are already dealing with overcrowded classes, limited resources, and high workloads."

Mr. Khan also added his concerns about workload pressure:

“Yeah, the workload is another challenge I face as a teacher. I have to prepare lessons, teach, assess, provide feedback, evaluate learner progress, and manage other administrative duties. This leaves me with little time to recognise and support gender diverse learners in my classroom. Most of the time, I simply deliver the lesson and assess the learners due to the limited time and pressure to meet deadlines and cover the curriculum. Because of the workload and time constraints, I do not always follow up or provide sufficient support as expected to learners. This becomes a bigger issue when a learner fails at the end of the term and I am asked to explain why. As a teacher, it is difficult, especially when government policy states that learners should not fail.”

To make sense of these findings, they implied that educators are under enormous pressure due to time constraints and work overload, which makes it difficult for them to give proper attention to issues of gender diversity in the classroom. The participants stated their responsibilities, which include lesson planning, teaching, marking, assessments, administrative duties, and managing large classes. Because of this, educators feel that they simply do not have the time to fully understand or address the needs of non-binary learners. As Mr. Nkosi explained, even though he tries to be fair to all learners, his teaching still relies on the school’s code of conduct, which only recognises male and female learners. In this way, educators rely on existing systems built on binary norms because it is the simplest way to cope with their heavy workload.

At the same time, the findings suggested that educators sometimes use work overload as a justification for not engaging more deeply with gender diversity. Since issues of non-binary inclusion are seen as uncommon or not urgent, they are often ignored or sidelined in favour of completing the syllabus and meeting deadlines. Mrs. Very and Mr. Naidoo’s responses make it clear that most educators are focused on finishing the curriculum, while matters of diversity are pushed aside. However, this can have serious consequences for learners. For instance, Mr. Khan admitted that he often notices too late when a learner is struggling because of discrimination linked to their gender identity or sexual orientation. The pressure to deliver lessons quickly and manage overcrowded classes means that the early signs of distress can easily go unnoticed. By the time such challenges are recognised, the learner’s academic performance may already have suffered.

This findings highlighted that workload pressure is not only a genuine challenge for educators but also a barrier that prevents them from responding fully to the realities of gender-diverse learners. As a result, classrooms continue to operate mainly within binary norms, and gender-

diverse learners face a risk of being left unseen or unsupported. This shows how systemic pressures in schools make inclusion a lower priority in classroom management, even for ethical educators who value fairness.

Moreover, the findings fitted well with the findings of other studies. For instance, a study by Paechter et al. (2021) exploring the experiences of non-binary teenagers in school found that schools often use binary systems and rules, which marginalise gender diverse and non-binary learners. Similarly, the participants in this study, like those in the study by Paechter et al. (2021), revealed that educators rarely address non-binary issues directly and are not well-equipped to address those issues. This is because schools are set up to follow male/female binary norms. This suggests that the exclusion of non-binary inclusion stems not only from individual educators but also from institutional conditions that perpetuate dependence on binary frameworks, particularly when educators face time constraints.

This challenge has also been explored from various perspectives in the South African context. The study by Motitswe (2025) exploring educators' views on incorporating students with learning barriers and addressing their diverse educational needs found that educators in the inclusive education system did not feel ready to assist students with different needs because they had a lot of work overload, their classes were too crowded, and they did not have enough time to be inclusive. This is a similar sentiment expressed by Mr. Khan, who admitted that he sometimes noticed learners' struggles too late because his energy was exhausted by curriculum coverage and administrative tasks. Both findings suggest that inclusion becomes less important when educators are overwhelmed by systemic expectations.

To add another similar contention, Joe and Mtsi (2024), in their study examining how educator workload affects academic achievement and metacognition in two Chris Hani high schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa, discovered that workload pressure directly influences the quality of teaching in South African schools. Their research indicated that stressed and pressured educators primarily concentrate on content delivery and meeting the curriculum deadlines, while neglecting the wider requirements of learners. This reflects the findings of the current study, in which educators acknowledged that matters of gender diversity are frequently overlooked, perceived as atypical or less urgent in comparison to syllabus fulfilment. Both studies emphasise that systemic workload issues result in a constriction of teaching techniques, potentially neglecting inclusiveness and learner well-being. Therefore, this finding of workload

pressure is not a new challenge. It has been widely argued in different perspectives locally and internationally.

To sum up the theme of challenges educators face when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, it is vital to examine the findings under this theme through the lens of the conceptual framework guiding this study. When the findings of this study are examined through the lens of the guiding conceptual framework, it becomes clear that the challenges faced by educators in managing gender diversity and non-binary learners reveal deep tensions between theory and practice. Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly the dimension of individualised consideration, emphasises the need for leaders and educators to recognise learners as unique individuals with diverse identities (Khan et al., 2022). Yet in this study, participants had challenges such as misgendering, bullying, and time constraints due to work overload in their classroom, which suggests that many educators struggle to enact this in practice. Instead of recognising non-binary learners in their full humanity, educators often fall back on binary categories or overlook learners' needs due to systemic demands. This gap between theory and practice shows how the promise of individualised consideration is undermined by structural pressures and a lack of preparation. Thus, with this lens, the findings show how educators as classroom leaders influence their followers/learners negatively by not being inclusive of them.

Similarly, with the SJT, focusing on the concept of recognition provides a deeper lens for this study. This lens highlights how participants oppose the inclusivity of non-binary individuals, which is contrary to the policies, as the Department of Education (2001) states in White Paper 6 that learners have diverse learning needs, and the system must provide flexible teaching, curriculum support, and assistive measures. According to Young (1990), recognition involves the respect and validation of diverse identities, particularly those that have been historically marginalised or misrepresented. This concept aligns with the Department of Education's policies, which encourage educators and institutions to create inclusive environments where all learners receive equal treatment and their identities are acknowledged.

However, the findings under this theme reveal the opposite: learners who are non-binary are often misgendered, bullied, or ignored because the systems and policies in schools remain binary. The absence of school support and explicit policies results in educators lacking guidance, compelling them to depend on their own restricted knowledge and cultural assumptions. This results in gaps where non-binary learners are denied the same

acknowledgement and support as other binary learners. The challenge posed by cultural and religious beliefs complicates this issue, as educators' personal beliefs sometimes conflict with the principles of equity and inclusion. This underscores the potential for schools to perpetuate injustice if they do not assist educators in managing these tensions.

Finally, Fayol's management concept, particularly the aspect of leadership/commanding, sheds light on the organisational dimension of these challenges. According to Fayol (1949), effective leadership involves providing direction, creating order, and ensuring that systems support the goals of the institution. Yet the findings demonstrate that leadership within schools often fails to provide clear direction for managing gender diversity. The absence of inclusive policies and the pressure of workload mean that educators are left to lead in uncertain conditions, where they lack the authority, training, or resources to make informed, inclusive decisions. This results in reactive, fragmented practices rather than proactive, guided leadership in the classroom.

Taken together, analysing the challenges through the conceptual framework highlights a significant disjuncture, that while theories of transformational leadership, social justice, and management emphasise recognition, equity, and supportive leadership, the realities in schools reveal educators who feel unsupported, constrained, and conflicted. This suggests that for educators to effectively manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, systemic changes are required, including those that reduce workload burdens, provide clear policy guidance, and offer professional development that enables educators to align their practices with the ideals of recognition, equity, and inclusive leadership.

4.4.4. What educators think can be done to assist in better managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms

Theme 4 addresses the question: What can educators do to better manage gender diversity and non-binary identities, ensuring inclusivity in the classroom? The responses of the participants were classified into three sub-themes, namely: clear policies and implementation, continuous educator training, and lastly, empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness.

4.4.4.1. Sub-theme 1: Clear policies and implementation

The participants demonstrated the urgent need for change in some of the policies in schools so that gender-diverse and non-binary learners will be fully included and not marginalised, as they currently are in school settings. Most participants emphasised the policy on uniforms, where gender-diverse and non-binary learners can be catered for in terms of their preferred school

uniforms. The participants further stressed that policies must not be on paper only, but must also be implemented in schools, providing a clear guide on what is needed to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms better. Here is what the participants said:

Mr. Nkosi strongly emphasised that:

“It must start with policies. Policies should not just exist on paper; they must be implemented. My school needs education and awareness on gender identities. We cannot pretend these things don’t exist. Social media encourages learners to be themselves, and if schools resist change, it becomes a problem. What we really need are policies and awareness. This should not only focus on certain cases, but on gender identities and gender diversity in general. It must start with a policy that clearly states that everyone should be accepted for who they are, regardless of race, colour, or gender identity. Without such a policy, it will always be difficult to deal with these issues.”

Mr. Naidoo also said:

“I also think the school needs to look at its policies and start addressing things like the uniform policy. Currently, uniforms are highly gendered. So, if a learner who identifies as non-binary wants to wear something different, there is no policy that supports or protects them. This can confuse and sometimes lead to the learner being unfairly disciplined or feeling excluded. We need policies that make space for all learners, and that also guide teachers on what to do in such cases.”

Mr. Jude similarly uttered that:

“The school rules on uniforms should be addressed to cater for all learners. For instance, you can see a lesbian learner feeling very uncomfortable when forced to wear a dress, or a gay learner struggling with trousers. These situations demonstrate that without clear policies and proper consultation with learners, we are not fully supporting them. If schools had clear guidelines and allowed space for learners to communicate their preferences, it would help them feel accepted and included.”

While Mr. Khan also added that:

“If we look to overcome these challenges, I think the existing school policies need to be amended to accommodate gender diverse learners clearly. For example, the school code of conduct could be amended to allow learners who identify as gay or lesbian to

wear the uniform with which they are comfortable. As I have already explained with that learner, allowing non-binary learners to wear trousers would be one such change. The school policies should not only be there for formality but must also be implemented and practiced.”

The findings highlighted that educators strongly believed that transparent and inclusive policies are the foundation for managing gender diversity in schools. Participants emphasised that although there are policies that promote inclusivity, they are not explicit on how educators should practically address gender diversity and non-binary identities in the classroom. As Mr. Nkosi noted, policies should not be limited in terms of clarity but should be written in a way that provides concrete guidance on the expectations of educators and schools in managing gender diversity and non-binary identities. Without such clarity, educators are left uncertain about how to respond to situations involving gender-diverse and non-binary learners, which often results in exclusion rather than inclusion. In essence, participants argued that schools need policies that go beyond general statements of inclusion and instead give clear direction on how to handle issues of gender identity in everyday school life.

Another major concern raised by participants was the restrictive nature of school uniform policies. Current rules are still binary, catering uniforms strictly for male or female learners, which leaves non-binary learners feeling excluded or uncomfortable. Mr. Naidoo and Mr. Jude explained how learners are often disciplined or judged when they attempt to wear a uniform that aligns with their identity, which results in feelings of isolation. Similarly, Mr. Khan highlighted that such rigid policies fail to create space for learners to express themselves. The participants therefore suggested that school codes of conduct and uniform policies should be reviewed and revised to recognise the needs of gender-diverse and non-binary learners. By allowing flexibility in dress codes, schools can create an environment where learners feel seen, respected, and included.

Finally, the findings revealed that, despite the existence of policies, their implementation remains inconsistent. Educators reported that school leaders and educators often overlook or fail to enforce inclusive policies, leaving learners without absolute protection or support. Participants stressed that diversity should be more than an idea; it should be shown in action such as implementing and perpetuating policies that will recognise gender diverse and non-binary learners. As Mr. Nkosi stressed, awareness and education are as important as policy itself, because without proper implementation, learners continue to face discrimination and

exclusion. Therefore, participants called not only for clearer and more explicit policies but also for their active enforcement, ensuring that inclusivity is lived and experienced in schools rather than just promised on paper.

The findings of this study strongly resonate with what Francis et al. (2017) studied across southern Africa, namely that policies promoting equity and inclusivity often fail to address the specific realities of gender and sexuality diversity in schools. Participants in this study, such as Mr. Nkosi, emphasised that policies that are already in place about inclusivity are leaving educators without clear direction on how to respond to learners who identify outside the binary identities. This is in the same vein as what Francis et al. (2017) argued, which is that without explicit policy guidance, schools fall back on cultural and religious norms, which results in exclusion rather than protection of all learners. Both this study and Francis et al.'s study underline that inclusivity cannot remain a general idea; it needs to be made practical and visible through concrete rules and support structures in schools.

The concern raised by participants in this study about school uniform policies also closely relates to Bhana's (2022) work, which highlights how schools, shaped by firm cultural and religious traditions, continue to reinforce binary gender norms. In this study, educators shared how learners were disciplined and denied wearing uniforms that aligned with their gender identities, a practice that mirrors the misrecognition Bhana (2022) describes, where trans and non-binary learners are forced back into male or female categories in school settings. Mr. Naidoo and Mr. Khan's perspectives in this study regarding strict dress codes highlight the same issue: policies that appear neutral but are actually exclusionary in practice. Bhana (2022) affirms that unless school codes of conduct are revised to allow flexibility and self-expression, these policies will continue to marginalise gender-diverse and non-binary learners and undermine the very principles of inclusivity they claim to uphold.

Moreover, the participants in this study showed concerns about how poor implementation of policies reflects the ongoing gap between policy and practice, which is similarly described by both Bhana (2022) and Francis et al. (2017). Educators in this study noted that even where policies exist, they are inconsistently applied, often because school leaders overlook their importance or lack the training to enforce them. This is supported by Francis et al.'s (2017) argument that educators frequently operate without sufficient preparation in terms of policy awareness, which leads to a reliance on personal beliefs and inconsistent responses in addressing gender diversity issues in the classroom. Similar to Bhana (2022), who advocates

for systematic support and professional development, enabling educators to move beyond misrecognition towards inclusive practices. In line with these scholars, the participants in this study argued that inclusivity must be more than a written promise; it must be embedded in training, awareness, and daily practice so that learners feel respected and supported in tangible ways. Therefore, the perspectives of the participants in this study correspond with key arguments presented in the existing literature.

4.4.4.2. Sub-theme 2: Continuous Educator Training

The responses from the participants highlight the need for continuous educator training as the required support to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. The participants revealed that they lack training and knowledge on how to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms and emphasised that they require professional development on such matters. Moreover, participants' responses demonstrate that they not only desire professional development but also want it to be continuous and compulsory, enabling them to better manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms for greater inclusivity. Here are the participants' original responses:

Mr. Nkosi said:

“The school also must train teachers on how to manage such classrooms. I believe that training on diversity should be compulsory every year, regardless of whether we face these challenges or not. The government should remind and train us regularly.”

Mrs. Vrey similarly said that:

“I think we still need more training, especially from outside the school. Internal training is not always enough. The government should provide training, because when we meet other educators from different schools, we can also learn from their experiences. Diversity challenges don't happen every year, but we need to be prepared.”

Mr. Khan pointed out that:

“As teachers, we need continuous training on how to support gender diverse learners in classrooms. At university, we were not properly taught about these issues. Training should not only be theoretical, but also practical, so that teachers can apply what they learn in real classroom situations. This could also help change our mindset and attitudes toward gender diversity.”

“Professional development workshops would make a big difference, especially workshops designed for teachers in township schools where learners may not have much exposure to these topics.”

While Mr. Naidoo emphasised that:

“The kind of support we really need is proper teacher training that focuses on gender diversity and non-binary identities. Most of us were never taught about these issues in our teacher training, and we are not well-versed in how to handle them practically in the classroom. Sometimes we want to do the right thing, but we are scared of saying or doing the wrong thing because we do not know the correct approach. So, if the Department or school leadership could organize workshops or even just basic training sessions that teach us about using the right pronouns, respecting preferred names, and how to respond to learners who identify differently, that would help a lot.”

These perspectives from the participants showed that educators lack the necessary knowledge and training to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms for inclusivity. These findings highlighted the recurring concern among educators regarding their lack of knowledge and training, which presents a challenge when managing gender-diverse classrooms. Participants in this study (Mr Nkosi, Mr Khan, Mrs Vrey, and Mr Naidoo) expressed how they were not properly trained to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms effectively during their higher education training. The participants’ perspectives revealed a growing awareness among educators that, to better manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms for inclusivity, necessary educator training is required to equip them more effectively to address such challenges.

One important takeaway from these participants’ perspectives was that educators are not rejecting inclusivity. However, they acknowledge their lack of training and knowledge, which will guide them in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms more effectively. Mr. Khan’s emphasis that training should be “not only theoretical, but also practical” showed the educators’ desire for hands-on learning about inclusivity that they directly apply to their classroom realities. Similarly, Mr. Naidoo’s admission that he fears saying or doing “the wrong thing” underscored the anxiety that stems from inadequate training. These notes from the participants highlighted the frequently neglected human aspect in policy debates: educators are also learners adapting to social and cultural changes, requiring secure, supportive environments

to cultivate confidence in addressing delicate matters of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity in their classrooms.

Furthermore, the emphasis from the participants that continuous training was also compulsory suggests that once-off workshops and internal briefings on such matters, although compulsory, are insufficient. Mrs. Vrey's assertion that "internal training is not always sufficient" and her recommendation for educators to collaborate with colleagues from other schools underscores the importance of cooperation and collective knowledge development. Such exposure broadens educators' perspectives, challenge biases, and foster more inclusive approaches. Furthermore, the recommendation for the government to assume responsibility for ongoing training indicates that educators perceive inclusion as a systemic concern rather than a personal decision. This assigns responsibility to educational leaders to incorporate diversity training into professional development policies. In essence, these findings indicated an urgent need for continuous educator training as a support system from educational leaders, thus ensuring that educators are better equipped to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Several studies (Mendoza & Johnson, 2024; Codina & Robinson, 2024; Singh, 2023; and Clark & Kosciw, 2022) reinforce the findings of this study and underscored the essential role of systematic professional development in promoting gender inclusivity, building on the discussion regarding educators' perspectives and their expressed need for continuous educator training. Mendoza and Johnson (2024) illustrated how educators translate awareness of gender diversity into classroom practice using the TRANS framework, highlighting experiential knowledge and reflective pedagogical practices. These scholars found that educators who are practically trained to incorporate inclusion in their pedagogy do not struggle with managing gender diverse classrooms. This corresponded well with participants' requests for training that is practical rather than solely theoretical, indicating that professional development would help educators overcome uncertainty and formulate concrete ways to support gender-diverse and non-binary learners in the classroom.

Codina and Robinson (2024), in their study analysing the data from action research on inclusion and special educational needs, also support the argument in this study by demonstrating that ongoing, collaborative, and context-specific professional development empowers educators to apply inclusive practices effectively. Their findings resonate with the participants' insights in this study on the advantages of collaborating with colleagues from different schools and engaging in systematic, recurring opportunities for reflective practice. Moreover, Singh (2023)

contextualises this need within the South African context, demonstrating that participatory and locally based professional development can significantly transform educators' perceptions and classroom practices regarding gender diversity. These studies closely align with my study's findings, which emphasise the necessity of collaborative learning by educators to better equip each other with knowledge about gender diversity and non-binary inclusion practices.

In addition, Clark and Kosciw (2022), in their work examining the state of educators' education programmes regarding LGBTQ-inclusive practices and preparation, emphasise that gaps remain in educators' understanding and readiness about LGBTQ+ challenges, indicating that, despite existing awareness, formal and continuous training is necessary for educators to effectively create inclusive learning environments. This aligns with the participants' advocacy for crucial support in training to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms better. Collectively, these studies emphasised that professional development should be ongoing, practical, and supported by educational leaders to provide educators with the confidence, skills, and reflective practices necessary to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms effectively. In the absence of systematic support, educators are hindered by fear, uncertainty, and a lack of knowledge, underscoring the critical need for well-structured, ongoing, and contextually relevant training programs that translate theory into effective classroom implementation.

4.4.4.3. Sub-theme 3: Empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness

Most participants indicated a need to empower gender-diverse and non-binary learners by giving them a voice and a platform to express their feelings. However, some participants emphasised the need for emotional support and empathy for these learners because they are scared of coming out and expressing their true identities. The participants, overall, demonstrate the need to support gender-diverse and non-binary learners by allowing them to express their emotions and assisting them in raising awareness about gender diversity, thereby creating a positive culture for all learners in the school. Here are the views of the participants:

Mr. Nkosi highlighted that:

“After policy comes awareness, and awareness should not only be for educators but for the whole school community, including learners. Non-binary learners must be given a voice and be heard. We should give them a platform to speak up and also spread awareness on gender diversity. Learners (peers) may laugh at first because they see it

as a joke, but if we continue with awareness campaigns from time to time, they will eventually learn, adapt, and accept.”

Mr. Naidoo said that:

“We need to spread awareness about gender diversity in our schools and allow those learners to voice out their feelings and support that they need. That kind of support will make a big difference.”

Miss Dube emphasised the need to support non-binary learners:

“We need to sit down and discuss their (non-binary learners) feelings and allow them to voice out their feelings and listen to them. So, we must formulate strategies to try to understand them better because they are very good at hiding their feelings and empowering them to express themselves. We should ask them what they need to feel accepted and free, and how they really feel, then we can take it from there. So, we should find a way to include them and make them feel comfortable in the school.”

Mr. Khan further elaborated that:

“We must encourage non-binary learners to speak up so that they do not suffer in silence. For instance, every Friday, educators could ask learners to write anonymous letters about how they feel as gender diverse individuals in the classroom.”

We could also give these learners chances to participate in group discussions or presentations about gender diversity. This would allow them to share their thoughts and feelings, while giving educators and peers an opportunity to understand them better. Such initiatives can reassure learners that they are not alone and not left behind.”

These findings suggested that educators acknowledge awareness and learner voice as fundamental for creating a genuinely inclusive school environment for non-binary learners. The participants recognise that policies alone are not enough; awareness and open discussion are crucial for changing the culture of the school community. Mr Nkosi's remark emphasised that awareness must include not just educators but also learners, because peers are the ones who often shape the daily experiences of acceptance or rejection that gender-diverse learners face. Mr. Nkosi's perspective reflected the notion that awareness must not be a one-off event but a continuous attempt to support the school community's capacity to learn, unlearn, and

adapt to acceptance. This understanding aligned with inclusive education principles, which view transformation as a collective journey rather than a policy directive.

Mr. Naidoo and Miss Dube further elaborated on this notion by stressing the need for emotional support and safe environments for non-binary learners to express their identities. Their perspectives indicated that inclusion is not merely tolerance but encompasses active listening and engagement. Miss Dube and Mr. Naidoo phrased: “sitting down and discussing” learners’ feelings or providing them the opportunity to “voice out” indicates a shift towards social and empathic inclusion. This demonstrated educators’ willingness to listen and provide a platform for gender-diverse and non-binary learners to express themselves, allowing them to receive the support they need. These perspectives from the participants illustrated an increasing recognition among educators that inclusion is fostered through relationships built on trust and understanding, rather than just institutional obedience.

Moreover, Mr. Khan’s suggestion of anonymous letters and group discussions also demonstrated the creative and compassionate support required to better manage gender-diverse and non-binary learners in classrooms and the school as a whole. This creative idea revealed an understanding that some non-binary learners may not be comfortable freely opening up and voicing their feelings, and the best way to do that is by making their voices anonymous and engaging with their peers with whom they are comfortable. This reflected a sensitive awareness of the psychological safety required for authentic participation of all learners. It also signalled a shift from a reactive to a proactive approach; educators are taking the initiative to understand learners’ experiences rather than waiting for problems to arise. Therefore, participants in this study showed willingness to listen to gender diverse learners and support their voices through awareness, change, and setting an inclusive environment.

This finding: *empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness*, is widely supported by relevant literature that stresses the required support to navigate gender diversity in school settings (Burford, 2017; Francis & Monakali, 2021; and Paechter et al., 2021). A South African study by Francis and Monakali (2021) reveals that many South African schools, while guided by progressive frameworks, still lack the cultural readiness to support gender-diverse learners. This is in line with what the participants in this study emphasise: inclusivity is about building relationships and trust with all learners to understand their true identities and not about obeying the policies that have been placed. These studies demonstrate that township schools still heavily rely on policies that are in place, emphasising the need for educators to

lead the initiatives of inclusivity to better manage gender diverse and non-binary school settings.

Similarly, the New Zealand gender diversity workshop study by Burford et al. (2017) demonstrates how consistent awareness initiatives can shift school culture by fostering empathy and reducing stigma. This intervention study aimed at raising awareness among students about gender diversity. It measured changes in attitudes and perceptions before and after the workshop, allowing for the assessment of the impact of awareness efforts (Burford et al., 2017). This is a similar take conveyed by the study's participants, which highlights the necessity of ongoing awareness as a form of support that will help both educators and learners unlearn prejudice and foster understanding. Awareness becomes more than just information; it becomes the foundation for human connection and acceptance, which creates an inclusive school environment. So, this study and Burford's (2017) study both underlined that proactive support is required to create an inclusive environment for non-binary identities in school settings.

Beyond awareness, this study also underscored the importance of emotional and relational support. Paechter et al. (2021) found that non-binary learners often navigate silence and invisibility in schools that do not actively invite their voices. This is similar to the connotations made by Miss Dube and Mr. Khan on how gender diverse and non-binary learners are often afraid and uncomfortable voicing their feelings, which leads to their exclusion. This is further supported by the study of Francis and Monakali (2021), which emphasised the lack of awareness among peers, educators, and institutional leaders about non-binary identities. Both these studies and this study stressed the need for empowering non-binary learners through giving them a voice and spreading awareness about their identities to change the negative binary norms that marginalise gender diverse and non-binary learners in schools.

Viewing all these findings under the theme of what educators think can be done to assist in better managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, within the context of the study's conceptual framework, offers a nuanced perspective on the educators involved in this research. Northouse (2019) observed that effective leaders acknowledge and address the diverse needs of their followers, a concept that TLT defines as individualised consideration. In the context of this study, educators emphasised the need for clear policies and their implementation, as well as having continuous educator training, and empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness, as the assistance they require in better managing gender-diverse and non-binary

classrooms. These findings, viewed through the lens of TLT, demonstrate that educators, as leaders, are eager to grow and transform their practices to accommodate all learners and inspire inclusive change; these traits of the participants exemplify transformational leadership principles.

On the other hand, the SJT emphasises the concepts of equity, recognition, and empowerment in this study (Fraser, 2005). The participants' emphasis on clear policies and implementation shows how educators are aware that without clear guidance in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms, inequality will persist in schools. Therefore, clear policies and implementation will ensure equity, recognition, and empowerment by creating an inclusive environment for all learners. Moreover, the study found that educators want to empower non-binary learners through voice and awareness. The participants believed that if learners are given a platform to express themselves freely, and when awareness is raised among both educators and binary learners, schools become more inclusive. This reflects the core tenets of social justice: ensuring that the marginalised voices are heard, recognised, and empowered.

Fayol (1949) emphasised that leadership and coordination are vital to achieving organisational goals. Within this context, educators calling for support, such as clear policies and implementation, mirror a strong management aspect of coordinating guidance that will meet the school's vision of inclusivity. Effective leadership will provide direction, coordination, and accountability to ensure that gender inclusivity is not only written in policies but also implemented in educators' daily practices. Leadership, in this sense, is not only about commanding orders but also about inspiring commitment and offering support in creating an inclusive environment that is explicitly emphasised in the written policies.

Viewed through these theoretical lenses, the findings suggest that educators are not resistant to gender diversity but rather under-supported in addressing it. Their experiences point to a need for a system that combines strong leadership, continuous professional development, and socially just practices. The call for clear policies, training, and learner empowerment demonstrates educators' desire to create classrooms that are inclusive, understanding, and equitable.

4.5. Chapter summary

This chapter presented an analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Moreover, this chapter presented the main findings of this study and aligned them with the existing literature. Lastly, the chapter looked at the findings using the lenses of the study's conceptual framework,

which includes TLT (individualised consideration), SJT (equity, recognition, and empowerment), and Fayol's management concept (Leadership). The following chapter will discuss the summary of findings, also highlight the limitations and delimitations of the study, then conclude, and lastly, present recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This study explored educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont (Pinetown District). Chapter 1 discussed the study's background, problem statement, rationale, significance of the study, purpose, research questions, and objectives, as well as the summary of the methodology that was utilised in this study.

Chapter 2 presented relevant existing literature about educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The literature review was divided into 4 sub-themes, namely, conceptualisation of gender diversity and non-binary inclusivity, managing gender diversity and non-binary identities in classrooms, challenges educators face when managing gender-diverse classrooms, and lastly, assistance educators need to manage gender diversity and non-binary classrooms effectively. Additionally, the gaps in this literature review were revealed, which was what this study aimed to explore. The chapter also discussed the study's guiding conceptual framework that draws on three key perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory (individualised consideration), Social Justice Theory (equity, recognition, and empowerment), and Henri Fayol's (1949) Management Concept of Leadership/Commanding.

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the methodology used for this study and the philosophical assumptions that strengthen the study. The research employed a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into educators' perspectives. A case study research design was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of educators' perspectives on their roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Purposive sampling was also used as a sampling technique, focusing on six Life Orientation educators from the selected secondary school. Data generation was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns in this study. A systematised approach was used to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Lastly, the ethical considerations of the study were also taken into account.

Moreover, Chapter 4 provided a comprehensive presentation, analysis, interpretation, and discussion of findings in relation to relevant existing literature to support the study's findings. Lastly, this chapter presents a summary of findings and further discusses the study's limitations

and delimitations. The chapter also concluded and discussed recommendations for practice and future research.

The main research question of this study asked: *What are educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms in a selected secondary school in Clermont Township?* The sub-questions were as follows:

- *How do educators understand the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities?*
- *How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
- *What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
- *What do educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*

5.2. Summary of findings, conclusion, and recommendations

The summary of the study's findings is categorised according to the above research questions. Thereafter, for each of the finding summaries, a conclusion is drawn and proportionately linked to the study's recommendations.

5.2.1. Research question one: How do educators understand the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities?

In this study, the participants' responses to the first research question revealed different understandings of gender diversity and non-binary identities by educators. This study shows that educators understand gender as a spectrum, implying that the participants recognise gender diversity and non-binary identities as concepts that acknowledge multiple genders beyond the binary gender norms of male and female. In this study, educators demonstrated a clear understanding of gender diversity, indicating that they are aware of learners who do not identify as male or female in their classrooms and are willing to cater to them as well. Moreover, one participant noted the understanding of the 'LGBTQI+' identities in their response, which are letters representing the non-binary gender identities within our society. This utterance by this participant showed that educators understand non-binary identities and how gender fluid the concept is, because it caters to all gender identities that go beyond binary gender identities.

However, the study also found that educators confused gender diversity and non-binary identities with sexuality. The participants in this study, when discussing the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities, mistakenly had a misconception of gender with sexuality throughout their responses, as they repeatedly linked the concepts of non-binary identities with male and female when trying to explain this concept. One participant even noted that non-binary identity does not limit people to 'this side or that side,' alluding that it does not limit people to being male or female but allows them to be in between. The researcher believes that, despite educators having some understanding of the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities, they still lack the correct terminology that will enable them to distinguish between gender and sexuality, thereby improving their understanding of these concepts.

As a result of this finding, it might be concluded that educators have a particular understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities. However, they lack some knowledge to grasp the complete meaning of these concepts fully, which results in educators having challenges when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. It appears as if while some participants do show understanding of these concepts, some participants cannot distinguish between gender and sexuality, making it challenging to navigate gender diversity and non-binary identities in their classrooms. As much as educators in this study knew these concepts, gender diversity and non-binary identities were not familiar in everyday language to educators. This notion was clearly portrayed in the challenges participants reported to face when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Therefore, based on this conclusion, it is recommended that educator training programmes should include specific and continuous learning opportunities that develop educators holistically. For instance, the Critical Social Justice compulsory module offered to first-year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal serves as a good example of how novice educators can be equipped with knowledge and sensitivity towards different forms of diversity and inequality. Introducing similar modules in all higher education institutions that train educators will help strengthen educators' capacity to manage diverse classrooms more effectively. Furthermore, in-service educators should be continuously engaged in professional development workshops that address these issues regularly, rather than as one-off sessions. This ongoing engagement would help bridge the gap in educators' understanding and ensure that they are well-prepared to create inclusive and socially just classroom environments.

5.2.2. Research question two: How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?

The study revealed four major strategies that educators use to manage gender-diverse and non-binary identities, ensuring inclusivity in their classrooms. The strategies were categorised into the following sub-themes: respect as a foundation to inclusivity, recognition and affirmation of learners' identity, creation of safe and equitable learning environment, and teacher mindfulness and reflective practices. Many participants recognise that respect fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance among all learners. The findings portrayed that educators in this study were mindful of the language they use, even when disciplining non-binary learners in class, to not discriminate against them in any way.

Moreover, the findings also revealed that the participants recognised and affirmed learner diversity in their classrooms to ensure inclusivity when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. The participants in the study appeared to recognise that there are genders that go beyond male or female in their classrooms and have affirmed those learners who are non-binary, even though it is against their personal beliefs. However, they recognise the importance of gender diversity in the workplace. One participant even emphasised that not accepting learners for who they are, means that they would be infringing on their rights. As a result, this study highlighted how educators utilise recognition and acceptance to promote inclusivity in their classrooms.

It was also found that most participants create a safe and equitable learning environment for gender diverse and non-binary learners to ensure inclusivity in their classrooms. The study revealed that, in addition to recognising and affirming non-binary learners, educators go beyond to support those learners by creating an equitable classroom environment for all. One participant revealed that he even allows non-binary learners to use the restroom of their choice as long as it is safe for every learner. This act by the participant clearly showed that the participants try to support those learners who are gender diverse, as they are usually sidelined and discriminated against within the school environment. Additionally, the participants also reported that they use teacher mindfulness and reflective practices as a strategy to ensure inclusivity in their classrooms. Many participants indicated that they carefully plan their lessons by adapting their teaching strategies to include the needs of those learners. While some participants incorporate gender diversity topics into their lessons to educate other learners on these topics, they thereby ensuring an inclusive environment.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that educators in this study were doing their best to create an inclusive environment for gender-diverse and non-binary learners. Even though participants were not explicitly trained to manage gender-diverse classrooms, they still demonstrated leadership and responsibility in caring for and ensuring that non-binary learners are recognized and treated fairly. This conclusion suggests that educators are not ignoring the reality of gender diversity in schools but rather taking action to ensure inclusivity. The educators' willingness in this study to step out of their comfort zone and make these learners feel safe and accepted reflects their strong leadership as classroom managers. It also suggests that, with better support and more structured training, their efforts could grow even stronger and make classrooms more inclusive in the future.

Based on this conclusion, I recommend that schools and education departments should create platforms where educators can share their own experiences, strategies, and practices in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Since the finding revealed that educators are already showing strong leadership and creativity in finding their own ways to include all learners, these experiences should be effectively utilised. Establishing professional learning communities, discussion spaces, or reflective workshops led by educators themselves will allow educators to learn from one another and build confidence in managing diversity as a whole. This approach recognises educators not only as implementers of policy but also as knowledge holders and leaders who can contribute to shaping inclusive education practices. Such platforms may also inform future training and policy development, ensuring that what is taught or written is grounded in the real experiences of educators on the ground.

5.2.3. Research question three: What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?

From the participants' responses to the third research question, five significant challenges were identified through their accounts of managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. These challenges included bullying and teasing, misgendering, policy gaps, lack of school support, cultural and religious beliefs, and time constraints due to heavy workloads. Most of the participants reported that they face a challenge of bullying and teasing of gender diverse and non-binary learners in their classrooms, being bullied by other learners. The participants demonstrated that bullying of these learners happened in various ways in their classrooms, such as name-calling, whispers, and shaming of non-binary identities.

Moreover, it was also found that participants noted misgendering of non-binary learners in their classrooms to be another challenge they faced when managing gender diverse classrooms. The participants reported that they struggled with remembering non-binary learners' identities and default to using the binary identities; they further claimed that learners also struggled with this. The study also found that policy gaps and a lack of school support are significant challenges for participants when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. The participants stressed that the school provided little to no support on how to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. There were no clear policies and guidelines to help them navigate such classrooms, and they are left to fend for themselves.

The study also found that cultural and religious beliefs was another challenge reported by the participants, which they faced when managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms. Most participants stressed that their cultural and religious beliefs perpetuated and supported traditional binary gender norms and rejected gender diversity, which made it difficult for them to accept non-binary learners for who they are. However, some participants stated that they are able to put aside their personal beliefs and be professional when managing gender-diverse classrooms. One final challenge identified in this study was the time constraints imposed by a heavy workload. Some participants stressed that, as educators, they already had a lot of administrative duties, thus they had no time to focus on the issues of gender diversity. The participants emphasised that time constraints challenged them in effectively managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms, so they resorted to binary gender norms that they are familiar with.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that educators in this study faced numerous challenges when managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Many of these challenges does not stem from educators' lack of concern for gender diversity issues, but rather from the school's culture, which is not supportive and lack clear policies, resulting in the school's continued adherence to traditional gender norms. This negative school culture made it difficult for participants in this study to manage gender diverse and non-binary classrooms to ensure inclusivity effectively. Overall, it was concluded that these challenges are interrelated; the lack of school support and clear policies leads educators to navigate gender-diverse classrooms within their binary norms, with which they are used to.

Therefore, it was recommended that schools progressively develop a more inclusive culture that supports educators in effectively addressing gender diversity and non-binary identities.

Schools can achieve this by evaluating and revising current school policies to ensure they are not only inclusive in theory but also transparent and practical in managing daily classroom interactions. Policies must provide systematic direction for educators and school leaders to address concerns about gender diversity in a manner that promotes respect and equity for every learner. In addition to policies, schools must deliberately create a culture that normalises diversity through open discussion, staff collaboration, and persistent support from management. Integrating inclusivity into the school's core principles, rather than merely existing as a policy statement, would enable educators to experience greater support and confidence, eliminating feelings of being overwhelmed by these issues. Through this recommendation, the school environment becomes a source of guidance and support for educators as they navigate gender diverse classrooms.

5.2.4. Research question four: What do educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?

The responses to the fourth research question from the participants revealed three major assistance interventions that they believe can help them better manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. The study found that clear policies and implementation, continuous educator training, and empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness are interventions that can play a vital role in helping them manage gender-diverse classrooms. Most participants emphasised that the policy needs to be rewritten to clarify expectations, thereby improving the management of gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Some participants even cited the uniform policy as an example, which currently caters for only male and female learners, and it needs to be reviewed to ensure it is inclusive.

Furthermore, the study found that continuous educator training is another intervention stressed by the participants that might play a crucial role in helping them better manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Most participants emphasised the need for consistent training, which would enable them to learn and become familiar with gender diversity and non-binary identities, thereby assisting them in better managing gender-diverse classrooms. The study also found that empowering non-binary learners through voice and awareness is another intervention that can assist educators. Participants reported that emotional support and empathy are vital when dealing with gender diverse classrooms, given that these learners often fear coming out. Overall, the participants stressed the importance of supporting gender-diverse and non-binary learners to foster a positive school culture by facilitating emotional expression and promoting awareness of gender diversity.

Based on this finding, it was concluded that educators recognised the need for support and intervention to manage gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms better. It appeared that educators are recognising the need for more effective school systems and policies, acknowledging that meaningful change is necessary to support educators in better managing gender diversity. Moreover, it appeared that educators believe they need specific knowledge and skills to manage gender-diverse classrooms more effectively, which only the DBE can supply. Thus, the study concluded that DBE need to change and update the system it is currently operating in to meet the needs of modern education settings. Significant updates are required, not just the policies, but also the training, induction, and structural changes within the department. Nonetheless, the study also concluded that it is not only external assistance and change that are required, but it also recognizes that educators have a professional responsibility to support gender-diverse and non-binary learners. Change can also begin internally, with educators creating a culture that is supportive and inclusive, which can help in better managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Consequently, it was recommended that initiatives to assist educators in navigating gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms be implemented from both hierarchical and grassroots levels. The Department of Education should be responsible for examining and revising policies, curricula, and educator training programs to ensure they are genuinely inclusive and consider the evolving nature of modern school settings, including gender diversity. At the same time, schools and educators should not wait for policy changes and DBE to take effect before acting. They should begin creating change from within by reflecting on their current practices, promoting inclusive values, and building a culture that respects and affirms all learners. This collaborative approach, in which the education system and individual schools work together, may help make inclusion a tangible reality, rather than a theoretical intervention.

5.3. Limitations of the study

It is vital to discuss the limitations of the study, as this reflects the authenticity and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Miles (2019), in his study focusing on the difference between limitations and delimitations, outlined that limitations in research are characterised as barriers coming from the research method and design, which researchers cannot control. Creswell and Poth (2016) further claimed that limitations are directly connected to the methods employed for generating and analysing data. To avoid mistakes and misleading data that could lead to incorrect conclusions, it is essential to carefully consider these limitations.

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. The research was conducted with only six Life Orientation educators, resulting in a small-scale qualitative study. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to all educational institutions or educators. Secondly, time restrictions existed, as the researcher aimed to complete their master's degree within a designated timeframe, necessitating the expedited execution of specific components of the study. Another limitation was the short duration of certain interviews; many participants were occupied with their teaching responsibilities, resulting in some sessions lasting under 20 minutes. Initially, not all educators were receptive to participation. Some participants were anxious or fearful due to their limited understanding of the study and uncertainty about their participation. The challenges made the process somewhat difficult; yet the study provided significant insights into educators' perspectives on their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms.

To address the challenges encountered in this study, I employed several strategies. Since the findings from the small sample cannot be generalised, it is recommended that future research explore this topic on a larger scale and in different school contexts to broaden the understanding. I managed the issue of time constraints through effective time management and careful planning. I created a schedule that helped organise interviews, data generation, and analysis within the set deadlines. To overcome challenges related to participants' limited availability and anxiety, the researcher focused on building trust and rapport with them. I also maintained regular communication through platforms such as WhatsApp to make them feel comfortable and to encourage honest and open responses during the interviews. These efforts helped ensure that the data collected was as rich and authentic as possible, despite the challenges faced.

5.4. Delimitations of the study

Delimitations refer to the specific boundaries and choices that a researcher intentionally sets in a study to narrow its focus and make it manageable (Miles, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2016) further claimed that delimitations define what the study will include and what it will not, based on the researcher's decisions about the scope, participants, location, or methods. In other words, delimitations establish the limits of the study that result from deliberate choices made during its planning and formulation.

The delimitations of this study were guided by my intention to focus intensely on educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. The study

was limited to Life Orientation educators, as they are most familiar with issues related to gender diversity through their curriculum and daily classroom interactions. The study was also limited to one selected secondary school, serving as a single-case study to allow for a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The study employed an interpretive paradigm, acknowledging that multiple realities exist and can be best understood through the voices of those directly experiencing them, which, in this case, are the educators. Furthermore, the study was framed within the context of Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Fayol's leadership concept of Management, which helped maintain a focus on leadership, Management, and advocacy for inclusive social change. Lastly, data were generated through face-to-face interviews conducted by me to ensure trustworthiness, authenticity, and richer engagement with participants.

5.5. Recommendations for further research

I also recommend the need for further research on various perspectives on educators' roles in managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms. Here are the following recommendations for further research.

- Since this study was a small-scale qualitative study focused on life-orientation educators in a single secondary school, it is recommended that future research be conducted on a larger scale. This could include a bigger pool of participants across multiple schools, both primary and secondary, allowing findings to be more generalizable. Additionally, including educators from all subjects, not only Life-Orientation, would provide a broader understanding of how classrooms are managed to ensure inclusivity for gender-diverse and non-binary learners.
- Future research could focus on understanding the perspectives and experiences of the learners themselves regarding inclusivity in classrooms. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current practices and policies from the learners' perspectives.
- Further studies could examine how existing school policies, educator training programs, and professional development initiatives influence the management of gender-diverse classrooms. This could help identify best practices and gaps in support that educators face when promoting inclusivity.

5.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the summary of all the chapters in this study. It also summarised the findings, made conclusions, and recommendations based on the following research questions:

- *How do educators understand the concepts of gender diversity and non-binary identities?*
- *How do educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
- *What are the challenges that educators face in managing gender diverse and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*
- *What do educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom?*

The chapter further discussed the study's limitations and delimitations and concluded by presenting the recommendations for future research.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL



09 June 2025

Thandokuhle Mcebo Nkambule (219062177)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear TM Nkambule,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008796/2025

Project title: Managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms: the perspectives of township secondary school educators in Clermont

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 04 June 2025 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

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

This approval is valid until 09 June 2026.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

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

Yours sincerely,

Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Interim Chair)

/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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

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

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY IN KZN DBE



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200

Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201

Enquiries : Ms Phindile Duma

Email : phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Ref: 2/4/8/516

Tel : 033 392 1063

Mr. Thandokuhle Mcebo Nkambule



Dear Mr. Nkambule

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"MANAGING GENDER DIVERSE AND NON-BINARY CLASSROOM: THE PERSPECTIVES SCHOOL EDUCATORS IN CLERMONT"** Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 05 May 2025 to 31 May 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

PINETOWN DISTRICT



Mr. GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 09 May 2025

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX C

CONFIRMATION OF APPROVAL BY THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

The Principal

Dear Principal

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

My name is **Thandokuhle Mcebo Nkambule** student number (219062177), a registered Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood Campus), specializing in Education Leadership, Management and Policy. As part of the requirements for the completion of my degree, I am undertaking a research study titled: **Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont.**

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how Life Orientation educators understand, experience, and manage gender diversity and non-binary identities within the classroom context. The study also aims to identify the challenges they encounter and to explore strategies that can support inclusive educational practices in line with social justice and queer theoretical frameworks.

Given the rising importance of inclusivity, equality, and sensitivity in education; especially around issues of gender diversity—this study is both timely and highly relevant. It is intended to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on inclusive education and to suggest practical recommendations that may assist educators and school leaders in creating supportive learning environments for all learners, regardless of their gender identity.

I hereby kindly request your permission to conduct this research at your school. The study will involve individual, semi-structured interviews with six Life Orientation educators. I assure you that all ethical standards will be upheld throughout the research process. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity of both the school and participants will be strictly maintained. No personal or institutional identifiers will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Please note that ethical clearance has been granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and I have received formal approval from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to conduct research in schools.

My supervisor's contact details are as follows: Dr. N.I. Jaca, who is a Doctor in Education at a school of education, UKZN. And Dr. Jaca can be contacted at 0312609111 or jacan1@ukzn.ac.za

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

Yours Faithfully
Mr.T.M. Nkambule

PRINCIPAL DECLARATION

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

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

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

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL

DATE



20/05/25

MIN. DEPT. OF EDUC
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
DEPUTY PRINCIPAL
ACADEMIC
20 MAY 2025
P.O. BOX 7111, 2002
JOHANNESBURG

APPENDIX D

LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS



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

Dear Participant,

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER OF PARTICIPANT

My name is Thandokuhle Nkambule; I am a Master of Education (Med) student from the School of Education, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research titled: Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont.

The focus of my study is to explore educators' perspectives of their role in managing gender-diverse and non-binary learners within secondary school classrooms, specifically in township schools such as those in Clermont. In recent years, there has been growing awareness and discourse around gender diversity in education. However, there remains a significant gap in research regarding how educators in township contexts understand and respond to gender diversity and non-binary identities in their classrooms. These environments are often shaped by deeply entrenched cultural, social, and economic factors that may affect inclusivity efforts. This study is therefore aimed at addressing that gap by understanding the roles, challenges, and support needs of educators in these settings.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore educators' understanding of gender diversity and non-binary identities.
2. To examine how educators manage gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom.
3. To identify the challenges that educators face in managing gender diversity and non-binary classrooms.
4. To explore what educators think can be done to assist them in better managing gender diversity and non-binary identities to ensure inclusivity in the classroom.

You are invited to participate in this study. To gather the information, I will conduct semi-structured interviews individually, asking general questions relating to Managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms: The perspective of Township secondary school in Clermont.

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

Please note that:

- Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw your child from the research study at any stage. The decision to not participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.
- Your child's confidentiality is guaranteed, as well as their input; pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity.
- Any information you give cannot be used against you, and the generated data will be used for this research only.
- Data will be in the form of semi-structured interviews and will be stored securely and destroyed by shredding after five years. Digitally recorded data will be deleted after five years.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes, and no financial benefits are involved. However, it is expected that you will gain insight into the management of gender diverse and non-binary classrooms.

Thank you

Yours faithfully

.....

My contact details are as follows:



My supervisor is Dr Nosipho Jaka. School of Education, College of Humanities, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal



You may also contact the Research Office at:

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics

Govan Mbeki Centre

Tel +27312604557

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for reading this document about this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I (Full names of participants) at this moment, I have been informed about the study titled Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont District by Thandokuhle Nkambule. I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

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

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

I voluntarily permit the interviews to be audio-recorded.

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

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED]

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

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section A

Name of the school/s: ~~Silwerpoort~~ Senior Secondary School

Name of the circuit: Pinetown

Section B: Managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms: The perspectives of Township secondary school educators in Clermont

Questions to ask participants:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching Life Orientation?
3. What qualifications do you hold as an educator?
4. What is your understanding of the term gender diversity?
5. What is your understanding of non-binary identities?
6. What strategies do you use to promote inclusivity in your classroom?
7. What challenges do you face in managing gender-diverse and non-binary learners in your classroom?
8. How do you address the challenges you have mentioned?
9. What support do you receive from the school when managing gender diversity?
10. What kind of support do you think would help you manage gender diversity and non-binary identities better in your classroom?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add about managing gender-diverse and non-binary classrooms?

APPENDIX F

AUDIT TRAIL TEMPLATE

Audit Trail Template:

Research Topic: Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont

School: Sakhengile Senior Secondary

Location: KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown, Clermont

DATE	STAGE OF RESEACH	DECISION TAKEN	REASON FOR DECISION	EVIDENCE

This table will be used to track all researchers' process and methodical decisions

APPENDIX G

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL TEMPLATE

Reflective Journal:
Research Topic: Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont
School: [REDACTED]
Location: KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown, Clermont
Date: _____
Event or Activity: <i>(Briefly outline the setting including relevant events related to management of gender diverse and non-binary classrooms)</i>
_____ _____ _____ _____
What happened? <i>(Describe any specific actions or events during the research activity)</i>
_____ _____ _____ _____
Personal Thoughts or Feelings: <i>(Capture your emotions, thoughts and reactions)</i>
_____ _____ _____ _____
How might this impact the research? <i>(How your thoughts, feelings, emotions or interview dynamics may impact the study)</i>
_____ _____ _____ _____
What will I do next?: <i>(Outline practical and reflective steps towards improving your research)</i>
_____ _____ _____ _____
SIGNITURE: _____

APPENDIX H

FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE

Field Notes:

Research Topic: Managing Gender Diverse and Non-binary Classrooms: The Perspectives of Township Secondary School Educators in Clermont

School: [REDACTED]

Location: KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown, Clermont

Date & Time: _____

1. Interview Context & Setting:

- Date and Time: _____
- Location: _____
- Description of setting and environment (e.g., quiet, interruptions, layout):

- Presence of others or distractions:

2. Key Observations & Verbal/Non-verbal Cues:

- Notable quotes from participants:

- Body language, tone, or emotional cues:

3. Researcher Reflections:

- How the session went overall:

- Researcher's emotional or cognitive responses:

- Potential biases or influences noted:

- Issues to consider for future interviews:

(This template supports the development of credible and reflective field notes during semi-structured interviews)

APPENDIX I
EDITOR'S REPORT

[REDACTED]
Rhodes University
Makhanda
6139

24 November 2025

To whom it may concern

This is to certify that I did language editing for Thandokuhle Nkambule's dissertation titled "Managing gender diverse and non-binary classrooms: The perspectives of Township secondary school educators in Clermont."

Please contact me if you require any further information.

Kind Regards

DR A Sibanda [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

CERTIFIED
PROOFREADER

APPENDIX J

TURNITIN REPORT

