Parental Perspectives on a Heteronormative and Heterosexist Schooling Space for Children with Same-Sex Sexual Orientations: A Qualitative Research Approach

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Homophobia, discrimination, and victimization in South African schools as well as globally, have been well documented. Little to no studies have been conducted on the inclusivity of school youths with same-sex sexual orientations.

Objective: This paper explored parents' perspectives on a heteronormative and heterosexist schooling space for children from same-sex sexual orientations.

Method: The study employed a qualitative research approach and case study research design using six (6) parents in South Africa. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather necessary information from the participants. Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The findings highlighted that schools remain heteronormative and heterosexist and that parents' perspectives of what an inclusive, safe, and supportive school setting is in contrast to their experiences.

Conclusion: Parents were proactively engaged with schools to address possible challenges that may emanate as a result of the same-sex sexual orientations of their children.

Key Words: Heteronormativity, Heterosexism, Parents perspectives, Same-sex sexualities, Schooling space, Sexual orientation

INTRODUCTION

Despite the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 which prohibits all forms of discrimination and intolerance, schools remain unsafe spaces for the same-sex oriented group of learners where they are not only discriminated against by their heterosexual peers, but that school staff turn the blind eye to this.^{1,2} In South African schools, sexual minority youths are at higher risk for compromised school outcomes.^{1,3,4} Same-sex-oriented people's experiences are restricted because of gender stereotypes associated with family activities and heteronormative occupations.⁵ The complex landscapes that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer navigate can create ambivalence in institutional settings.⁶ Stigma can have a negative impact on the same-sex parented families children's health within a same-sex family context.⁵ Heteronormativity presents risks to children and families who identify themselves as gay or lesbian or gender diverse

and as a result cannot be left unchecked within the school settings.⁸ Based on this premise, the researchers sought parental perspectives on a heteronormative and heterosexist schooling space for children from same-sex sexual orientations within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological theory.

Historically, teachers who do not conform to gender and sexual orientation norms have been the subject of persecution and form major problems to normalize heterosexuality.⁹ Patterns of thinking and ideologies of dominant heteronormative practices that ultimately result in discrimination among same-sex orientated youths have been explained in emerging research.³ Parents used resilience building to construct a positive environment for child health due to lack of understanding and discrimination among youths with same-sex orientation.⁶ Learners are expected to be identified as heterosexual and embody heteronormative gender expression and expectations due to

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proliferation which makes explicit gender and sexuality binaries in the curriculum, and school culture.³ Unlike before when children have salient sexual identities of their own, children through interactions with their teachers and peers in preschool have started to make sense of heteronormativity and rules associated with sexuality.⁷ Gay fathers were actively engaged with school-based, home-based, and community-based educational opportunities for their children.⁸ Providing sexual information that covers a wide range of sexual orientations and behaviours is beneficial to all teens, most especially those who are not heterosexual.⁹

There is constant harassment of school youth with same-sex sexual orientations in and around their learning institutions.¹⁰ To ensure safe and inclusive schooling space for teaching and learning of their non-heterosexual children, parents wanted to get actively involved through communication and collaboration with school authorities.⁴ Parents have positive views on the use of children's picture books featuring same-sex as powerful resources in leading change in the struggle against heteronormativity in early childhood education.⁸ The ugly experiences of school youth with same-sex sexual orientations have been neglected by the appropriate authorities in South Africa.¹¹ Based on the work experiences of same-sex teachers, there is the need to establish a policy to manage their identities in school contexts characterised by a culture of heteronormativity.¹²

There are negative associations for sexual minority women between their heteronormative behavioural attitudes and personal growth.¹⁴ Francis's¹⁰ study highlights how race contributes to a normalising view of heterosexuality in some contexts. Hostile reactions to non-heteronormative behaviour reinforce heteronormative beliefs and there is the need for interventions to address both prejudice and its underlying mechanisms.¹³ Same-sex relationships are negated by life orientation sexuality education which is a gendered, heteronormative and moralistic approach to youth sexuality.² In recent years, family as a 'child-friendly through the incorporation of their inclusive range of different family's resources into lessons, has been used to encourage primary educators to broach same-sex relationships.¹⁴ Discrimination and exclusion resulting from current political and socio-cultural conditions have led to the restriction on the occupational transition towards motherhood/fatherhood for same-sex couples.⁵

The unfortunate reality in South Africa is that heterosexual norms and patriarchal values influence traditional binaries of male and female sexuality expressions.¹⁰ In South Africa as well as other parts of the world, oppression and resistance have been associated with the history of same-sex sexual orientated people.¹⁵ The social reality associated with same-sex orientations is quite due to harassment and discrimination from institutional service providers not minding the protection and legal quality of such people.¹⁶

In South Africa, there is gross negligence by multi-disciplinary adolescent research and service provision of the experience of school youth with same-sex sexual orientations.¹¹ However, no study in South Africa has explored the views of stakeholders on the inclusive and supportive learning environments for children from same-sex sexual orientations. Based on the foregoing, the researchers sought the views of parents on inclusive and supportive learning environments for children from same-sex sexual orientations. The following two questions guided us in this study:

1. What are the parents' experiences with children of same-sex sexual orientation?
2. What are the parents' perspectives on a heteronormative and heterosexist schooling space for children with same-sex sexualities?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research approach and design

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study using a case study research design. The qualitative research approach has been used recently.¹⁷ A case study research design was used to carry out in-depth interviews with the participants. This design was used to explore the views on inclusive and supportive learning environments for children from same-sex sexual orientations.

Participants

The participants for this study comprised Six parents of youths with same-sex sexual orientations. The participants were selected through purposive sampling technique from a population of parents on same-sex sexual orientations youths in Free State and Gauteng Province of South Africa. Each of the participants had a child who is still in school and is identified as having same-sex sexual orientation and must have affirmed the child's non-heterosexual orientation. Those served as the inclusion criteria.

Instrumentation and procedure

Data for this study were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide allowed the research to restore the age of the participants. To ensure the credibility of the data collection instrument, the researchers made provisions to promote confidence by accurately recording the phenomena under scrutiny. Telephonic communication was used at the initial stage of communication with participants to brief them about the purpose and objectives of the study. Based on that arrangement, the participants consented to participate in the research as sought by the researchers. Each interview was conducted within 20-30 minutes at a convenient venue for the participant.

Ethical measures

The ethical approval for the conduct of this research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Besides, the researchers ensured that informed consent forms were given to the participants to fill and sign before the commencement of the data collection procedure. Also, the researchers further explained to the participants that they are free to end the interview at any stage. Pseudonyms were used to avoid the use of real names of participants during the interview for the sake of confidentiality.

Statistical Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data, allowing the researchers to examine themes and patterns to make meaning of the data. The data were analysed using the step-by-step procedure involving reading and re-reading through the recording interview scripts. That approach is normally called transcription.

RESULTS

The results were presented based on the two themes that emerged from the thematic data analysis.

Theme 1: Parents' experiences with children of same-sex sexual orientation.

This theme emerged from the individual interviews with the 6 participants for the study. Each of the participants was interviewed and below are the extracts from their responses on their experiences with children of same-sex sexual orientation.

#1: Since she was very small, maybe six years old, I knew. I knew from the start. She acted and did things different from children, I mean like the other boys. She refused to wear trousers as boys do. She was adamant about it. I tried to teach her and even reprimand her. Then I gave up (giggling). But now I am so proud of who she is and what she stands for. She has the courage and she is happy now. And when my child is happy, I am happy. She is my daughter (transgender) and I am proud to call her that. I don't care what other people say.

#2: At first, to be bluntly honest, she was just a bit weird. I compared her with other girls both in school and in our community. She was just different. I considered her to be weird at that stage. She talked different like she spoke about girls in a way that caught my attention. I thought to myself, this is not how other girls talk about girls in general. Later I realised, and confirmed my suspicion, that by the way, she chose to dress and all the other things that she was a lboy'san. I was confused and didn't know what to do and how to react towards my child because she was still my child even though she was different. One thing I was sure of was that she is still my child and that I loved her, no matter what. I will never

abandon my child. I became very protective over her since I knew that the life that she is going to live will not be an easy one. She might be rejected at school and even by her other family members.

#3: When my child was 11, he told me. It wasn't a shock to me since I always had a suspicion that there might be a chance of him being gay. My husband and I sat down with him, spoke to him about it and tried our utter best to say the right things to make him realise that we love him no matter what. I think it came as a shock to him that we accepted him. We got the idea that he thought we will chase him out of the house or something. We would never do that. We love him too much. He stays our son, whether he likes girls or boys.

#4, #5 & #6: We didn't know what was going on. We didn't even know what it was, and the doctor didn't explain to us what was going on. All he (the doctor) said was that we should raise Grace as a girl (intersex). Remember, we didn't even know what intersex was at that stage. He advised us to never tell Grace about the choice we made because it will confuse her when she grows up. We had to lie to her when we took her to the doctor. We told her that there were problems with her kidneys, and she needed to go for regular check-ups. Later when she got to the puberty stage, she told us she does not want to wear dresses and that she didn't feel comfortable wearing them.

Theme 2: Parents' perspectives on a heteronormative and heterosexist schooling space.

The parents in this study recalled instances and experiences of discrimination and violence reported by their children and had the following to say.

Participants #1 and #2 for example narrated thus:

I knew that Thabo was in danger, especially in school. Remember, the other children and the school staff had never had to deal with issues of people who are transgender. Children can be awful and with no doubt, we knew that he will not be safe there but there was nothing we could do. Just hope for the best. Happiness is all that we wanted for him. Thabo would come home and cry and this broke my heart. He said that the kids called him names, and even though he never said it, we knew that there was more involved than just mere name-calling.

Similar memories were shared by participants #3, #4, #5 & #6

They didn't want to go to school and started to pretend to be sick. But we knew they weren't sick. Home-schooling was an option and we discussed this. They never mentioned exactly what happened, but they just said that there were things that the other boys did to them. We were scared because we knew that it wasn't only name-calling. On numerous occasions, we contacted the school, and we specifically spoke to the teach-

ers, but this was all in vain because no change happened. We were angry about this because it was their job to protect our children. Our hands were tied.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings showed that parents are very much aware of the same-sex sexual orientation of their children. However, most of the parents narrated the ugly experiences of their children in schools as a result of their same-sex sexual orientation. This buttresses the fact that gender and sexual diversity are not addressed in schools even though they are included in the formal curriculum. These findings are consistent with the findings of the following recent studies. There is constant harassment of school youth with same-sex sexual orientations in and around their learning institutions.¹⁰ To ensure safe and inclusive schooling space for teaching and learning of their non-heterosexual children, parents wanted to get actively involved through communication and collaboration with school authorities.⁴ Parents have positive views on the use of children's picture books featuring same-sex as powerful resources in leading change in the struggle against heteronormativity in early childhood education.⁸ The ugly experiences of school youth with same-sex sexual orientations in South Africa have been neglected by the appropriate authorities.¹¹ Based on the work experiences of same-sex teachers, there is the need to establish a policy to manage their identities in school contexts characterised by a culture of heteronormativity.¹²

There are negative associations for sexual minority women between their heteronormative behavioural attitudes and personal growth.¹⁴ Francis's¹⁰ study highlights how race contributes to a normalising view of heterosexuality in some contexts. Hostile reactions to non-heteronormative behaviour reinforce heteronormative beliefs and there is the need for interventions to address both prejudice and its underlying mechanisms.¹³ Same-sex relationships are negated by life orientation sexuality education which is a gendered, heteronormative and moralistic approach to youth sexuality.² In recent years, family as a 'child-friendly' through the incorporation of their inclusive range of different family's resources into lessons, has been used to encourage primary educators to broach same-sex relationships.¹⁴ discrimination and exclusion is resulting from current political and socio-cultural conditions discrimination and exclusion resulting from current political and socio-cultural conditions have led to the restriction to occupational transition towards motherhood/fatherhood for same-sex couples.⁵

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data shows that parents were proactively engaged with schools to address possible challenges that may emanate as

a result of the same-sex sexual orientations of their children. However, most parents were ready to change schools for their children due to the kind of harassment and discrimination experienced by their children in school. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that:

1. To ensure effective involvement of parents in the affairs of the school, certain strategies must be promoted and popularized within the school community
2. Certain channels must be created by the school to assess all parents' opinions regularly and gather informal suggestions.

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Conflict of interest

The researchers declared no potential conflict of interest.

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Authors' contribution

Both Dr Henry and Dr Christian initiated this research and followed it to the completion stage.

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