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### Queering Teacher Education Through Intergroup Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

This article reports on intergroup dialogue as an innovative pedagogical tool to disrupt compulsory heteronormative values among life orientation (LO) students. LO is a school subject that is the study of the self in relation to others and to society. An intergroup dialogue between student teachers and their peers with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions aimed to explore and understand sexuality differences, foster deeper understanding about issues of oppression and privilege, and build alliances for social change. Using a three-phase approach, the article examines the initial perceptions held about sexual diversity among the student teachers and how dialogue with same-sex sexual desire students enabled an understanding of the everyday realities of bullying and harassment. Six students with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions, as guest speakers, shared their school experiences with a fourth-year cohort of LO students during sessions for comprehensive sexuality education. Dialogues between these two groups led to an increase in compassion for the repressive experiences of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and a quest for knowledge on how to facilitate redress. Intergroup dialogue was shown to be a promising pedagogical tool to facilitate critical self-awareness, a shift in dissonance, and a quest for more knowledge to provide an inclusive learning environment for all learners.

**Keywords:** queering, heteronormativity, intergroup dialogue, sexual orientation

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#### Introduction

This paper seeks to discuss intergroup dialogue as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the learning of sexual and gender diversity inclusion initiatives in teacher education programmes. Student teachers have expressed high levels of discomfort in addressing the topic of sexuality and gender diversity or in

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engaging peers with nonheterosexual identities (Brown & Diale, 2017; Richardson, 2008; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). Even teacher educators are found to be afraid to address issues of sexual and gender diversity (Pieterse, 2019). It is not surprising that teachers have inadequate knowledge and pedagogical tools to create a learning environment that is safe and inclusive for all learners, regardless of sexual orientation (Francis, 2017a). Gender identities and sexual orientation in South African schools continue to be conceptualised through normalised notions of heteronormativity, conservative religious beliefs, and perceived cultural values that construct sex, sexuality, and gender as fixed (Francis, 2019). The wellbeing, learning opportunities, and agency of young people who identify as, or are perceived as, LGBT are compromised and subjected to persistent homophobic violence, bullying, and discrimination that compromises their wellbeing, learning opportunities, and agency (Francis et al., 2019; Francis, 2017a; Msibi, 2012; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Teachers are reluctant to create safe and inclusive learning environments because they claim that they disrupt the moral compass of society (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). This is despite the constitutional and educational statutes that afford protection to, and affirmation of, diverse sexual orientations in South Africa.

Teachers need to be empowered to be competent and comfortable to educate and create enabling environments for learners with diverse sexual and gender identities because lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are part of every society, globally (Richardson, 2004), and certainly in the school community. Francis (2010) found that young people as young as 13 years disclose and embrace their nonheterosexual identities. Using literature that deals with sexual diversity in teaching enables student teachers to navigate away from feeling uncomfortable to gaining knowledge—and makes them eager to learn about sexual diversity realities (Helmer, 2015). This study asks the question: “How could intergroup dialogue be used as pedagogical tool to facilitate the teaching and learning of sexual and gender diversity?”

### **Intergroup Dialogue: A Pedagogical Tool for Agency**

Intergroup dialogue has the potential to gather people from diverse backgrounds in a conducive and facilitated learning environment to explore commonalities and differences. It allows for the exploration of the nature and consequences of systems of power and privilege and helps those who participate in the dialogue to find ways to work together as one (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Miles and Kivigham (2012) explained that one group is often more privileged than those from certain othered social identities. “Intergroup dialogue integrates cognitive teaming about identity, difference, and inequality with affective involvement of oneself and others through sharing intimate personal reflections and meaningful critical dialogue” (Zúñiga et al., 2007, p. 5). This approach is ideal considering the privilege of heterosexuality is the norm in school settings, with any other form of sexual identity being constructed as abnormal (Francis, 2017b). It is important to point out that intergroup dialogue is not a debate where one group tries to prove to the other group the accuracy of their own positioning and the error of the other. This approach focuses on the importance of listening and speaking truthfully and openly to improve interpersonal communication (Zúñiga et al., 2007).

In this study, intergroup dialogue meetings were designed to offer a safe space for student teachers to explore diversity and justice issues through participating in activities, individual and group reflections, and dialogue between groups (Nagda et al., 1999). In his theory of anti-oppressive education, Kumashiro (2000) advocated for an education that is critical of privileging and othering, and is responsive to notions of discrimination. Dialogue between the two groups has been found to increase the extent to which participants think about themselves as members of society and as members of the social identity group they are in (Miles & Kivigham, 2012) as they learn from the other. Intergroup dialogue has the ability to increase awareness about self, individual differences, group identities, and social discrimination (DeTurk, 2006). Studies using intergroup dialogue meetings

helped participants not only to learn more about other groups, but also to speak freely with the other group members and help them to feel comfortable spending time with the different groups they are in contact with (Tauriac et al., 2013). However, communication between different sexual and gender identity groups can be emotionally difficult for participants. DeTurk (2006), in a study with groups of diverse sexual orientations, found that participants were encouraged to talk with and support others whom they would never engage with under normal circumstances. Similarly, Dessel et al. (2011), in researching bisexual identities, shared a reflection of a student who perceived intergroup dialogue as “an opportunity for personal growth in terms of accepting your own sexuality and having a sense of self value” (p. 1140).

Nagda et al. (1999) identified three goals when using intergroup dialogue as pedagogical tool: (a) developing intergroup understanding by helping participants discover their own and other social identities, (b) promoting positive intergroup relationships by developing participants’ sympathy and motivation to overcome differences of identity, and (c) promoting intergroup teamwork for personal and social responsibility for better social justice. Dessel et al. (2011) showed how intergroup dialogue (a) develops participants’ skills in constant communication despite differences, (b) develops understanding the dynamic of differences and dominance, and (c) encourages commitment in individual and group alliance building and social justice action. Intergroup dialogue may, nonetheless, pose a few challenges. For example, in such dialogue, students share their very personal experiences and feelings. Dessel et al. (2011) suggested that participating in this dialogue involves a fear of being outed to people beyond the group although there are ground rules set at the beginning of the meetings. Students may be concerned that their sexuality will be shared with people who do not know their preferred sexual identity. It is critical to point out that participants should only share information that they feel comfortable with in the event that it ends up in the public domain. Certain participants in groups might have strong opinions about others, and it is important that very clear ground rules of participation are laid down at the outset.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory critically interrogates and analyses the meaning of identity, focusing on interactions between groups of people and resisting oppressive social constructions, orthodoxies, and dualism of dominant sexual orientation and gender identities (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Above all, queer theory disrupts what is perceived to be “normal” and celebrates the differences in society (Kumashiro, 2003). This ideology that perpetuates the belief that a heterosexual gender and sexual identity is valued more than sexual minority identities and expression enforces hierarchies marked by rigid beliefs, rules about gender expressions, and roles (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Queer theory ultimately questions the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from marginal and central positions, be they ethnic, racial, sexual, or gender identities (Dilley, 1999). Queer theory is not to make being queer normal but to interrogate existing unjust principles that uphold rigid structures of conformity and ideas about heterosexuality that constrain people’s identification and life choices (Plummer, 2015). Msibi (2012) chose the term “identification” because the term “identity” creates the perception of a fixed form of being. The expression a person has of their gender and sexuality can be fluid and changeable as the individual affects society, and as society affects the individual (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Therefore, the ways in which an individual identifies could vary. In this article, I avoid northern hemisphere identification labels such lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex because these terminologies are not always recognised in African ecologies (Francis & Reygan, 2016), particularly in rural communities in South Africa (Msibi, 2012). Here, terminologies were found to reinforce perceptions of nonheterosexual identification as a Western import and sexual diversity as unAfrican (Brown, 2019). The phrase, “sexual and gender diversity” is more suitable because it engages with issues of gender, power, and community in Southern Africa (Reygan & Francis, 2015).

Schools are microcosms of the broader society (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015), with the values of such a society being transferred, reinforced, and perpetuated in the school community. If schools are located in homophobic societies, such beliefs regulate how sexuality and gender diversity are perceived. Consequently, teachers and learners are more likely to discriminate against people who do not conform to the compulsory heteronormative culture because it is not allowed in the societies they come from (Brown, 2019a). However, if schools start to affirm and embrace a learning environment that accommodates diversity, teachers and learners will have a chance to gather information and knowledge about same-sex sexualities to help society understand and accept difference. To help learners understand and accept sexual diversity, teachers need to be empowered with tools that will resist different forms of oppression (Francis & Msibi, 2011). This requires teachers to facilitate discussions on sexual and gender diversity (Francis, 2012). Therefore, queer theory is seen as a method to disrupt and challenge the traditional styles of thought we have around gender and sexual identity that view heterosexuality and homosexuality not as an identity or social status, but as categories of knowledge, desire, sexualities, or identities (Meyer, 2010). Including queer theory in teacher education could help to deconstruct the idea that homosexuality is the opposite of heterosexuality—because there is a spectrum of sexualities that shows that people are diverse and fluid in their sexual identities. Teachers must learn to see schools as a place to question, explore, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge means certainty, authority, and stability (Meyer, 2010). Schools should not be institutions that police and regulate human agency when it comes to sexuality but an environment that fosters, encourages, embraces, and celebrates human agency in a diverse society such as South Africa. Teachers need skills to facilitate a learning environment of continuous negotiation and mutual influence. As Francis (2017a) explained, teachers should provide young people with opportunities for agency or the choice to resist, contest, or select existing discourses and exercise power. The use of intergroup dialogue in sexuality education (research) takes into consideration the process of knowledge production and identity construction (Pattman & Bhana, 2017). It deconstructs the power dynamics found between the adult (researcher) and the youth (participants) and acceptable discourses that mark sexuality as a topic for adulthood. More so, an understanding of diverse (sexual) identities will empower individuals and institutions to question systems of oppression, how they work, how they are sustained, and how they can be contested (Muthukrishna, 2008).

## Data Collection Strategies

Students from my institution constitute a diverse cohort predominantly from rural geographies. In one of the comprehensive sexuality education<sup>12</sup> sessions, a few students shared that they had never spoken to, and were not likely to engage with, individuals' nonheterosexual expressions. This reality motivated me to introduce an intergroup dialogue session. My student teachers who assumed a privileged heterosexual identity were put into dialogue with others with often-oppressed nonheterosexual identities. This process was facilitated over two weeks and in three phases. Phase 1 had two groups: The first group were the fourth-year life orientation (LO) student teachers, and the second group consisted of nonheteronormative students from the same institution. In trying to disrupt student teachers' perspectives and assumptions through transformative learning, the second group consisting of six speakers with diverse sexual orientations came to share stories of their school experiences. Tauriac et al. (2013) found that intergroup dialogue between heteronormative and nonheteronormative groups was an ideal strategy to disrupt deep-seated prejudices and promote critical consciousness (Kumashiro, 2001; Miles & Kivlighan, 2012). I met separately with the two groups and explained the focus of the engagement. These experiences could date back to their school years (on average, about three years earlier) and depict recent and possibly present practices in schools. During Phase 1, students in Group 2 (i.e., with self-identified nonheterosexual identities)

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<sup>12</sup>Comprehensive sex education (CSE) is a sex education instruction method based on a curriculum that aims to give students the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values to make appropriate and healthy choices in their sexual lives. It forms part of the LO curriculum.

shared with each other what they experienced and decided on different focus areas that they wanted to present to the fourth-year LO student teachers. Tauriac et al. (2013) suggested that participants test ideas or previously unarticulated feelings about other groups before raising them directly in the dialogue.

During this phase, student teachers in Group 1 were also coached on simple strategies to engage in a discussion that was of an empowerment nature. I asked students to share how society talks about individuals who do not conform to the normative genders. By phrasing the question from a societal angle, I hoped to avoid politically correct responses that might reflect students' personal views and shield their own image from being seen as negative (Larrabee & Morehead, 2008). They nevertheless presented their own views. Student teachers were also requested to express their levels of comfort should they be asked to teach about and attend to the needs of learners with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions. In both groups, we established rules of engagement that would be respectful of others and would not cause harm.

The two groups met in Phase 2. This phase commenced a week after the first phase. Participants were given the opportunity to explore issues that related to personal and social identities and commonalities and differences between the two groups (Miles & Kivlighan, 2012). Students with nonheterosexual identities presented their school experiences to student teachers. The purpose of Phase 2 was for student teachers to be sensitised to the everyday realities of learners with nonheterosexual sexualities in schools. It was also to illustrate to student teachers how prejudice and discriminatory beliefs and behaviour impact the school experiences of nonheterosexual learners. The group engaged in a discussion guided by the presentations prepared in Phase 1. Student teachers had to write a short reflection of their experiences during the session.

Phase 3 was conducted during a tutorial session in the same week. Student teachers reflected on their perceptions about nonheterosexual students before and after the dialogue. The initial reflections on social talk about sexuality and gender diversity from Phase 1, the reflections from the intergroup dialogue from Phase 2, and reflections on personal perceptions on sexuality diversity before and after the talk were thematically analysed to explore changes in perceptions.

A total of six volunteer self-identified nonheterosexual students were recruited from the sexual and gender diversity student support organisation. All participants were above the age of 18 years and signed a consent form to participate. The students with diverse sexuality and gender identities as well as the LO student teachers had to consent that all information could be used in a publication. They were assured that all identities would be protected and that they could withdraw at any time should they feel uncomfortable. Both groups remained active throughout the dialogue and other activities.

## **Finding and Discussions**

The three themes generated during the analysis process are as follows:

- Homophobic society: Shaping young minds
- Discomforting heteronormativity
- Shifting perceptions: From homophobia to social cohesion.

## Homophobic Society: Shaping Young Minds—Phases 1 and 2

Families in South Africa have predominantly grown up in a heteronormative society where heterosexuality is the only acceptable relationship (Brown, 2019b; Wells & Polders, 2006). As a result, these heterosexual households possess innumerable misconceptions about diverse sexual and gender expressions (Kowen & Davis, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2016). This belief in a heterosexual society is reinforced by the media, religion, legal discourses, and education (Wells & Polders, 2006). Narratives from student teachers depicted similar notions of compulsory heterosexual perceptions of sexual orientations.

### Phase 1

As explained, in Phase 1, I explored the perceptions of student teachers towards people with nonheterosexual orientations. In my initial planning, we started the conversation with a simple question on how people in society perceive and talk about nonnormative sexuality. One of the biggest gatekeepers of sexual diversity and social cohesion in South Africa is religion (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2015). Thus, in Phase 1, I drew attention to a homophobic incident that elicited wide public attention when a pastor equated people with a same-sex sexual orientation to being lower than animals. A self-disclosed popular television icon known to most South Africans, Somizi Mhlongo, attended the service in which homosexual identities were dehumanised and staged a walkout as a result. This was widely reported by means of a video clip in the media. It should be noted that in South Africa, entertainment education has been hailed as a tool that enables transformation and social cohesion (Brown, 2019b). The video clip that expressed Somizi's complaints about the disparaged sermon was presented only to the LO student teachers in Phase 1. Student teachers were asked to write short reviews of the clip and the discussions that followed. This was beneficial to the dialogue because all the students were aware of the incident, which had sparked a national debate. Students were also asked how comfortable they would be to teach a child with a nonheterosexual sexuality. Below, are selected views of my student teachers about sexual diversity:

*In my Zulu culture, we were never taught about gay people. If boys don't act like men, then they must be beaten to be made strong. There is no such thing as a homosexuality in my culture. (Male student teacher)*

*Homosexual people should understand nature. How can two men or two women reproduce? It is against the natural order of the universe. So, homosexuality must be abnormal. (Female student teacher)*

*I don't have a problem with homosexuals. They must just live their lives in private. (Male student teacher)*

*Homosexuals are abused and neglected people. They just need counselling; then they will be all fine. (Female student teacher)*

*Since homosexuality was legalised by the constitution, they have become so many. It is like a fashion; everyone wants to be homosexual. Even young children. I think it is just a bad example. (Male student teacher)*

*On the question of how comfortable they would be to teach learners who disclosed and embraced their nonheterosexual orientations, the following views were captured:*



*I see gay people on campus all the time, but I have never spoken to them. I never engaged with a homosexual person before. I am not sure if I will be comfortable. (Male student teacher)*

*I don't have a problem with teaching them as long as they don't disrupt my class. They are always loud and seek attention. (Female student teacher)*

*These people always make moves on us straight guys on campus. What if a learner wants a relationship with me? I am not sure whether I could handle that. (Male student teacher)*

*How do you group the class with homosexuals there? Let's say you want to split the class in male and female groups, what do I do? (Female student teacher)*

*In LO, you talk about safe sex education. Will I be expected to talk about gay sex? I think I will have problems with other parents and, besides, my religion does not allow it. (Male student teacher)*

*I am an African man. There is no way I can accept that. I will ignore his or her homosexuality and treat them like all the other normal learners. (Male student teacher)*

The above narratives from participants represent the overall responses from LO student teachers. Student teachers' constructions of diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions demonstrate similar dissonance found in the survey by Sutherland et al. (2016) with 5,000 participants who expressed strong elements of homonegativity. This is despite that fact that issues of diverse sexual orientations fall into the domain of LO (Francis & DePalma, 2014). The student teachers' perceptions of diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions were framed by religion, culture, social misconceptions, and objectification. Francis (2017b) and Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) found that these influenced teachers' and learners' homophobic responses to sexual diversity in schools. Without the necessary intervention, many of these student teachers would have reproduced and sustained the homophobic violence that is prevalent in schools (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). From the responses, I also identified that silencing and invisibilising of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender expressions is still the most common approach among teachers (Brown, 2019b; Francis, 2017b). Francis (2017b) found that discussion on bisexuality is almost nonexistent or often confused with understandings of intersex developments. Transgender learners are constantly subjected to violence and harassment for not adhering to the compulsory gender binary school practices (Sanger, 2014). Student responses to sexual orientations and gender expressions in this study too, pressed for heterosexuality as the only valid sexual orientation (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015), hence, South African schools have been found to be unsafe for (young) people with diverse sexual orientations (Brown, 2019b; Butler et al., 2003; Francis, 2017a; Kowen & Davis, 2006; Msibi, 2012). Perceptions about diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions held by student teachers show the wellbeing risks that young people with nonheterosexual orientations might face when in the care of these future teachers. In response to the first research question—"How do student teachers view learners with sexual orientations and gender expressions other than heterosexuality?"—Phase 1 clearly demonstrates that perceptions and constructions of diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions are still repressive. It is concerning that over almost 20 years, South African research publications on sexual diversity in schools (Butler et al., 2003; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019) show that very little transformation has taken place in teacher education. It does not appear that universities where teachers are prepared have aligned themselves with the constitutional ideals of a diverse and socially cohesive society. It is concerning to find that student teachers in their fourth and final year of initial teacher education still exhibit such dissonant views. Ironically, LO teachers are on the frontline in schools to instil a socially just education through the curriculum that they are to teach (Francis & DePalma, 2014). I argue that the lack of training around sexual diversity in the LO teacher education

programme reflects negative views as the official view about people with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions.

## *Phase 2*

In Phase 2, LO student teachers and young people with nonheterosexual orientations joined for one session that enabled them to engage in dialogue about sexual orientation and gender diversity. I had separate conversations with the two groups about their conduct during Phase 2. Much of the discussion was about ethical behaviour. An educational psychologist was present in the event that the discussion inflicted any form of harm or discomfort. I introduced the six students with the self-disclosed diverse sexual orientations to the LO student teacher cohort. I reminded the two groups of the focus of the activity. The six self-disclosed same-sex sexual orientation students shared their individual experiences of everyday life at school. Below are excerpts from the discussion on how homosexuality was perceived at school, and how these young people were treated as a result. Many of the findings aligned with the perceptions that student teachers held in Phase 1.

Heteronormative societies imprint gendered dressing as distinctive markers of sexuality (Vaccaro et al., 2012). For instance, when young boys might want to wear a skirt or nail polish, they are lectured or disliked by parents, neighbours, teachers, and strangers, while those who dressed gender appropriately were viewed as “normal” (Vaccaro et al., 2012).

Guest Speaker 3, who identified as a female with a same-sex sexual orientation, explained that she had had a similar incident at school:

*So, they told me, “No, you are not allowed to wear these pants; they are for the guys only. So as a girl, you need to wear a skirt.” So yeah, I got used to them.*

Choosing what is normal, mainstream, or acceptable is determined by the hegemonic groups in our society; they have the power to choose what is tolerable and what would not be tolerated (Francis & Msibi, 2011). If groups are seen as “abnormal” by the dominant group, their culture and language are misrepresented, discounted, or eradicated (Francis & Msibi, 2011). By rejecting and labelling nonheterosexuality as “abnormal,” people with diverse sexual orientations are forced by their desire to be normal to the social scripts (Gutmann Kahn & Lindstrom, 2015). Other guest speakers in the study who defined themselves as persons with diverse sexual orientations supported this statement:

*I felt a pressure at my student residence, and I changed for a couple of months because I wanted to impress them. I tried to fit in because they are only guys. At the initiation, I felt I had no choice. (Guest Speaker 1: Male with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

*At school, they asked me why I wanted to be a man. I tried to do female stuff like wearing skirts and the sport they played, but I was so uncomfortable. It is not nice to be rejected, so you end up doing what they want. (Guest Speaker 3: Female with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

*In the beginning, I was teased. I never had a girlfriend. I would sometimes report it to the teachers and nothing would happen. I decided to date girls just to end the teasing. It was very depressing. (Guest Speaker 2: Male with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

The narratives are indicative of a deep-seated heteronormative culture that is sustained in learning institutions, be they basic or higher education. These participants reflected on how they had to self-



regulate in order to have a sense of belonging. They denied the self in order to be accepted in the hegemonic collective. The systemic heteronormative culture is in total contravention of the values and fundamentals of inclusive education that bars any form of discrimination. My intention was to explore how these revelations would translate into the discussion session to follow. The student teachers were confronted with dominant powers and privileges that were often taken for granted. I was not sure if these students could comprehend that the privilege of the hegemonic group had the potential to other and to oppress. The narratives of the same-sex sexual orientation participants highlight the need to queer schools. Not only should diverse sexualities become a topic of teaching and learning in the LO curriculum, but there is also a need to disrupt the regimented heteronormative school culture. Using a transformative learning approach allows individuals to create their own personal knowledge, values, and beliefs without the influence of society (Quinn & Sinclair, 2016).

### **Discomforting Heteronormativity**

The notion of “discomfort” refers to a feeling of anxiety or embarrassment. The term, “discomforting heteronormativity” as a theme, is explained on the basis that not only society but specifically LO teachers feel uncomfortable talking to or teaching learners about gender and sexualities apart from heterosexuality. Recent research by Francis (2017b) and Mayeza and Vincent (2019) found that LO teachers are embarrassed and ill prepared to talk about sexuality with learners, let alone nonheterosexuality. The visibility of nonheterosexual learners in schools through nonnormative gender expressions creates a feeling of discomfort for teachers who assume that their class or the school is a heteronormative environment. Although all discussions of sexuality create discomfort for teachers (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019), they consciously distance themselves from a topic they feel uncomfortable with (Francis, 2019). The LO student teachers expressed similar discomfort narratives when asked how they would feel about teaching learners with diverse sexual orientations.

*No, I would not want to make myself [part] of something I don't even understand. As I said, it is a private matter, and I prefer to stay away from personal issues. (Male student teacher)*

*No, I would not be comfortable to deal with issues of homosexuality because I would not know how to deal with such situations, firstly. Secondly, I would not know how to approach such a situation and I would not know what to say to these learners and I would not feel comfortable talking to them about it. (Female student teacher)*

Taylor and Hill (2016) stated that a person’s perspectives are predominantly derived from experience, and these perspectives further influence their understanding of new experiences. Because these student teachers’ perspectives and anxiety about the inclusion of diverse gender and sexuality identities needed to change, transformative learning was incorporated into the data-gathering process. These school realities troubled the fixed, repressive perceptions of the student teachers’ views and beliefs about homosexuality. They could personally see the speakers and their emotions while they shared their stories. The stories were marked with injustice, discrimination, dehumanisation, ostracism, and violence. Guest speakers shared that:

*I was nominated to be the head boy in Grade 12. The principal said they had never had a gay head boy, and that they couldn't allow me to be the first. This is despite the fact that I was elected by the majority of the learners. I was very hurt because my sexuality was used to discriminate against me. I decided to fight for it. (Guest Speaker 1: Male with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

*In Grade 10, I was accompanied by a girlfriend to the school games. On our way there, we started kissing . . . two guys approached us and confronted us kissing. When we told them we are kissing, they responded, "Ooh, that thing is not normal." The one guy grabbed me, and the other grabbed her. The one said "Ja, we are going to teach you guys." He wanted to whip us. (Guest Speaker 3: Female with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

*Secondary school was a very difficult time for me. The boys did not want me to go to the male toilets. They would always chase me from it. Although girls tolerated it and allowed me to share a bathroom, some teachers didn't approve. I had to wait till after school so I could go to the toilet. (Guest Speaker 2: Male with a same-sex sexual orientation)*

The experiences of these speakers explained to the student teachers their realities while in school. The idea was to explore how these realities could create an awareness about perceptions and responses in schools and the need for a safe and inclusive learning environment. Student teachers' facial reactions were those of shock, sadness, and horror. Many of them expressed their disappointment about the schools' direct acts of discrimination:

*I can't believe that those things still happen in this day and age! I am shocked. Why are people not left alone to live their lives? (Female student teacher)*

*Schools are places where learners should be protected from violence. But the teachers not allowing you to go into the female bathrooms gives power to the boys to bully you. (Male student teacher)*

*I didn't even think that toilets would be a problem. I don't even think of problems; if I have a need, I just go to the toilet and do my thing. It is sad that someone must hold his needs till they go home. I cannot imagine that. (Male student teacher)*

From the responses of the student teachers, I noticed a shift towards values that are included in the LO curriculum. I sensed compassion, disappointment on how school youth with same-sex sexualities were treated, and disgust with teachers' unwillingness to support and affirm. Moore (2005) highlighted that shifting a person's perspectives on a matter often requires dialogues of a discomforting nature. Participants in the study showed a change in attitude towards the subject.

Cranton (2001) explained that using an unexpected action, in this case speakers telling their stories, can potentially transform the dissonant feelings held by individuals. Transformative learning is extremely difficult and fraught with emotional upheavals (Moore, 2005). Mezirow, as cited by Taylor and Hill (2016, p. 256), purported that "transformation can be sudden and dramatic, even epic or more incremental where slow and steady changes in meaning schemes result in eventual change in meaning perspective." Using intergroup dialogue as a transformative learning tool in a gradual process resulted in student teachers examining and changing their perspectives more easily than in one dramatic moment. This is why I not only had a discussion with individuals with diverse sexual orientations, but also did a pre-evaluation with the LO student teachers, arranged an intergroup dialogue, and asked for reflections after the dialogue to facilitate a process of change. Making transformative learning a process, although it is time consuming, would have a major impact on the student teacher's worldview (Hoggan, 2016).

Student teachers in this study had more questions than views when guest speakers shared their daily realities at school. A few of the questions the student teachers asked the speakers were as follows:

*My question is, do you feel any pressure to fit into a certain sex due to societal pressure? Do you like how you feel about yourself? Didn't you, at any time, feel that you should deviate a bit to a certain sex just to fit in or be appreciated as a human being? (Male student teacher)*

*Having gone through whatever your school experiences were, what advice would you give to teachers to deal with these homosexual learners? How can I take your experiences you shared with us to make it easier to include them in our classrooms, and change the conflict between those who are homophobic or those who want to make fun of homosexuals? (Female student teacher)*

*My concern is that the curriculum does not cater for people with gender diversity. My question is, what can be done to educate teachers, school managements, and learners? (Male student teacher)*

By using intergroup dialogue in transformative learning, student teachers started to question and examine their perspectives and views around sexual diversity. The student teachers started to explore ways that could enable practising teachers to approach learners with diverse sexual orientations. Mezirow (1997, p. 61) was of the view that “we can become critically reflective of the assumptions we or others make when we learn to solve problems instrumentally or when we are involved in communicative learning.” After giving the student teachers a chance to reflect and offer comments about the dialogue after the speakers’ interviews, the following comments were made:

*I think as a teacher, change is something you should get used to. I think there should be a workshop where teachers learn about different sexual orientations. This is the first time we learned about it in university. I hated homosexuals and I don't even know why? (Male student teacher)*

*It is important to remember that there should not be a definition on what a man or a woman is, or what is normal or abnormal because we, as a society, grew up knowing that a man should be with a woman. We should not label that as normal. People should realise that what you see as normal, someone else may not see as normal. (Male student teacher)*

*I wanted to say that having these talks with you guys will drive out the misconceptions or stereotypes people have in our community. If you are gay or lesbian, they consider you as abnormal. People should understand that what is normal to you may be abnormal to me. So, if you have such talks in the media, this will help other people like yourself to spread the word that being gay is not abnormal. (Female student teacher)*

There seemed to be a shift in the perceptions expressed from Phase 1 to Phase 2. Student teachers started questioning their knowledge about sexuality and gender diversity. Hoggan (2016) stated that after questioning one’s own knowledge, an overall change will occur in the way people relate to other people or, identification can begin to shift.

Comparing the research question in Phase 1 with discomfoting heteronormativity, it was clear that student teachers had a feeling of discomfort towards nonheteronormative sexualities. The participants experienced different emotions and views about diverse sexual orientations, for instance, anger, rejection, fear, and discomfort. The silence on sexual diversity at university denies student teachers the opportunity to affirm and create an inclusive learning environment for all learners. It also enables an environment where hegemonic views on heteronormativity are reproduced and perpetuated. Queer theory posits that sexuality is fluid, but if teacher education programmes silence

such knowledge, then it is difficult to queer teacher education. While at university, student teachers are not prepared or willing to teach learners about different sexualities. Intergroup dialogue between the nonheterosexual speakers and student teachers not only allowed them to examine their own perspectives and beliefs towards diverse sexual orientations but also brought about an awareness of discrimination. Through the intergroup dialogue sessions, participants started to gain and acquire knowledge they felt they needed to start supporting nonheterosexual learners.

### **Shifting Perceptions: From Homophobia to Social Cohesion**

A third theme that came to light was the shifting perceptions. This theme examines how the participants' beliefs and views shifted from being dissonant about sexual diversity towards being considerate of sexual diversity. After the dialogue between guest speakers and student teachers, the student teachers were given a chance to reflect on their engagement with people with diverse sexual orientations. They commented:

*I was always angry at gay people. I thought they just looked for attention. I didn't want anything to do with them. I was even scared they would make moves on me. Listening to these six people made me realise it's not a choice. Who will choose to be abused like that? We still need to learn a lot. (Male student teacher)*

*I had seen homosexual youth before at school. I just ignored them. I saw them like any other learners. I think I will now be more aware of the challenges that homosexual learners experience. (Female student teacher)*

*My culture is very strict. But I also have to take care of all learners in the school. It will be a difficult one. (Male student teacher)*

The above comments show a shift from the student teacher sexual diversity dissonance, found in Phase 1, to a more considerate and supportive positioning towards school youth with same-sex sexuality. Transformation can only happen through critical reflection in which the adult learner questions assumptions and beliefs that have been used to interpret the meaning of past experiences (Taylor & Hill, 2016).

On examining these views, it becomes apparent that the participants engaged in deep thinking about their beliefs and values and how these perspectives affect individuals with nonheterosexual orientations. Cranton (2001) explained that when individuals critically reflect on their views, they become receptive to alternative views and questions. Reflections enabled student teachers to work through beliefs and assumptions, assessing their validity in the light of new experiences or knowledge. Using critical reflection enabled participants to transform their single-lensed dimension of sexuality to that of considering different forms of sexual expressions as posited by queer theory perspectives. Student teachers were asked to write a short summary of what their needs were in order to respond to school youth with diverse sexual orientations in an affirming and inclusive manner. This is how they responded:

*I need to know how to deal with the bullying of homosexual learners. I don't think the bullying is the same. Sometimes teachers bully them. How do we deal with this as LO teachers? (Female student teacher)*

*I still need to learn more about homosexuality. As a Christian and a Zulu man, I am not sure if I am comfortable. Maybe if I learn more about what causes this. (Male student teacher)*

*I don't have a problem teaching it. But I am worried about the parents who will have a problem with it. I need knowledge and skills to deal with such parents. (Male student teacher)*

These comments show that the LO student teachers moved beyond an awareness of negativity towards diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions. They are concerned with skills and knowledge on how to address the inequities. Kumashiro (2001) advocated for an education about the other, education for the other, an education that is critical of privilege and othering, and education that brings about change. To facilitate an inclusive environment for school youth with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions, teachers need specific strategies and pedagogies that would facilitate change.

## Conclusion

Through a three-phase intergroup dialogue process, this article explored strategies to disrupt conceptions of compulsory heteronormativity and the repression of sexual diversity. Although Phase 1 proposed the questioning of perceptions in society around sexual diversity, a slight change was introduced. I focused on an event at the time that had sparked wide public discussion on nonnormative sexualities. I am of the opinion that this slight change allowed for richer and more engaging debate. The three themes identified show a transformative journey from rigid compulsory heteronormative perceptions to support for sexual diversity, and care for those who are othered. Critical self-reflexivity became central in the journey of undoing oppressive tendencies towards the other and difference. The LO student teachers showed a desire to serve as agents of change and expressed the need to accommodate inclusive learning for all learners in schools. This article shows that intergroup dialogue between people with diverse sexual orientations and hegemonic communities has the potential to queer environments. Queered environments create respect for, and humanise, those who are othered.

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