TWIST

Mothers' Acceptance and Support for their LGBT Children in Cisheteronormative School Systems

Henry James Nichols
Department of Education Foundations,
University of the Free State,
Bloemfontein, South Africa
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1738-1853

Abstract

This article addresses the underexplored experiences of mothers of LGBT children in South Africa, particularly in the context of school bullying and imposed cisheteronormative school cultures. By including the voices of these mothers, the article contributes to the ongoing conversation about combating bullying and creating more inclusive educational environments. Using a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews with six mothers were conducted, and the transcribed data were thematically analyzed. The narratives highlight maternal practices and strategies in supporting their children who grew up in homophobic and transphobic school environments. These mothers shared their experiences of their children "coming out" at a young age and their efforts to advocate for equal educational opportunities akin to those afforded to heterosexual and cisgender students. The findings revealed that their efforts were largely unsuccessful despite attempts to address the bullying with school management. Drawing on the theory of compulsory heterosexuality, this article demonstrates the critical role that mothers play in challenging heteronormative structures and advocating for their children's psychological well-being and academic success in the face of discrimination at schools.

Keywords
Cisheteronormativity, Homophobic, Transphobic, Motherhood

INTRODUCTION

In South African schools, homophobia and transphobia are widespread, and learners who identify as queer face daily bullying, discrimination, and silence from classmates and teachers (Msibi, 2012; Mamba & Francis, 2019; Nkosi & Masson, 2022). The vulnerability of LGBTQ learners in South Africa is increased by the heteronormative culture in school systems, which is further exacerbated by a lack of teacher intervention and policy implementation.

Research has consistently demonstrated the essential role that family, particularly mothers, plays in the well-being and life trajectories of children, especially those who identify as LGBT (Aaron & Rostosky, 2019; Abreu et al., 2023; Ryan et al., 2010; Brainer, 2017; Msibi, 2012). Scholars, both in South Africa and globally, such as Lynch and Morison (2016), Aaron and Rostosky (2019), Abreu et al. (2023), Roopnarine and de Yildirim (2021), and Tamagawa (2018) have emphasized that the emotional bonds children form with their mothers significantly shape how mothers respond to their children's gender identity and sexual orientation. Fathers' responses to LGBT children, when present, have often been associated with rejection or emotional distance, making maternal support even more crucial for LGBT children's well-being (Ryan et al., 2010). This study, therefore, prioritises mothers to capture the complexities of maternal acceptance, resistance, and advocacy within cisheteronormative educational and social systems, where mothers act as key agents of support while simultaneously navigating societal and institutional challenges (Lynch & Morison, 2016).

Focusing specifically on mothers also allows the study to interrogate the gendered dimensions of caregiving and advocacy, exploring how mothers' roles intersect with their children's sexual and gender identities within the socio-cultural and historical context of South Africa (Bhana & Anderson, 2013). This emphasis enables a deeper understanding of the emotional, relational, and structural dynamics mothers experience while supporting their LGBT children, providing rich, focused insights necessary for informing policy and practice in the South African education system.

Mothers frequently serve as the primary caregivers, developing stronger emotional ties daily that make it safer for children to share private parts of themselves (Brainer, 2017). Because of cultural expectations surrounding masculinity,

emotional distance, or the upholding of heteronormative norms within the family, fathers may be viewed as less approachable in many contexts, including South Africa (Msibi, 2012). Mothers are often seen as the emotional pillars and mediators in identity-related conversations due to the gendered dynamics in families. As such, they are the first people children turn to when they are navigating the complexities of their gender and sexual identities (Brown, 2024; Aaron and Rostosky, 2019; Abreu, Lefevor, Barrita and Watson; 2023). Brainer (2017) and Kuhar and Svab (2014) note that these close relationships, often fostered by the time spent together, can profoundly influence the level of support and acceptance mothers provide. For example, in the South African context, Brown (2024) found that LGBT children perceived their mothers' responses to their identities as empathetic and supportive, which facilitated open conversations about sexual identity, desires, and preferences. Despite substantial research on the influence of teachers, peers, and curricula on the development of gender and sexually diverse youth, the role of mothers in shaping the lives of LGBT children remains largely underexplored. However, emerging evidence points to the critical importance of maternal support in the lives of these youth. Mothers are often at the forefront of providing emotional acceptance and advocacy, both within their families and in broader community settings (Brainer, 2017; Roopnarine and de Yildrim, 2021; Nagoshi et al., 2012). They hold a unique position in challenging societal norms and defending their children's identities, as seen in a study by Rosenkrantz (2018).

Tamagawa's (2018) study on LGBTQ individuals in Japan highlights that LGBTQ children feel more comfortable confiding in their mothers than in their fathers or the broader community when revealing their diverse sexual orientation or gender identity. This is often because mothers are perceived to have a more comprehensive understanding of gender and sexual diversity, providing much-needed emotional support. Such maternal backing is not only essential in global contexts but also in environments like South Africa, where LGBT youth face societal pressures and discriminatory practices.

LGBT youth encounter high levels of homophobia and transphobia in educational settings, which are central to their socialization. Schools significantly shape students' experiences through policies, curricula, and the overall school environment, all of which deeply influence learners' emotional and personal development. While research in South Africa primarily focuses on the harassment LGBT youth face from their peers, family members, and educational staff, the critical role of maternal advocacy in educational settings has been largely overlooked. This gap in research neglects the powerful contribution that mothers make in defending their children's rights and challenging the heteronormative structures entrenched in many schools.

The perspective of mothers is critical for several reasons. First, as primary caregivers, mothers are often the initial and most consistent source of emotional support for LGBTQ children. Their acceptance and advocacy are vital in shaping their children's mental health and well-being, helping to buffer the negative effects of bullying, discrimination, and social isolation that often occur in school environments. Second, mothers play a pivotal role in confronting the educational systems and societal norms that perpetuate homophobia and transphobia. By actively advocating for their children, they challenge the exclusionary practices within schools, pushing for policies that protect and support LGBT learners.

Moreover, understanding the maternal perspective provides important insights into family dynamics and the gendered nature of advocacy. Focusing on the experiences of mothers allows for a deeper examination of how they navigate the complexities of supporting their children in contexts that may be hostile or unaccepting. Their efforts to confront discriminatory policies, push for inclusive school environments, and demand better protection for their children illustrate the significant influence mothers have in shaping more inclusive educational spaces.

Including the voices and experiences of mothers in research on LGBT youth is vital for understanding the multifaceted support systems that shape these children's lives. Maternal advocacy and emotional support serve as a crucial counterbalance to the negative experiences LGBT youth often face in schools, making the perspective of mothers indispensable to both family and educational research. Their role not only underscores the importance of familial acceptance but also highlights the potential for change in broader societal and institutional contexts.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of mothers of gender and sexually diverse children in South Africa, specifically in the context of school bullying and heteronormative and cisnormative educational environments, and to examine how these mothers advocate for their children's well-being and academic success.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do mothers of LGBT children in South Africa navigate and respond to school bullying within heteronormative and cisnormative educational environments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experiences of mothers with LGBT children in cisheteronormative school environments remain a critical but underexplored area of research, especially in South Africa. Much of the current literature focuses on the experiences of LGBT youth themselves, including their encounters with homophobia and transphobia in educational settings. These mothers play a pivotal role in both supporting their children and challenging the oppressive structures within schools that perpetuate bullying and discrimination. This literature review explores the existing scholarship on the roles of mothers in supporting LGBT children, the challenges posed by heteronormative educational environments, and the framework of compulsory heterosexuality as a lens for understanding these dynamics.

Maternal Support for LGBT Children

Mothers play an essential role in the emotional and psychological well-being of LGBT children, often serving as their first and most constant source of support. Research consistently highlights the positive impact of maternal acceptance on LGBT children's mental health. Aaron and Rostosky (2019) and Abreu et al. (2023) found that maternal empathy and acceptance contribute significantly to LGBT youth's ability to navigate their identities in a heteronormative society.

Mothers are also at the forefront of advocacy efforts, as evidenced by research from Brainer (2017) and Roopmarine and de Yildirim (2021), who emphasized that maternal support extends beyond the home. These mothers actively defend their children's rights in broader societal contexts, including schools and communities. Brainer (2017) and Kuhar and Svab (2014) further observed that the emotional bonds formed between mothers and their LGBT children often enable mothers to challenge traditional norms around gender and sexuality as they push for more inclusive environments. This line of research suggests that mothers' advocacy is central to the well-being and social inclusion of LGBT youth, particularly in educational settings.

LGBT Youth in Cisheteronormative School Environments

The sociocultural and historical background of South Africa has a significant impact on how mothers of LGBT children perceive and react to their identities in school environments. A society where heteronormativity and cisnormativity are ingrained in institutions, including schools, has been fostered by the legacy of apartheid, ingrained patriarchy, and conservative religious influences. However, enduring social stigma against gender and sexual diversity coexists with post-apartheid constitutional guarantees of equality (Msibi, 2012). This situation impacts mothers from a variety of racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds in different ways, which affects their ability to support and defend their LGBT children in schools.

Schools, as primary socialization institutions, often reinforce compulsory heterosexuality through policies, curricula, and practices that marginalize LGBT students. LGBT youth face high levels of bullying and discrimination within these environments, as noted in multiple studies, including those by Tamagawa (2018) and Rosenkrantz (2018).

In South Africa, studies reveal that LGBT youth are subjected to persistent bullying and harassment, often with little to no intervention from school authorities (Msibi, 2012). However, the role of mothers in addressing this bullying within the school context is underexplored. This gap in the literature is particularly striking, given the essential role mothers play in advocating for inclusive and equitable educational experiences for their children. Understanding how these mothers navigate and respond to the institutional barriers posed by heteronormative schools is crucial for developing more effective anti-bullying policies.

Maternal Advocacy in the Face of Compulsory Heterosexuality

Adrienne Rich's (2004) theory of compulsory heterosexuality provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by mothers of LGBT children in heteronormative educational environments. Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the societal expectation that heterosexuality is the default or "normal" mode of sexual orientation, which is deeply embedded in institutions such as schools (Rich, 2004). Schools often perpetuate this expectation through heteronormative curricula and a lack of support for LGBT students.

Mothers of LGBT children find themselves in a unique position, having to confront and resist the cisheteronormative assumptions ingrained in school cultures (Nkosi and Masson, 2022) As advocates for their children, they demand recognition and protection for their children's identities, often facing resistance from educational institutions that are reluctant to address issues of homophobia and transphobia (Rosenkrantz 2018). Research by Brainer (2017) highlights how mothers act as intermediaries between their children and the schools, pushing for policy changes that promote inclusivity. These advocacy efforts are crucial not only for individual children's success but also for challenging the broader systems that enforce compulsory heterosexuality.

Emotional and Psychological Toll on Mothers

The emotional and psychological burden on mothers who support LGBT children in hostile school environments cannot be understated. Research by Nagoshi et al. (2012) and Brainer (2017) highlights the immense stress mothers face when advocating for their children's rights in environments that are resistant to change. In South Africa, where homophobic and transphobic attitudes are prevalent within both society and educational institutions, these mothers often face isolation and marginalization. The work of Rosenkrantz et al. (2018) suggests that the advocacy efforts of mothers come with significant emotional costs, as they must continuously fight against deeply entrenched societal norms that view their children as "other."

This emotional toll is compounded by the school's failure to address bullying adequately. Rosenkrantz (2018) argues that mothers' efforts to intervene in instances of bullying are frequently met with indifference or resistance from school staff, leaving them to navigate complex emotional landscapes while their children suffer in silence. Understanding this dimension is crucial for comprehending the broader challenges mothers face in supporting their LGBT children.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

In the context of mothers' acceptance and support for their LGBT children within cisheteronormative school systems, Adrienne Rich's (2004) theory of compulsory heterosexuality provides a critical lens to understand how heteronormative

structures and societal expectations shape both the experiences of LGBT youth and the responses of their mothers. Adrienne Rich's (2004) theory of compulsory heterosexuality helps us understand how heteronormative structures and societal expectations affect both LGBT youth and their mothers Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the school's norm that assumes and enforces heterosexuality as the natural or default sexual orientation. This expectation permeates societal institutions, including schools, and systematically marginalizes those who deviate from heterosexual and cisgender norms.

Schools are key socialization institutions where compulsory heterosexuality is often reinforced through policies, curricula, and social practices. These educational environments typically assume that students are heterosexual and cisgender, thus rendering LGBT identities invisible or abnormal. The curricula often omit LGBT representation, reinforcing a cultural silence around sexual and gender diversity. This creates a hostile climate where homophobia and transphobia can thrive, as evidenced by bullying, exclusion, and discrimination experienced by LGBT students.

In this study, the mothers' narratives reveal the ways in which cisheteronormative school environments are not only complicit in perpetuating compulsory heterosexuality but are also resistant to change. The compulsory heterosexuality framework helps illuminate the cultural and institutional pressures that mothers of LGBT children confront when their children do not conform to the expected norms of heterosexuality and cisgender identity.

Within this framework, the role of mothers in challenging compulsory heterosexuality becomes pivotal. Mothers, as key advocates for their LGBT children, are forced to confront a school system entrenched in heteronormativity. Their advocacy often takes the form of demanding equal treatment and recognition of their children's identities, which stands in opposition to the institutional expectation that all students are or should be heterosexual and cisgender.

Compulsory heterosexuality is also gendered, imposing specific expectations on both male and female identities. Mothers in this context are often expected to uphold societal norms of gender conformity, including the heterosexual nuclear family structure. However, their advocacy for LGBT children disrupts these gendered expectations, as they challenge the very systems that uphold compulsory heterosexuality. This places mothers in a unique position, where their gender and role as caregivers become intertwined with their advocacy against heteronormativity.

Rich's theory provides a deeper understanding of how maternal advocacy is not only a fight for their children's rights but also a challenge to the broader societal and institutional enforcement of heterosexuality and binary gender norms. By supporting their LGBT children, these mothers subvert traditional gender roles and contest the societal pressures to conform to heteronormative family structures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm
The study is grounded in the interpretivism paradigm, which seeks to understand individuals' subjective meanings and experiences within their social environments (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This paradigm is appropriate for examining the nuanced and intricate experiences of mothers of LGBT children, focusing on their perspectives and actions within the context of heteronormative school settings. The interpretive approach allows the researcher to interpret the meanings that participants assign to their advocacy efforts and challenges.

Research Design
Case studies were employed to provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of individual mothers. Yin (2018) advocates for case studies as an effective design when seeking to understand the complexities of real-life situations, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not evident. This design allows for a comprehensive analysis of the specific strategies mothers employ in supporting their LGBT children, as well as the challenges they face in navigating bullying within heteronormative and cisnormative educational systems.

Research Approach
This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences of mothers who support their LGBT children in navigating school bullying in South African schools. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research is well-suited to capturing the depth and complexity of personal narratives and social dynamics. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and advocacy efforts of mothers in heteronormative and cisnormative educational contexts.

Sample and Sampling
The study utilized purposive sampling to select six mothers of LGBT children who have experienced bullying in South African schools. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allows for the selection of participants who have specific characteristics and experiences that are directly relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2002).

Table 1 Biographical information of participants

Participant	Race	Home language	Province
M1	Black	Sotho	Free State
M2	Black	Sotho	Gauteng
M3	White	Afrikaans	Free State
M4	White	Afrikaans	Free State
M5	White	Afrikaans	Gauteng
M6	Black	Sotho	Gauteng

The criteria for participation were:
1. Had to have an LGBT son/daughter;
2. Had to have known that their child was LGBT while in school;
3. Had to have experienced their child being bullied based on their gender and sexuality while in school;
4. Must have affirmed and accepted their child's sexual orientation and gender while in school.

Data Collection Tools

The study utilised snowball sampling to recruit mothers of LGBT children who have experienced bullying in South African schools, reflecting the sensitivity of the topic and the privacy concerns of participants. This approach ensured the inclusion of mothers from diverse racial, socio-economic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, capturing the intersectional realities shaping their advocacy within cisheteronormative school systems. Interviews were conducted in comfortable and supportive environments at times and places convenient for participants, ensuring they felt secure and respected while sharing their experiences of their children's "coming out," their advocacy efforts, and their responses to bullying in school settings. (Kvale, 2009). In addition, field notes were taken during and immediately after each interview, assisting the researcher in capturing non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations that enriched the data beyond what was verbally shared.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. To protect confidentiality and ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and their children in the transcripts and reports. The study adhered to ethical guidelines on privacy and confidentiality throughout the research process (Orb et al., 2001), ensuring that participants felt safe and respected during their involvement in the study. Ethical clearance was also obtained for this study by the University of Johannesburg.

To guarantee the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions, trustworthiness and rigor were given top priority. Long-term interaction with participants, the use of field notes, and reflective journaling to capture emotional and contextual subtleties during data collection all improved trustworthiness. To cross-verify emerging themes and guarantee the accuracy of interpretations, triangulation was accomplished by utilizing a variety of data sources, such as field notes and interview transcripts. Where feasible, member checking was used, enabling participants to examine interview summaries and verify the data's accuracy

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interview data, following the process outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016). This method allows for the identification, examination, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data. The thematic analysis focused on exploring the emotional and psychological impact of school bullying on LGBT children, the role of maternal advocacy, and the barriers mothers faced in challenging heteronormative and cisnormative structures within the schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the themes derived from the study using the theory of compulsory heteronormativity, I explore how societal expectations of heterosexuality and cisgender norms influence both individual behaviors and institutional responses. Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heteronormativity suggests that heteronormativity is pervasive, structuring social and institutional life in ways that marginalize and punish non-heteronormative identities. The narratives of the mothers in this study reflect how these systemic norms shape their children's experiences in educational settings, as well as how the mothers respond and advocate in a heteronormative context.

Theme 1: Mothers Supporting and Embracing Their Child's Sexual and Gender Diversity

The narratives within this theme powerfully illustrate how mothers actively resist and dismantle compulsory heterosexuality within the intimate sphere of family life. Adrienne Rich's (2004) theory positions compulsory heterosexuality as a pervasive societal force enforcing heterosexuality and binary gender norms as natural, often upheld within family structures. However, the mothers in this study disrupt this enforcement by recognising and affirming their children's gender and sexual diversity, transforming the home into a space of resistance against societal heteronormativity.

M4's account of recognising her daughter's gender identity as early as infancy "He was not even 1 year old when I realised this… when we go to the shops, he immediately goes to the girls' section" demonstrates a maternal attentiveness and acceptance that challenges societal prescriptions of gender conformity. Rather than policing her child's preferences, M4's recognition and subsequent affirmation signify a deliberate break from heteronormative parenting expectations.

Similarly, M1's statement, "I knew that I didn't have three sons anymore, but two sons and a daughter," reflects an active renegotiation of familial gender identities in response to her child's authentic self-expression. This decision to affirm her child's identity, despite societal pressures, represents a maternal rejection of the normative expectation that gender aligns with assigned sex at birth.

M2 and M3's narratives further highlight early recognition and acceptance of non-normative gender expressions. M2's description of her son's preference for "girly" toys and her interpretation of this as an indication of her son's identity underscores maternal openness to interpreting and accepting children's signals of non-normativity without imposing rigid gender expectations. Similarly, M5's acknowledgment of her son's flamboyance as a reflection of his identity, rather than a behaviour to be corrected, demonstrates maternal support as an act of everyday resistance against gendered societal scripts.

Collectively, these narratives underscore how mothers' affirmation of their children's identities directly contests the structures of compulsory heterosexuality that enforce heteronormativity within family systems. Rather than reinforcing cultural narratives that position heterosexuality and gender conformity as "natural" or desirable, these mothers' choices to embrace their children's diverse identities create critical sites of resistance within broader societal contexts that often marginalise LGBT identities.

Furthermore, by providing emotional and psychological support within the family, these mothers foster resilience and affirm the identities of their LGBT children, buffering against the external hostility of cisheteronormative environments, including schools. This maternal support is essential for the personal development and mental health of LGBT youth, as it affirms their identities in the face of societal marginalisation, providing them with a sense of safety and belonging.

These narratives also reveal the gendered dynamics of maternal advocacy, where mothers, as primary caregivers, shoulder the responsibility of affirming and protecting their LGBT children's identities, often in the absence of similar support from fathers or extended family. This gendered advocacy positions mothers as key actors in resisting and challenging the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality within the family unit, demonstrating that maternal acceptance is not passive but an active, transformative practice with significant implications for the well-being of LGBT youth.

Ultimately, the mothers' narratives in this theme illustrate that maternal support within the family is a crucial, yet often overlooked, site of resistance against societal heteronormativity, and a foundational step toward fostering inclusive environments for LGBT youth within South African society.

Theme 2: Maternal Advocacy and Support in Heteronormative and Cisnormative School Environments

This theme reveals the collision between maternal advocacy and the entrenched cisheteronormativity within South African schools, positioning the school as an active site of the enforcement of Adrienne Rich's (2004) compulsory heterosexuality. The narratives from M2, M4, and M5 expose schools not as neutral institutions but as gatekeepers of heteronormative order, systematically resisting change while disregarding the safety and dignity of LGBT learners.

M4's recounting of how her gay son was subjected to slurs such as "moffie," "shemale," and "isitabane," including by teachers, highlights schools as sites of institutionalised violence where authority figures participate in the policing of gender and sexual norms. Teacher complicity in harassment signals how compulsory heterosexuality is embedded in the culture of schooling, where non-normative identities are openly ridiculed, reinforcing the notion that LGBT identities are deviant and deserving of social sanction.

M5's narrative, describing how her son's head was forcibly submerged under water by peers, reveals the physical violence LGBT learners face within these environments. Her attempt to secure safety by moving her son to five different schools demonstrates the lengths mothers must go to protect their children in a system fundamentally unwilling to adapt. Her frustration "I just wanted a damn normal life… the principal said he would look into the matter. Until now, we have heard nothing" exposes the hollow nature of institutional responses, where promises to address bullying are seldom followed by action.

The narrative of M2 further highlights the consequences of institutional inertia, as her son ultimately dropped out due to unaddressed bullying. The reality that three of the six LGBT learners in this study dropped out by Grade 10, never returning to complete school, reveals how heteronormative schooling structures actively displace LGBT learners, erasing their presence within the education system.

Through these narratives, it becomes evident that maternal advocacy within heteronormative schools often meets structural resistance, rendering individual efforts largely ineffective in producing systemic change. While mothers engage in protective and advocacy roles, their efforts are continuously undermined by institutional cultures that normalise and perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality, demonstrating how schools systematically marginalise LGBT learners by refusing to accommodate their needs or protect them from harm.

The emotional toll on mothers, as reflected in these narratives, reveals the gendered burden of advocacy, where mothers are compelled to shield their children from institutional violence while grappling with the emotional strain of navigating systems resistant to change. The repeated failures of schools to act underscore how institutional practices, policies, and cultural norms converge to enforce heteronormativity, resulting in the exclusion and silencing of LGBT youth.

Theoretically, the compulsory heterosexuality lens frames these systemic failures as deliberate, illustrating how the invisibility and erasure of LGBT learners are not accidental oversights but the outcomes of institutional structures designed to prioritise and preserve heteronormative order. Schools, in this sense, become spaces of social conditioning where gender and sexuality are regulated through policies, curricula, and practices that simultaneously exclude and punish deviation.

These findings call attention to the limits of maternal advocacy within hostile institutional contexts and highlight the need for structural transformation within South African schools. While maternal acceptance and advocacy are vital, they cannot substitute for systemic change. Without policy enforcement, inclusive practices, and accountability mechanisms within schools, maternal efforts alone remain insufficient in dismantling the institutionalised heteronormativity that harms LGBT learners.

Theme 3: Institutional Resistance and Maternal Advocacy within a Heteronormative School Context
This theme reveals the entrenched nature of institutional heteronormativity within South African schools, as exposed through the narratives of M1, M2, and M6 illustrating the systemic barriers mothers encounter when advocating for their LGBT children.

M1's account highlights the school principal's prioritisation of rigid gender norms over the child's safety, seen in the refusal to allow her son to use the girls' bathroom despite repeated incidents of physical bullying in the boys' bathroom. The principal's dismissive response "he doesn't know of any such incidents" followed by a shift to "discipline problems," demonstrates a common institutional deflection tactic that reframes the victim as the problem, thus absolving the school of responsibility for addressing bullying. This aligns with Rich's (2004) theory of compulsory heterosexuality, where institutional actors enforce heteronormativity by policing gender boundaries and deflecting accountability, even when it compromises the well-being of LGBT learners.

Similarly, M2's and M6's narratives demonstrate institutional inertia and wilful blindness in addressing bullying. Despite M2's son's involvement in fights triggered by persistent bullying, the school never communicated with her, effectively condoning the violence through silence. This indicates how heteronormativity is not only present in explicit policy but also perpetuated through passive institutional practices that ignore the specific needs of non-normative learners.

Collectively, these narratives highlight how school environments become complicit in the marginalisation of LGBT learners, leaving mothers to confront these injustices without institutional support. The mothers' emotional labour, advocacy, and repeated efforts to protect their children illustrate maternal resistance against institutional heteronormativity, but also demonstrate the limits of individual advocacy when structural change is absent.

The data further underscore the dual struggle faced by mothers: nurturing and affirming their children's identities within the home while simultaneously confronting schools that uphold heteronormative structures. This systemic resistance forces mothers into adversarial relationships with educational institutions, transforming what should be a collaborative process of child protection and inclusion into a site of conflict and emotional strain.

From a theoretical standpoint, the compulsory heterosexuality lens clarifies how these institutional responses are not isolated incidents but are systemic manifestations of a deeply ingrained heteronormative order. Schools, by prioritising policy compliance over learner safety, reinforce normative gender expectations and silence alternative identities, leaving mothers to carry the burden of advocacy in a resistant system.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Conclusion
This study sheds light on the complex and layered realities faced by mothers who advocate for their LGBT children within South African schools structured by heteronormative and cisnormative norms. These mothers not only provide essential emotional support within their homes but also take on the challenging role of confronting school systems that often reinforce bullying and discrimination against LGBT learners. Despite their persistent efforts, the findings indicate that schools frequently fail to recognise and address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of LGBT students, revealing a deep institutional reluctance to move beyond surface-level interventions.

These insights underscore the urgent need for transformative systemic change within educational spaces, requiring schools to critically examine and dismantle the entrenched ideologies that marginalise LGBT learners. Maternal advocacy, therefore, is not merely about protecting individual children but reflects a broader call for educational reform that prioritises equity and inclusivity for all marginalised learners.

Recommendations
To address these challenges and create more inclusive school environments, this study proposes the following actions:

Strengthen Anti-Bullying Policies
Schools should adopt and rigorously enforce comprehensive anti-bullying policies that explicitly address the realities faced by LGBT students. These policies must include clear, actionable guidelines to prevent and respond to verbal and physical bullying, with particular attention to homophobic and transphobic behaviours.

Implement Ongoing Teacher Training
Continuous professional development programmes focusing on LGBT inclusivity are essential. Educators should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to support LGBT learners and to challenge heteronormative and cisnormative biases within classrooms and broader school culture.

Foster Parental Engagement in Inclusivity Efforts

Schools should actively engage parents—particularly those of LGBT learners—in discussions around inclusion and policy development. The experiences and perspectives of mothers advocating for their LGBT children should inform school practices and decision-making processes to ensure that the needs and rights of LGBT students are prioritised.

FUNDING INFORMATION

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Aaron, A., & Rostosky, S. S. (2019). Transgender individuals' perceptions of maternal support in central Appalachia. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 15*(1), 1–21.
2. Abreu, R. L., Lefevor, G. T., Gonzalez, K. A., Barrita, A. M., & Watson, R. J. (2023). Bullying, depression, and parental acceptance in a sample of Latinx sexual and gender minority youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 20*(3), 585–602.
3. Brainer, A. (2017). Mothering gender and sexually nonconforming children in Taiwan. *Journal of Family Issues, 38*(7), 921–947.
4. Browne, C. H. (2024). *Expanding the perspectives and research foundation for the Strengthening Families & Youth Thrive frameworks*. Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://www.cssp.org/resource/expanding-the-perspectives-and-research-foundation-for-the-strengthening-families-youth-thrive-frameworks
5. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
6. DePalma, R., & Francis, D. (2014). Silence, nostalgia, violence, poverty...: What does 'culture' mean for South African sexuality educators? *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 16*(5), 547–561.
7. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE.
8. Francis, D., & Reygan, F. (2016). Teaching about sexual diversity and challenging homophobia in South African schools. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 13*(3), 214–232.
9. Kuhar, R., & Švab, A. (2014). The only gay in the village? Everyday life of gays and lesbians in rural Slovenia. *Journal of Homosexuality, 61*(8), 1091–1116.
10. Kvale, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
11. Lefevor, G. T., Etengoff, C., Davis, E. B., Skidmore, S. J., Rodriguez, E. M., McGraw, J. S., & Rostosky, S. S. (2023). Religion/spirituality, stress, and resilience among sexual and gender minorities: The religious/spiritual stress and resilience model. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 18*(6), 1537–1561.
12. Mamba, S., & Francis, D. (2019). Silence, shame and sexuality: Homophobic bullying in South African schools. *South African Journal of Education, 39*(S1), 1–8.
13. Msibi, T. (2012). "I'm used to it now": Experiences of homophobia among queer youth in South African township schools. *Gender and Education, 24*(5), 515–533.
14. Nagoshi, J. L., Brzuzy, S., & Terrell, H. K. (2012). Deconstructing the complex perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation among transgender individuals. *Feminism & Psychology, 22*(4), 405–422.
15. Nkosi, B., & Masson, J. (2022). Navigating the rainbow: LGBTIQ+ students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in South African schools. *Perspectives in Education, 40*(1), 168–182.
16. Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33*(1), 93–96.
17. Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2017). The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield.
18. Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. SAGE.
19. Rich, A. C. (2004). Reflections on "Compulsory Heterosexuality". *Journal of Women's History, 16*(1), 9–11.
20. Roopnarine, J. L., & de Yildirim, E. (2021). Father involvement in different family systems across cultural communities: Links to childhood development. In *The Oxford handbook of evolutionary psychology and parenting* (Ch. 15). Oxford University Press.
21. Rosenkrantz, D. E. (2018). Factors impacting parental acceptance of an LGBT child (Doctoral dissertation). University of Kentucky.
22. Tamagawa, M. (2018). Coming out to parents in Japan: A sociocultural analysis of lived experiences. *Sexuality & Culture, 22*(2), 497–520.
23. Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE