

**Ukulwisana Nobuqhswaga: A Queer Black Female Beginner Teacher's
Experiences of Workplace Bullying**

by

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Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree

MAGISTER EDUCATIONIS

in the Faculty of Education

at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

Supervisor: Dr Yolandi Woest

2025

Declaration

I declare that the dissertation that I hereby submit for the degree Master's in Curriculum and Instructional Design and Development at the University of Pretoria is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.



.....
Busisiwe Yabo

2025

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval. The author declares that she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for researchers and the policy guidelines for responsible research.

Dedication

I dedicate this research to my God, ancestors, parents, siblings, girlfriend, family members, friends, learners, and colleagues who all have contributed significantly to my personal and academic growth as an individual and a pedagogical practitioner in the best way I could.

Acknowledgements

- I would have not made it this far if it were not for His grace and mercy. All thanks go to my heavenly Father who gave me wisdom, strength, and knowledge. Further, I want to extend my gratitude to my ancestors for connecting me to the father, “Thokozani Makhehla, nina zindlondlo eziletha ukukhanya nokuphila ndithi camagu!”
- To my beautiful loving grandmother in heaven, thank you gogo wam for being idlozi elihle kumina wena Mamqwathi, Noni, Dikela, Tswayibane wena Mampemvu, Jali, Juda, Zulu wena Jola, Mphankomo, Jolinkomo, Qengeba, Thole’lomthwakazi (clan names).
- Dr Yolandi Woest, thank you for being there. Words cannot express enough how grateful I am to have met you. I cried to you when I was not accepted due to “no supervision” and you took it upon yourself to make my dream come true. Thank you so much for your professional guidance and giving me motivation throughout my research. Thank you for enabling me to graduate successfully. It was amazing working under your great supervision; I will forever be grateful.
- My mom, who always made sure that she prayed for me, even on those days when I wanted to give up. Thank you, mama, for loving me unconditionally and for the strong relationship we have built throughout this journey. I know that Papa in heaven is proud of me and all the things I have achieved. My siblings especially my sisters who would call every time to check up on me and push me with encouraging words, I am grateful for them.
- To the editor, Dr Brenda Gouws, thank you so much for taking me in and accepting to edit my work. Thank you for your dedication and for helping me to produce good research.
- My register class, Grade 9A, to all my babies in Grades 8, 10, and 11 who stood by me and encouraged me all the time. Thank you, my babies, for keeping me going and always reminding me how I inspire you all. Thank you for helping with trivial things like sentence constructions and grammar. I will forever be grateful for the contributions you all made.
- Last, but not least I want to thank myself. This journey was the hardest, but I would remind myself every time that I am the future Dean of the Faculty of Education. I

am immensely proud of myself and the days I doubted myself because they drew me closer to God.

Abstract

Workplace bullying is a widespread issue globally and in South Africa, where it is often exacerbated by gender inequality, race, and organisational hierarchies (Bergbom & Vartia, 2021). This autoethnographic study explored my experiences of workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher. I drew on the two-dimensional bullying framework by Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) to examine how race and sexual orientation shape bullying within organisational settings. Framed within a qualitative paradigm, I purposefully selected autoethnography as my research design to illuminate the complex, personal dimensions of bullying within educational environments. Situated epistemologically within the interpretivist paradigm, the study sought to make meaning of my lived experiences through self-reflexive narratives constructed via memory work, journaling, and personal artefacts such as photographs. These narratives were enriched through critical conversations with selected co-constructors of knowledge, allowing for deeper insight and validation of my reflections. Data were thematically analysed (Wagner, Kawulich & Garner, 2012) to uncover patterns in my experiences. The study's main findings reveal that power dynamics are central to workplace bullying, that marginalised identities, shaped by past experiences, continue to influence present interactions, and that a lack of organisational coherence creates conditions in which bullying can thrive.

Key Terms: Autoethnography; Beginner teacher; Black queer female; Bullying; Workplace

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Table of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CAT	Computer Applications Technology
DSA	Department of Student Affairs
HK	House Committee Member
HR	Human Resources
HOD	Head of Department
JLZ	Classroom literacies
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex +
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PSTD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
SMT	School Management Team
SRC	Student Representative Council
TLC	Tender loving care
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UP	University of Pretoria
UPRAG	University of Pretoria Reach Out and Give
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

Contents

Declaration	ii
Ethics Statement	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Abstract	vii
Language Editor	viii
Table of Abbreviations and Acronyms	ix
Contents	x
List of Figures	xvi
List of Tables	xvi
Ethics Certificate	xvii
Chapter 1: Overview of the Study	18
1.1 Introduction	18
1.2 Background and Context	20
1.3 Rationale and Motivation	27
1.3.1 Personal Justification	27
1.3.2 Professional Justification	27
1.3.3 Conceptual Justification	27
1.3.4 Scholarly Justification	28
1.4 Focus and Purpose	29
1.5 Research Questions	29
1.6 Concept Clarification	29
1.6.1 Gender Identity	29
1.6.2 Queer Black Woman	29
1.6.3 Beginner Teacher	30

1.6.4	<i>Beginner Teacher Identity</i>	30
1.6.5	<i>Autoethnography</i>	30
1.6.6	<i>Bullying in the Workplace</i>	31
1.7	Overview of Research Design	31
1.8	Overview of Conceptual Framing	32
1.9	Quality Measures	32
1.10	Ethical Considerations	33
1.11	Outline of my Study	33
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature		36
2.1	Introduction	36
2.2	The Nature and Purpose of a Literature Review	36
2.3	Understanding Bullying	38
2.3.1	<i>Overview of bullying as a concept</i>	38
2.3.2	<i>The Nature of Workplace Bullying</i>	40
2.3.3	<i>Uncovering the Reasons Behind Workplace Bullying</i>	42
2.3.4	<i>Bullying in Educational Settings</i>	43
2.3.4.1	<i>Learners as Victims</i>	44
2.3.4.2	<i>Teachers as victims</i>	46
2.3.5	Effects of bullying	47
2.3.5.1	<i>The Effects of Workplace Bullying on Employees</i>	48
2.3.5.2	<i>Workplace Bullying and Organizational and Professional Health</i>	49
2.4	Prevalence of Workplace Bullying	51
2.4.1	<i>Workplace Bullying in Global North Countries</i>	52
2.4.2	<i>Comparison of Workplace Bullying: Global North vs. Global South</i>	55
2.5	Race and Workplace Bullying	56
2.6	Gender and Workplace bullying	59
2.7	Queer Identity, Sexual Orientation and Workplace Bullying	61

2.8	The Influence of Power Relationships on Bullying	64
2.9	Synthesis of the Literature Findings	65
2.10	Conceptual Framing of My Study	67
2.11	Overview of Hodson’s Theory of Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Contexts.....	67
2.11.1	<i>Power and Powerlessness as the First Dimension</i>	68
2.11.2	<i>Organisational Coherence as the Second Dimension.....</i>	68
2.11.3	<i>Teacher Bullying Based on Race.....</i>	69
2.11.4	<i>Teacher Bullying Based on Sexual Orientation</i>	70
2.12	Designing a Conceptual Framework for My Study	72
2.12.1	<i>Functioning of the Dimensions.....</i>	72
2.12.2	<i>Suitability of the Conceptual Framework for this Study</i>	74
2.13	Conclusion	75
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN		77
3.1	Introduction.....	77
3.2	My Paradigmatic Perspectives	77
3.2.1	<i>An Epistemological Perspective.....</i>	77
3.2.2	<i>An Ontological Perspective</i>	78
3.2.3	A Qualitative Methodological Perspective	79
3.3	Research Design	79
3.3.1	<i>Autoethnography as Research Design</i>	80
3.3.2	<i>Choosing an evocative auto-ethnography.....</i>	82
3.3.3	<i>Benefits of an Autoethnography.....</i>	83
3.3.4	<i>Drawbacks and Criticism of Autoethnography.....</i>	84
3.3.5	<i>Managing the “Pitfalls” of an Autoethnographic Study.....</i>	86
3.3.6	<i>The Process of Data Generation.....</i>	88
3.3.6.1	<i>Self-Reflexive Narratives.....</i>	88

3.3.6.2	<i>Memory work</i>	90
3.3.6.3	<i>Artefacts</i>	91
3.3.6.4	<i>My Reflective Researcher’s Journal</i>	92
3.3.7	<i>Engagement with my co-constructors of knowledge</i>	93
3.3.7.1	<i>Selection of the Co-Constructors of Knowledge</i>	93
3.3.7.2	<i>Critical Discussions with Co-Constructors of my Autoethnography</i>	94
3.3.8	<i>The Process of Data Analysis</i>	94
3.3.8.1	<i>Outline of Data Analysis Procedure</i>	95
3.3.8.2	<i>Thematic Analysis</i>	95
3.4	Quality Measures	97
3.4.1	<i>Credibility</i>	97
3.4.2	<i>Trustworthiness</i>	97
3.4.3	<i>Dependability</i>	98
3.4.4	<i>Relatability</i>	98
3.4.5	<i>Verisimilitude</i>	99
3.5	Ethical Considerations	100
3.5.1	<i>Basic Ethical Principles</i>	100
3.5.1.1	<i>Informed Consent</i>	100
3.5.1.2	<i>Confidentiality</i>	101
3.5.1.3	<i>Potential for Harm</i>	101
3.5.1.4	<i>Honesty</i>	102
3.5.2	<i>Extra Ethical Guidelines for Conducting an Autoethnography</i>	102
3.5.2.1	<i>Tender Care for My Co-constructors of Knowledge</i>	103
3.5.2.2	<i>Tender Care for Oneself as a Primary Participant</i>	104
3.6	Conclusion	105
	Chapter 4: My Autoethnography	106
4.1	Introduction	106

4.2	The Offence of Falling in Love	107
4.3	Finding Hope in Darkness: A Cry for Help	114
4.4	The Vocation	116
4.5	Welcome to Freedom: Hello Tuks	118
4.6	The End of Freedom	122
4.7	My Career vs My Sexuality	123
4.8	Learners vs My Sexuality	125
4.9	Advocating for Anti-Bullying School Environments	126
4.10	Eyewitness of Workplace Bullying	127
4.11	Colleague Relationship: The Principal	130
4.12	Change of Senior Management	131
4.13	Story within a Story: Distracted by the Smell of the Skunk	132
4.13.1	<i>First Incident</i>	132
4.13.2	<i>Second Incident</i>	132
4.13.3	<i>Emotional Damage</i>	134
4.14	Stories about Others: Victims Coming Together	135
4.14.1	<i>Ms Stella's Incident</i>	135
4.14.2	<i>Being held Hostage</i>	136
4.14.3	<i>Being Aggressive</i>	137
4.14.4	<i>Intervention of HR</i>	138
4.15	Conclusion	139
Chapter 5: Analyzing and Interpreting the Data		140
5.1	Introduction	140
5.2	The Analysis and Interpretation of the Data	140
5.3	Themes and Sub-Themes Stemming from My Data	142
5.3.1	<i>Experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity</i>	143

5.3.1.1	<i>Experiences of religion and culture</i>	143
5.3.1.2	<i>Experiences with former teachers</i>	146
5.3.1.3	<i>Experiences during my tertiary education</i>	148
5.3.1.4	<i>A synthesis: Developing my sexual identity</i>	150
5.3.2	<i>Experiences in the Workplace</i>	151
5.3.2.1	<i>Experiences as an advocate against bullying</i>	152
5.3.2.2	<i>Violation of my sexual identity</i>	153
5.3.2.3	<i>Experiences of race influences in the workplace</i>	155
5.3.2.4	<i>Experiences of gender influences in the workplace</i>	157
5.3.2.5	<i>Teacher-Perpetrated Bullying</i>	158
5.3.2.6	<i>Experiences of being part of a collective of teachers</i>	160
5.3.2.7	<i>Experiences with learners and my vocation</i>	162
5.4	Conclusion	164
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Reflection		165
6.1	Introduction	165
6.2	Reflections on My Research Design	167
6.3	Responding to my Research Questions	169
6.4	Recommendations Originating from My Study	174
6.4.1	<i>Policy on Workplace Bullying</i>	174
6.4.2	<i>Recommendations for Teaching Practice</i>	175
6.4.3	<i>Suggestions for Future Research</i>	176
6.5	Challenges experienced during my Study	177
6.6	Final Reflection and Conclusion	178
List of References		180

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Conceptual framing outlining questions relating to workplace bullying according to Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional model.....	72
Figure 3.1: Micro-level thematic map focusing on highlighted theme	Error!
	Bookmark not defined.
Figure 4.1: A picture of myself as a “queer” Black baby	108
Figure 4.2: A picture of me and Zama, my childhood friend with whom I discovered my sexuality	109
Figure 4.3: A teacher who influenced my vocation.	117
Figure 4.4: Me, my classmates, and teachers who influenced my teacher identity.	118
Figure 4.5: Celebrating Anti-Discrimination Week and LGBTIQI+ Pride Month at the University of Pretoria	122
Figure 4.6: Letter from the Dean in 2020.....	123
Figure 4.7: The most supportive management team	125
Figure 4.8: Me and my kids in 2023 celebrating Valentine’s Day and my birthday.....	126
Figure 4.9: Me and the 2023 learners	104

List of Tables

Table 5.1: The main themes and sub-themes of the study	Error!	Bookmark	not
	defined.		

Ethics Certificate



FACULTY OF EDUCATION
Ethics Committee

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CLEARANCE NUMBER: **EDU159/23**

DEGREE AND PROJECT

MEd
Ukulwisa nobuqhwaya: A Queer Black female
beginner teacher's experience of workplace
bullying

INVESTIGATOR

Miss Busisiwe Yabo

DEPARTMENT

Humanities Education

APPROVAL TO COMMENCE STUDY

08 July 2024

DATE OF CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE 16 October 2024

CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE: Prof Funke Omidire

Mr Simon Jiane
Dr Yolandi Woest

This Ethics Clearance Certificate should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Declaration Form (D08) which specifies details regarding:

- Compliance with approved research protocol,
- No significant changes,
- Informed consent/assent,
- Adverse experience or undue risk,
- Registered title, and
- Data storage requirements.

Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

1.1 Introduction

In my native language, we usually say, “Chosi chosi ngatsomi,” which means that a folktale is about to be told. A folktale holds power in shaping one’s life and educating one to change our behaviour for the better. O’ktam qizi Shukurova (2023, p. 96) deemed folktales as a “tool of positive reinforcement in children’s development”. We grow up learning from others’ stories, whether they are negative or positive. We learn from others and use the ending of their stories as motivation to hold onto life because there is light at the end of the tunnel. A person’s philosophy and perspective of the world are shaped by past lessons they have learned about how to live life and fight through adversity (Setiya, 2023). Furthermore, Rahiem (2021) adds that storytelling holds significant power and is known as a pedagogical tool. I concur with both views that enlighten the role played by storytelling in our lives. Storytelling gives a voice to the voiceless. Moreover, it is a reflection technique on one’s daily life, and it contributes to growth both professionally and personally. Telling my workplace bullying story has allowed me to reflect on my experiences and to grow as a teacher. It also helped me to recognise the therapeutic power of storytelling.

Telling stories shapes our identities and how we view the world (Zheng et al., 2021). Essentially, telling narratives gives us an opportunity to understand the world around us and our perceptions of ourselves and others. We can use the power of storytelling to build empathy, understanding and a society that is more inclusive and compassionate. The word “identity” builds up questions such as, “Who are you?” The way one’s identity is viewed stems from being associated with society and how you interact with the socially (Secules, McCall, Mejia, Beebe, Masters, Sánchez-Peña & Svyantek, 2021). Identity gives a sense of individuality and a vision of who we are – even in our societies. The way we interact with others gives us a chance to develop our identities. Torres and Tarozzi (2020) view identity as a phenomenon that is persistently evolving in all contexts: global, national, and local. Identity strikes as an unfinished project that one constantly works on while changing here and there to also meet the standards of the community.

My study reflects on the narrative of a queer Black beginner teacher who experienced workplace bullying in South Africa that was supposed to be bully-free. By making use of an autoethnography research design, I bridged both the “auto” (personal) and “ethno” (cultural) to expose my experiences and the environment in which my experiences occurred (Gerrior, 2023). I have told my story by drawing on my lived experience while taking into consideration the setting of the story. I inwardly investigated my inner self (auto) while examining the outer world (ethnography) in which experiences took place. The auto (internally) was influenced by my history of being a queer Black female beginner teacher. The ethno (externally) was influenced by the workplace bullying and humiliation that I received at a private school.

My autoethnography is based on my working environment and how I experienced bullying as a queer Black beginner teacher, being shaped by my experiences of workplace bullying. My story is an autoethnography in which I share both my professional and personal experiences. Autoethnography involves the researcher being completely engrossed in their own experience while watching, writing, journaling, and reflecting (Edwards, 2021). I regarded autoethnography as a diary or journal for this dissertation into which I poured the good and bad experiences that I once had or was having. As a queer Black beginner teacher, I could write extensively about my experiences with educational practices, such as curriculum modifications, in educational research. My experiences were elaborated on not only through storytelling but also through the analysis and interpretation of the self-reflexive data, which I created by keeping a record of the narratives about my experiences and viewpoints on the topic. The co-constructors of this knowledge played the role of evoking my experiences through critical conversations, which were done as interviews. My mother, sister, and a colleague were the co-constructors of knowledge. A key validity requirement for self-study is verisimilitude, so I engaged with it to ensure the reliability and credibility of my narrative. Verisimilitude is cited by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as a crucial criterion for evaluating the value of narrative investigation. I have chosen verisimilitude as a kind of quality control for my autoethnography.

My experiences were elaborated on not only through storytelling but also through the analysis and interpretation of my self-reflexive data to build my teacher identity. Through the process of thematic analysis, I analysed and interpreted my story.

Moreover, questions were set for my co-constructors of knowledge while allowing me to combine various themes to promote flexibility. My conceptual framing employed Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional model of bullying to see if my experiences with workplace bullying supported the idea that being bullied was a result of both my lack of control as the victim and the lack of order or stability inside the workplace. My conceptual framing allowed me to explore the workplace bullying while focusing on the organisation, which is the school in my context and where the bullying took place. The use of autoethnography in my study was not easy. However, autoethnography gives a voice to the voiceless through writing, and there is power in letting your voice be heard. Thus, it pushed me, as the writer, to open up without being the victim in my own story (Chang, 2016).

In telling my story, autoethnography as my research methodology assisted me in harnessing my past experiences of workplace bullying. Autoethnography takes pride in researchers sharing their personal stories while considering the sociocultural context in which the story took place (Adam & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography fills the gap of being silenced and then opens the door of "Finally, I got my voice." There is a great need for us to share our stories since we all have unique stories to tell about our life experiences.

1.2 Background and Context

The word 'queer' is the umbrella term that is used to cover members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex communities. The + indicates there is room for the growth of diverse gender and sexual identities (Morris, 2018). If one is not straight or cisgender, they sexually and gender identify as queer (Smith, Willis & Hopkins-Walsh, 2022). Nonetheless, lesbians, gays, transgender, and bisexuals are all under the umbrella of queer because they identify as not being straight. The word queer also allows the LGBTQI+ community to embrace and celebrate themselves (Smith et al., 2022). I identify as a queer female under the letter 'L' in LGBTQI+, which means that I am a lesbian. I prefer to use the words gay and queer because they are powerful and celebrate accepting and loving the same gender as themselves. Therefore, there is no isolation when using the words queer or gay as they represent diversity. Individuals may have varied definitions of what it means to be queer, but all the experts who are

well-informed about LGBTQI+ concur that this term is strong, and it celebrates people accepting themselves and others for who they truly are.

The LGBTQI+ community is composed of individuals who have had collective experiences, not a singular event, which led to their development. The acronym LGBTQI+ has been in use in various forms since the 1990s. It is an adaptation of the acronym LGB, which was first used in a variety of forms, mostly in the early 1990s, to replace the term gay when referring to the community as a whole (Morris, 2018). The LGBTQI+ community has increasingly come to view the term “homosexual” as insulting, mostly because of its cultural and historical meanings (Staff, 2015). One of the reasons that this term is regarded as derogatory has to do with the fact that it was used to pathologize gays and lesbians. In the past, the gay community was regarded as a negative way of living, an anachronistic way of natural living, and a sin to the entire society (Pickett, 2022).

Historically, gay people were treated in a dehumanising manner. Their identities were propelled by anti-gay legislation, which led to their existence being ignored. During the times of colonisation, gay people were severely abused by the European defence forces. They were given electric shocks and were chemically castrated, and narcoanalysis was used to try and correct or cure their sexual orientation (Kaplan, 2024). In South Africa, it was normalised to arrest every gay person, and there were severe penalties for being gay, including imprisonment and the death penalty (Whipple, 2012). All these occurrences happened during the times of colonisation and apartheid.

There was no immediate success in normalising and celebrating by activists in South Africa (Botes, 2023). In the 1980s, the LGBTQI+ community gained more visibility as they attempted to speak out. During that period, there was an HIV/AIDS pandemic that significantly impacted the LGBTQI+ community, particularly gay men. It was unfortunate that by 1983, gay men were experiencing a rapid spread of the disease (Eaton, 2019). The Government of the United States was forced to address the issue of the LGBTQI+ community due to growing gay organisations and pride events that gained them international attention (Eaton, 2019). In 1994, after the decolonising of the apartheid regime, all the barriers that were imposed on the LGBTQI+ community

were eradicated. The new South African government recognised the people of the LGBTQI+ community and addressed all inequalities they faced. Finally, in 1996, the government recognised same-sex relationships (Hamilton & Diega, 2020). This was one of the huge successes in South Africa, which seemed impossible in past years.

Despite the legislation being changed for the better, people's negative mentality and hateful opinions did not change. Even today, it is reported that the gay community is attacked with many cases of homophobic hate crimes, including rape, assaults, and killings taking place. Individuals who identify as queer, particularly those with Black feminine bodies, are disproportionately the victims of violent attacks and overt discrimination (Shepherd & Nyeck, 2019). Our society is built on cultural norms and beliefs which hinder transformation and diversity. Religious norms and cultural standards frequently fuel the pervasive stigma against gay-conforming community identities, which makes it easier for gay people to experience violence and discrimination (Ludt, 2024). These societal stigmas make it more difficult for those who identify as gay to balance community acceptance and family expectations in a setting that alternates between progress and enduring discrimination (Ghaziani & Holmes, 2023). As a result of these perceptions and hate crimes, many people are afraid that they will not be accepted for who they are and will not even seek the necessary support due to fear. Moreover, South Africa might have made transformation progress towards the global advancement of LGBTQI+ rights (Brown, 2023), but the reality in the society shows a sharp contrast, characterised by persistent societal challenges.

There has been some similar development in South Africa in relation to other colonial countries and Africa. The European colonial powers also eradicated all anti-gay laws in their colonies, and there were very few former colonial territories that tried to fight them (Esin, 2023). Unfortunately, countries like Ghana have continued to deprive gay people of their right to be who they are – unfortunately, some people in the LGBTQI+ community are still socially and politically underprivileged. With the current review of human rights by the United Nations in the Year Against Homophobia, it is of significance that the history of the oppressive laws against gay people should be revisited to obtain a homophobic-free continent.

The LGBTQI+ community is exposed to bullying because they embrace who they are. Bullying is a quite common and current problem in contemporary life. Everyone is familiar with this expression, which means that bullying is an unacceptable social behaviour which is done to spite the other by a known person (Namie & Namie, 2011). Moreover, bullying is a recurring and deliberate abuse due to the enforcement of power, which includes physical, emotional, and social behaviour abuse with the purpose of causing physical and emotional harm during interpersonal interactions (Wadesango, 2022). In my experience as a queer Black beginner teacher, I was deliberately bullied because of my sexuality and Black skin colour. The setting of my lived experiences is post-apartheid South Africa and the hatred of gay people in the 21st century. The behaviour was harassing and socially eliminating in the workplace. Harassment emerges when one supports an unwanted classification on the basis of colour, age, race, sexual orientation, and political belief (Hastie, 2020). Bullying and harassment have the same sentiments that lead to a person being emotionally and physically abused. The effects of bullying and harassment leave permanent scars on an individual. If the activists of post-1994 society were able to fight an oppressing system, then by sharing our narratives of bullying, we could build better-united nations. By addressing bullying, we are positively eradicating harm to employees' well-being, which would directly affect how employees do their everyday duties in the workplace.

Bullying in the workplace is a widespread issue documented across various contexts (Abdulmuhsin et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2019; Lee & Chen, 2020). It is, therefore, a phenomenon that has to be looked at in South Africa. WorkTrauma.com was the only study that looked at occurrences of bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Moreover, the study was conducted in 2000 by the Work Dignity Institute, and the results concluded that 77.8% of people in South Africa experienced workplace bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). However, there is little research currently that looks at the workplace bullying experiences of South Africans. Furthermore, just a few research looked at how different sociodemographic groups experienced bullying at work. This is significant since the South African workforce is multicultural and multiracial (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Nonetheless, to determine whether there are disparities in people's experiences of bullying in the workplace, researchers should focus on characteristics like race, gender, educational level, and age.

Workplace bullying is referred to as unacceptable negative behaviour towards an employee by an employee or colleague to enforce power and superiority, which leads to a hostile and unfriendly working environment (De Wet, 2011b). Workplace bullying may aim at fostering submission in a gruesome manner. Verbal/emotional abuse, intimidation, gossiping, and social segregation are some of the bullying behaviours that the perpetrator portrays, which affects employees' emotional and physical state negatively (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). Workplace bullying is an ongoing unacceptable behaviour that needs to be put to a stop.

Workplace bullying in schools is a severe issue that needs to be given vivid attention and managed with the utmost care. The educational system might be faced with a shutdown if teachers are continuously being bullied, which will lead to a country that is not governed by knowledge givers. Schools as organisations can become spaces for bullying to occur since they have hierarchical structures and dynamic power relationships (Hodgkins & McNamara, 2019). Perpetrators are in a senior management role, which already gives them the power to intimidate employees. Schools without unions to stand up for employees who are victims of bullying operate on the basis of the force of power. Research suggests that teachers may be victimised on one or more levels, including by co-workers and students, but De Vos (2010) indicated that school principals are, in some cases, the main perpetrators of teacher victimisation. Employees with less power and authority are subject to bullying by those with greater power.

Teachers are the ones who lay the foundation of the education system (Hugo & Masalesa, 2021). When teachers are victimised and bullied, it hinders the love they have for their vocation in teaching. They may lose their self-confidence and feel helplessness, powerlessness, humiliation, anxiety, and depression (De Vos, 2013). Nonetheless, their physical health is affected, and they may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, and changes in appetite. Moreover, bullying infringes on teachers' constitutional right to human dignity (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). The Bill of Rights emphasises that everyone's dignity, equality, and freedom must be given the utmost respect (RSA, 1996b), so the right of a teacher's dignity is significant and has to be valued. The Bill of Rights plays a pivotal role in the democratic system of South Africa. It assures everyone that their democratic rights

are preserved, including their right to freedom, human dignity, and equality (Curlewis & Venter, 2021). This exemplifies that everyone in South Africa has rights. By infringing one's rights with bullying, it causes the victim to suffer harm to their psychological, mental, and physical well-being (Dan, 2023), which in turn has an impact on any co-workers or bystanders who witness the bullying. Thus, bullying can negatively harm the well-being of the employees, which will directly affect how they perform their everyday duties in the workplace.

Research has been conducted on workplace bullying and how it affects professional careers like teaching. Filling a gap in the education profession, Steinman (2003) was one of the authors who focused first on this issue in the health profession. Teaching was then recognised as one of the professions that was negatively and seriously affected by workplace bullying (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013). Schools that are managed poorly and an education system that keeps on failing educators are the core factors of workplace bullying.

The South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR) released a report that showed that 80% of the South African public schools' educational system has failed to eradicate poverty by producing the necessary skills for employment opportunities (Arendse, 2020). The core issue lies with schools that are managed poorly, which is also a reason for the prevalence of workplace bullying. De Wet and Jacobs (2013) were alarmed that 90.8% of South African teachers who participated in their study were victims of workplace bullying 12 months before the study was conducted. The study also revealed the effects of bullying in the education sector, which included the resignation of teachers from schools. The study indicated that 76.7% of the bullied teachers wanted to resign and find better jobs, and 49.4% indicated that they were willing to leave the education profession due to being bullied by their principals (Blase, Blasé & Du, 2008).

The hypothesis that different race groups face various degrees of bullying in the workplace has raised the eyes of international research (Miller, Ostrom, Kruchko, Patil, Tihan, Cioffi, & Barnholtz-Sloan, 2021). Miller et al., (2021) was unable to locate any research on potential racial disparities in South Africa. Also, due to inconsistent reporting, worldwide epidemiologic statistics on nurses being bullied are insufficient.

Between 17% and 76% of professionals, and nurses in particular, have reported being the victims of bullying, according to studies and data from the British Isles, the United States, and Western and Eastern Europe (Spector, Zhou & Che, 2014).

The backbone of countries lies in the way the constitution is implemented. The constitution navigates how a country should be governed, with rights being accompanied by responsibilities and the freedom that people should enjoy (Jegede & Shikwambane, 2021). As South Africans, we come from an unjust constitutional system that favoured certain races, ages, and sexual orientations. South Africa suffered 46 years of racial oppression and an unjust constitution which suffocated people's rights to their identities (Horowitz, 2023). Fortunately, the dark cloud was suppressed by activists who brought us, the 20th-century youth, a rainbow-nation country. The extreme change in the South African constitution brought transformation to the society that discouraged the unjust constitution. With all the transformation from the 1993 interim constitution to the 1993 final drafting, South Africa has proved that the conception of a constitution was purposefully done with the spirit of ubuntu within it.

Section 7(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a) emphasises the importance of the values of democracy, which include equality, human dignity, and freedom. Furthermore, it states that the Bill of Rights is a foundation that ensures the protection of the democracy of South Africans. It enshrines that the people of our country have rights and democratic values that need to be protected. The Constitution of South Africa affirms every one of their rights. Workplace bullying is a violation of those human rights. As a result, it should be mandatory to educate policymakers about the seriousness of workplace bullying so they can put in more strict laws that fight against workplace bullying. The legal experts should ensure the safety of the victims and assure them that they are defended. Under the South African constitution, Section 9(1) clearly states that everyone, including the LGBTQI+ community, should be equal before the law and should be protected, regardless of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, it explains in Section 9(3) that no one should be treated unfairly and discriminated against, whether directly or indirectly, based on their gender, sex, race, sexuality, or ethnic group. This section holds a significant lesson in

the education profession and its development and how to retain teachers, as workplace bullying is not the only issue that South African teachers face.

1.3 Rationale and Motivation

In this section, I outline the personal, professional, conceptual, and scholarly justifications for this study, all of which are explained in depth.

1.3.1 Personal Justification

As a student at the University of Pretoria, I have occupied leadership positions during all four years of my course, and that is where I learned to stand up for myself and toughen up as a leader and teacher. However, “Toughen up!” never worked for me in the workplace environment; instead, I became a “Bottle it up, Ma’am, or else you will be shown the door” employee. I was exposed to workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher by the school management at a private school. Stories have been told about workplace bullying, but I never expected to be the victim. This autoethnographic study has helped me to find my voice by sharing my story while finding healing. Through this study, I am sharing my experiences of workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher. Furthermore, there is a great need to share the severe consequences of bullying and how it affects one’s mental state.

1.3.2 Professional Justification

By conducting this study, I hope to build and strengthen my teacher identity and envision my professional path in a bully-free workplace environment. Although there are multiple anti-bullying campaigns and interventions that are employed to address the issue, this autoethnography employs a narrative that another teacher can relate to. As a teacher, it is my job to educate and impart knowledge, and with this study, I hope to achieve just that. This includes exploring how race and sexuality can build or influence a queer Black beginner teacher in post-apartheid South Africa.

1.3.3 Conceptual Justification

I aim to make meaning of my experiences of workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher. My study centres on gender identity, racial identity, queer identity, beginner teacher identity, workplace bullying, and autoethnography. According to Adams and Bochner (2011), autoethnography involves personal

narrative embedded within sociocultural context. While my personal story is foundational, this research also engages existing theory to illuminate broader structural patterns. Intersectionality, first articulated by Crenshaw (1989), highlights how overlapping identities such as race, gender, and sexuality produce compounded marginalisation—what Deborah King later termed multiple jeopardy.

Drawing on Black feminist scholarship from Mirza (2009) and Bhopal (2016), this study recognises how Black women educators navigate schools shaped by institutional silencing and cultural bias. At the same time, research on novice teachers in South Africa (Mahabeer, 2020) and broader studies into identity-based bullying show that beginner educators, especially those from minoritised identities, face heightened vulnerability in unsupportive school environments. By weaving my personal narrative with these theoretical lenses, this study seeks not only to explore my lived experience but to contribute to collective understanding of how bullying and identity collide in the professional lives of queer Black beginner teachers.

1.3.4 Scholarly Justification

In conducting this study, I wanted to focus on my experiences as a victim of workplace bullying. So, by introducing the use of autoethnography as my study design, I could attempt to fill the gap in the literature on workplace bullying. Previous studies have focused on workplace bullying in the nursing career, but there are few studies on beginner teachers who have shared their lived experiences (Karatuna, Jönsson & Muhonen, 2020). Through this autoethnography, I can assist other researchers to recognise the influence that their own identities, beliefs, and values have on their research as well as how participants might also exhibit these characteristics (Adams, Van de Vijver, De Bruin & Bueno Torres, 2014). My study has attempted to broaden our understanding of the challenges of workplace bullying and the state of the education system in South Africa, as well as how queer Black female beginner teachers fit into it. Importantly, it offers insight into how gender and sexuality operate as organising forces in school workplaces—often reinforcing exclusionary cultures for queer and gender-nonconforming teachers (Connell, 2012; Mizzi, 2013). This research thus contributes to a growing body of literature on identity, marginalisation, and institutional power in educational settings.

1.4 Focus and Purpose

The focus of my study is to explore my own experiences of bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher.

The purpose of the study is to make meaning of my own experiences of bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher.

1.5 Research Questions

- How did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher?
- Why did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher the way I did?

1.6 Concept Clarification

My study includes the key concepts of gender identity (that of a queer Black woman), beginner teacher, autoethnography, and bullying in the workplace.

1.6.1 Gender Identity

As individuals, we have developed the ability to label individuals based on their gender identities and use gender labels in our speech regularly (Martin & Ruble, 2010). We refer to the two biological sexes known as female and male. The term “biological sex” describes how people are categorised according to their chromosomes, hormone profiles, and reproductive anatomy (Safer, 2022). Then, culture and society shape them to understand their roles as men or women, which builds their identity. Gender identity refers to how an individual experiences themselves to be such as being attracted to others of the same gender (Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013). One’s gender identity can determine how people view themselves and also build a foundation based on how they interact with others. For the purpose of this study, gender identity has to do with me identifying as female despite my sexual preference of being queer.

1.6.2 Queer Black Woman

I, Busisiwe Yabo, identify as a Black woman who has the sexual orientation known as queer. I am attracted to women only, which means that I am gay, and I hold the letter ‘L,’ which stands for lesbian in the LGBTQI+ community. When you belong to African

ancestry and carry a Black skin pigmentation, you are classified as a Black person (Mbatha, 2017). The term “queer” describes the intersecting experiences and shifting identities that define who we are. LGBTQI+ communities have reclaimed the term “queer” to refer to a wide variety of gender identities and sexual orientations (Thomson, 2021). Being Black and queer means going beyond binary and heteronormative notions. Nonetheless, one gets to identify as female when they are assigned as such according to their sex organ at birth (Renström, 2015). Yet being female, gay, and Black carries a lot of power because you get to fight through societal issues like bullying and harassment throughout your life. I concur with the above definitions for my study.

1.6.3 *Beginner Teacher*

A beginner teacher is classified as an entry-level teacher who is fresh from a preparation programme and has been in the teaching field for one or two years (Schmidt, Klusmann, Lüdtke, Möller, & Kunter, 2017). Mitchell, Reilly & Logue (2009) state that the term “beginner teacher” can be used interchangeably with the terms “novice teacher” and “career beginner”. However, for a teacher to be classified as a novice teacher, they need to be new to the school or district (Schmidt et al., 2017). All of these terms apply to educators who are brand-new to the field of teaching. As I am the only participant and I have fewer than three years of experience, I am referred to as a “beginner teacher” in this study.

1.6.4 *Beginner Teacher Identity*

Teacher identity starts to develop when one is a student teacher, so it is described as a “dynamic phenomenon” (Peker, Torlak, Toprak-Çelen, Eren & Günsan, 2020, p. 230). This simply means that as a student teacher, one is stepping into a career that can bring about change in one’s life. As the teacher enters employment and engages with the school and the larger community, this identity continues to grow (Claassen, 2020). When the teacher steps into the workplace as a queer Black beginner teacher, there is a transformation of their teacher identity. In this study, queer Black beginner teacher identity is viewed as an identity that keeps evolving from the time that the teacher steps into the workplace and throughout their teaching career.

1.6.5 *Autoethnography*

For this study, I have used autoethnography. Maréchal (2010) states that autoethnography is a research method that incorporates lived experiences and self-observation within the framework of ethnographic fieldwork and writing. It is described as a research, writing, and story method that connects lived and personal experiences to the cultural, social, and political (Ellis, 2004). According to Allen-Collinsen (2013), autoethnography is the process by which a writer makes sense of their life experiences in relation to their culture. Reaching an agreement on the definition of autoethnography is difficult. Nevertheless, this study concurs with the definition of Allen-Collinsen (2013). Therefore, in Chapter 4, I open myself to self-reflexive practice as I recall my lived experiences.

1.6.6 *Bullying in the Workplace*

Workplace bullying is unacceptable negative behaviour towards an employee by another employee or colleague to enforce power and superiority, which leads to a hostile and unfriendly working environment (De Wet, 2011b). Workplace bullying may aim at fostering submission in a gruesome manner (Akella, 2016). Verbal emotional abuse, intimidation, gossiping, and social segregation are some of the bullying behaviours that the perpetrator portrays, which affects the employees' emotional and physical states negatively (Seisa, 2020). Bullying is ongoing unacceptable behaviour that needs to be put to a stop. The setting of my study is the educational arena and the school community in which I experienced bullying.

1.7 *Overview of Research Design*

This study was approached through the lens of a qualitative perspective that has the benefit of study findings being descriptive rather than prescriptive (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). I employed autoethnography in my research design as it allowed me to share my lived experiences of workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher in the personal, societal, and academic context. Autoethnography involves the researcher being completely engrossed in their own experience while watching, writing, journaling, and reflecting (Edwards, 2021). I was the only participant in this autoethnography study, so I relied on my research journal, artefacts, and memory work to remember my lived experiences. I employed an interpretive paradigm approach to make sense of my study. The interpretive paradigm focuses on how individuals socially and culturally try to shape their lives and identities (Elster, 2007).

I focused on a procedure for gathering data, which included my preferred research tools that served as the basis for my autoethnography. I made use of thematic analysis to interpret and analyse my data (Wagner et al., 2012). My data were analysed and put into themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2014) in response to my research questions. Then, I discussed the quality measures, data analysis techniques, and a summary of my ethical considerations in depth.

1.8 Overview of Conceptual Framing

I chose Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional theory because it engages with bullying in the workplace within a school context. The theory explores workplace bullying while focusing on the organisation, which, in my context, is the school where the bullying took place. Hodson et al.'s two-dimensional theory is relevant to my study because it confirms my experiences of workplace bullying. It is confirmed by how the individual's powerlessness may lead to them being victims of workplace bullying by finding themselves in a poorly managed organisation.

Two authors, Shelton (2015) and Ojedokun, Oteri & Ogungbamila (2014), note factors influencing potential circumstances in which a person could experience bullying (focusing not only on negatives). Hodson et al. condense each of these components into two dimensions. According to Hodson et al.'s (2006) research, schools can take steps to reduce the likelihood that their instructors will experience bullying, and they should do so. Hodson et al. state that there are two interconnected dimensional models in bullying that are at play. The relationship of helplessness inside the workplaces the subject of the first dimension. Organisational coherence is the second dimension.

1.9 Quality Measures

One's experiences and feelings are covered by qualitative research, and it is important to ensure that the results are meaningful (Patten et al., 2015). I chose verisimilitude as a sort of quality control for my autoethnography. Verisimilitude is composed of relatability and credibility to ensure the truthfulness of the study (Lombard, 2020). Then I ensured that my study had accurate quality standards by employing validity. According to autoethnographers, validity is the pursuit of verisimilitude; it gives readers the impression that the experience being described is real, realistic, and doable and

that what has been shown might be genuine (Ellis et al., 2011). By choosing autoethnography as the research design, I made sure that the study was composed of reliability and credibility. This is further clarified in Chapter 3 of my study.

1.10 Ethical Considerations

Since you are concentrating on your own life, it could seem that autoethnography would be “easy” in terms of ethics. The autoethnography is autobiographical by definition. It is crucial for a researcher to ensure that confidentiality is prioritised and that anonymity is given as an option to the participant (Subramani, 2021). I used pseudonyms because they protect my co-constructors of knowledge from being harmed (Foster, McAllister & O’Brien, 2006). I do not reveal information about any of my co-constructors that they would not logically want other people to know. I gave my co-constructors an option. If they wanted to remain anonymous, I would refer to them as “Participant 1” or “Participant 2”, for example. All my co-constructors were comfortable being known by their identities. I created a consent document outlining the process for my co-constructors before conducting the conversations. All the co-constructors were alerted that they had a right to leave or withdraw their participation from the study if they felt any kind of discomfort.

There is a thin line of honesty that is needed when dealing with autoethnography studies (Foster et al., 2006). In my study, I made an oath to be honest in my narrative while allowing me to show my emotional and vulnerable side, even going beyond portraying myself in an unflattering way to fully open up in order to construct my teacher identity as a queer Black beginner teacher. I obtained ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria before collecting my data.

1.11 Outline of my Study

Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

This chapter provided an introduction to my study and explained how the use of autoethnography served its purpose. The background and context of the study were explored and expanded. Core concepts linked to the study’s title were clarified to ensure reader comprehension. I justified my choices regarding all aspects of the study, including personal, professional, conceptual, and scholarly considerations. The

chapter presented a clear vision of the study's focus and purpose. It concluded with an outline of a significant aspect of the study—the research design—which provided a rational and systematic approach to addressing the research topic by describing how I intended to conduct the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In Chapter 2, I examined existing research on workplace bullying while integrating my own findings. I explored how race, gender, and power dynamics influence workplace bullying. Additionally, I analysed the effects of workplace bullying across various levels, including social, familial, professional, and organizational well-being, as well as its impact on colleague-witnesses. A review of multiple articles deepened my understanding of these aspects in both Global North and Global South contexts. The chapter concludes with a conceptual framework supported by justifications from other scholars. This framework is based on Hodson et al.'s (2006) theory of workplace bullying called "Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Context", which posits those experiences of workplace bullying result from both the victim's lack of control and the absence of order or stability within an organization.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the research methods and design employed in this study. Research design plays a crucial role in shaping the logical strategy for conducting a research study. In this study, the research design provided a clear framework for systematically selecting methods, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the data. Additionally, this chapter outlines the qualitative concepts that informed the study.

Chapter 4: Autoethnography

This chapter focuses on narrating how my teacher identity was shaped by various personal, professional, and social experiences. Through autoethnography, my lived experiences are acknowledged as a meaningful social phenomenon worthy of academic inquiry. By situating my experiences within broader socio-cultural and

institutional contexts, I reflect on the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality have influenced my identity as a beginner teacher. My narratives are presented in distinct sections, each offering insights into the challenges, conflicts, and transformative moments that have shaped my professional journey.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter details how I employed thematic analysis to systematically analyse and interpret the data. Thematic analysis enabled me to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences explored in this study. By coding and categorizing data into themes, I was able to address my research questions in a structured and meaningful way. This chapter also discusses the process of data analysis, including how themes were developed, refined, and connected to the broader theoretical framework of the study. The collected data is systematically analysed and interpreted, highlighting key findings and their implications.

Chapter 6: Conclusion of the Study

The final chapter provides a comprehensive summary and conclusion of the study, synthesizing key insights from each chapter and demonstrating how they collectively address the research questions. It offers a critical reflection on the study's main findings, linking them to the broader theoretical framework and existing literature. Additionally, I discuss the significant limitations encountered during the research process, such as methodological constraints, potential biases, and contextual challenges, and I offer recommendations for future researchers in the field. These recommendations highlight areas for further exploration and suggest ways to build upon the study's findings. The chapter concludes with an in-depth personal reflection on how this research has influenced my professional and personal growth as a teacher, shaping my understanding of identity, resilience, and the complexities of workplace experiences.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This study explored my lived experiences of bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher while making meaning of those experiences. This chapter starts by outlining the concept of bullying and workplace bullying. I clarify the key concepts in depth, including gender identity, queer Black female beginner teachers, and workplace bullying. I then highlight why workplace bullying occurs and why it is necessary to explore the concept. To do this, I explore how race, gender, and power relationships influence workplace bullying according to existing scholarly literature. I provide a synthesis of the most recent findings about the experiences of workplace bullying of queer Black female beginner teachers. In the second part of this chapter, I outline the conceptual framework of Hodson et al., (2006) theory of workplace bullying that underpinned my study. Thereafter, I describe the suitability of the decision to include this conceptual framework. To build up my research inquiry, the study provides an in-depth explanation and justification of the conceptual framework that I chose for this study which is the 'Overview of Hodson's Theory of Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Context.'

2.2 The Nature and Purpose of a Literature Review

As diverse as we are, people have different opinions, and we ought to respect their opinions. As authors come together, an essential part of research called the literature review emerges (Kushwaha, Kar & Dwivedi, 2021). A literature review is published information that relates to a certain topic (Bandara, Furtmueller, Gorbacheva, Miskon & Beekhuyzen, 2015). It gives guidance on how one can develop ideas from the prior knowledge of other authors. Upcoming authors or researchers compile different ideas to make meaning of their research. The literature review helps with the selection and analysis of existing data to corroborate and support one's research (Winchester & Salji, 2016). In analysing, selecting, and processing the data, the writer can find information that fills the gap about their topic.

Through the process of writing my literature review, I identified key concepts that included gender identity, queer Black female beginner teachers, and workplace bullying. Through engagement with my research questions, I discovered the key concepts that assisted in narrowing my research. I gathered information from prior

research conducted by different authors. Nkomo et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of not just collecting a summary of other authors but critically engaging with the existing ideas instead.

There is a variety of authors in my study, both locally (South Africa and Africa) and internationally. Getting a variety of voices from different countries, races, sexual orientations, and beliefs builds a rich study. Moreover, it makes my study relatable to other authors globally. Therefore, I have organised and built a solid literature review as I critically engaged with the existing data. I ensured that there was a systematic analysis of studies from other authors through being purposeful, focused, and contextualising. I also made it a priority to acknowledge the authors in the literature review through in-text citations and by referencing all the sources used. Acknowledging authors is important as it gives the research academic authenticity and honesty while enabling others to be able to consult and refer to the source to deepen their understanding (Todd, 2022). I also ensured that my ideas were coherently linked throughout, including the conceptual framework of the study, which is an important section of the literature review.

Research is guided by a conceptual framework, which is based on existing theory and serves as the foundation for all research, linking directly to the study's hypothesis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). As a researcher, I used the blueprint of the conceptual framework to guide my research inquiry, ensuring it formed the foundation of how my study was structured. The chosen framework is integrated throughout the study, not only as a reference but as an ongoing thread that informs the research process. The researcher's theory must be noticeable in an absolutely and plainly way to prove that there is development, creation and acquired knowledge (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). This framework provides coherence and direction, ensuring that every aspect of the research is aligned with the guiding theoretical principles and contributes to a deeper understanding of the topic.

The chosen conceptual framing was based on Hodson et al., (2006) theory of workplace bullying. This study employed their two-dimensional model of bullying called Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional context (Hodson et al., 2006) to see if my experiences with workplace bullying

supported the idea that being bullied was a result of both a victim's lack of control and the lack of order or stability inside an organisation.

2.3 Understanding Bullying

In this section of the literature review, the overview of the concept of bullying is explained in depth. Then I clarified why bullying exists and found trends that relate to my autoethnography.

2.3.1 Overview of bullying as a concept

It is important to understand bullying from different authors' perspectives. The conceptualizations and definitions of bullying that I found all referred to perpetrators and victims (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013). Bullying is explained as an aggressive behaviour that can be repeated also intentional and includes an involvement of power balance between the victim and the perpetrator (Olweus, 2013). This means that the perpetrator uses their power to bully the victim. These authors Kallman, Han & Vanderbilt, (2021) concur that bullying occurs when someone or a group deliberately mistreats or intimidates another person, aiming to cause physical pain or emotional distress. It is a harmful behaviour that can leave lasting scars on the victim. It can take various forms, including verbal, physical, psychological, and social aggression, with the intent to harm or intimidate the target (Smith et al., 2008). Workplace bullying, in particular, is characterized by ongoing negative actions in a professional setting that create a toxic work environment, often leading to emotional distress, burnout, and decreased job performance (Einarsen, Nielsen, Hetland, Olsen, Zahlquist, Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2020). Unlike general bullying, workplace bullying is deeply embedded in institutional power structures, where superiors, colleagues, or even subordinates engage in behaviours such as harassment, professional sabotage, exclusion, or micromanagement (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). In educational settings, workplace bullying may be exercised through hierarchical power imbalances, where school leaders or senior staff target teachers, particularly those in marginalized positions (De Wet, 2010; Maphosa, 2019).

In this study, bullying is defined as a negative conduct, whether it is done directly or indirectly. In much of the international literature, researchers have examined cases where teachers were bullied by learners (e.g., Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012; McMahon,

Reaves & McConnell, 2014; de Wet, 2010; Hepburn, 2019; Korkmaz, 2018). In contrast, South African studies have focused on teachers being bullied by school leadership, particularly principals, superiors, or colleagues (e.g., De Vos & Kirsten, 2015; De Wet, 2014; Marais & Meier, 2010; Maphosa, 2019; Phasha et al., 2021). These South African studies align closely with my autoethnographic account of being victimized by my members of the school management team.

In an exploratory study focused on the South African educational system, De Wet and Jacobs (2013) discovered that 90.8% of participating teachers had experienced victimisation in the year prior to the execution of the study and that 89.1% of those victims had experienced at least two types of bullying. This suggests that workplace bullying is pervasive and systemic rather than an isolated occurrence. Furthermore, Blase et al. (2008) found that 76.7% of bullied educators reported that they would prefer to switch to another teaching position, and 49.4% of those who experienced mistreatment by a principal stated that it was the primary reason they wanted to leave the profession. These findings highlight the severe impact of bullying on teacher retention and job satisfaction, as well as the power imbalances present within school leadership structures.

Workplace bullying excessively affects marginalized groups, particularly women, racial minorities, and LGBTQI+ employees (Salin & Hoel, 2020). Research suggests that queer teachers face additional layers of discrimination, experiencing workplace bullying not only in the form of professional exclusion but also through microaggressions, homophobic policies, and biased evaluations of their competence (Ferfolja, 2014; Meyer, 2009). In South Africa, where schools remain sites of racialized and gendered power struggles, the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' experiences of bullying (Soudien, 2012; Msibi, 2019). As a queer, Black, female, beginner teacher, my experience of workplace bullying cannot be understood in isolation from these broader systemic issues.

The impact of workplace bullying extends beyond the direct victims. Research has shown that bullying can contribute to an unhealthy school climate, negatively affecting learners as well (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco & Brethour, 2006). Burnout, anxiety, and disengagement are a consequence of lived experiences of bullying, and this leads to

poor education quality and withdrawn relationships with learners (Billett et al., 2021). The education system in South Africa is already burdened by overcrowding and lack of resources, so the workplace can further damage and affect the quality of teaching and learning within the school (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010).

In the end, bullying in South Africa does not affect learners only but goes beyond to workplace bullying where teachers are also affected and that affects the whole education system in this country. There is a necessity to employ strategies like awareness campaigns, policy amendments focused on workplace bullying, and government support for teachers who are victims of workplace bullying in order to eradicate the issue.

2.3.2 The Nature of Workplace Bullying

This literature review allowed me to look into current studies on workplace bullying, which is a prevalent negative issue that affects the well-being and job performance of employees. Workplace bullying tends to occur in different forms which are verbal abuse, the use of intimidation, professional and personal sabotage, and exclusion people (Ojedokun et al., 2014). Besides the use of direct forms of aggression, workplace bullying can occur in a subtly and systematically way, which makes it difficult to recognize and address. In the educational system, workplace bullying may occur as embedded within institutional structures, which turns to be a personal issue too but also a systemic one (Hodgkins & McNamara, 2019). Power imbalances often facilitate workplace bullying this occurs in professional spaces with rigid hierarchies.

Schools are not only places of education; they are also offices where power, authority, and hierarchy interact, hence influencing teachers' experiences of victimisation (Hodgkins & McNamara, 2019). Workplace bullying can occur between teacher and management also between teachers and learners, so studies indicate that bullying in educational settings is multifaceted (Blase & Blase, 2006). The senior management that occupies higher positions have the capacity to humiliate, intimidate, and control their staff members which results in manipulation, undermining their professional integrity and coercion (De Wet, 2010). The authority of principals over workplace conditions, resource distribution, and career advancement further worsens the

vulnerability of educators, particularly those who are beginner teachers into the profession.

Research indicates that perpetrators of workplace bullying are principals since they are the ones occupying hierarchical framework in a school environment (De Vos, 2010). While bullying by colleagues or learners is acknowledged in the literature, power-based victimization by school leadership is particularly damaging as it limits teachers' autonomy, creates fear-driven work environments, and pushes many educators out of the profession (Blase et al., 2008). This is particularly concerning given that beginner teachers—who are still navigating their roles and professional identities—are more vulnerable to being mistreated (Pervin & Turner, 1998). As a queer, Black, female, beginner teacher, my experiences of workplace bullying must be understood within this broader context, where power, race, gender, and sexuality converge in ways that shape my vulnerability.

Intersectionality further deepens the impact of workplace bullying, particularly for those who do not conform to dominant norms of race, gender, and sexuality (Salin & Hoel, 2020). Studies have shown that Black women in professional spaces often face racialized and gendered forms of bullying, where their authority is challenged, their competence is scrutinized, and they are excluded from decision-making processes (Soudien, 2012; Msibi, 2019; Parker, Haskins, Clemons, McClure & Washington, 2022). Similarly, queer educators often experience professional marginalization, microaggressions, and outright hostility in school environments that remain heteronormative and patriarchal (Ferfolja, 2014; Meyer, 2009). Thus, my experiences as a victim of workplace bullying cannot be separated from the racial, gendered, and sexualized power dynamics that characterize South African schools.

The consequences of workplace bullying are far-reaching, affecting not only individual teachers but also the broader school climate and student learning (Billett et al., 2021). Research shows that teachers who experience bullying are more likely to suffer from burnout, depression, and anxiety, which in turn affects their teaching effectiveness and relationships with learners (Twemlow et al., 2006). In South Africa, where the education system is already burdened with resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and socio-economic challenges (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010), the

additional strain of workplace bullying exacerbates an already fragile teaching environment. If left unaddressed, bullying in schools does not only harm individual educators but also compromises the quality of education and the emotional well-being of learners.

Given the systemic nature of workplace bullying, institutional interventions are necessary to protect educators and foster a more supportive work environment. While policies exist to address workplace harassment, enforcement remains a challenge, particularly when bullying is normalized or when victims fear retaliation (De Wet, 2014). Addressing workplace bullying in schools requires stronger anti-bullying policies, improved support systems for teachers, and a cultural shift that prioritizes workplace dignity over hierarchical control (Parker et al., 2022). As this study highlights my subjective experiences, it also contributes to the broader discourse on workplace bullying, calling for systemic change that acknowledges the unique vulnerabilities of beginner teachers, particularly those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

2.3.3 Uncovering the Reasons Behind Workplace Bullying

In academic research, the precursors of bullying have been discovered in many areas. In general, there are two categories into which we can divide the causes of workplace bullying: human traits and organisational features (Suggala, Thomas & Kureshi, 2020). It is possible to further categorise the individual traits into workplace bullies and workplace victims. School management has the option to bully their co-workers and then defend their behaviour, calling it required, necessary, justifiable, and deserving (Neall, Li & Tuckey, 2021). Most bullies think their actions are situational and intrapersonal in nature. The bullies act out by demonstrating that they have no malicious intent behind their conduct; they present themselves as innocent and blameless. They act aggressively and persistently in an unjustified manner toward co-workers, justifying their behaviour as necessary to achieve departmental goals and objectives (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). They think that to get the workers geared up for action, there needs to be a push. The truth is that there is no motivation for victimising teachers who lose interest in how they do their jobs. Their vocation spirit within their hearts is dying.

An additional form of bullying at work takes place because of harsh supervision by superiors (Suggala et al., 2020). Most of the time, the intention is to attack one's attitude, values, lack of social interaction, and privacy through verbal abuse, physical pressure, and rumourmongering. This type of bullying is characterised by verbal aggression, being made a laughingstock, social marginalisation, and obstruction in one's work, among other things (Notelaers & Van der Heijden, 2019). Bullies are also discovered to have institutional superiority and substandard performance or execution skills at work (Kelly, 2011). On the other hand, people who are bullied are frequently seen as having low self-worth, poor social skills, and negative outcomes (Braithwaite, 2008). Additionally, results support the notion that traits like aggression, impulsivity, cynicism, emotional reactivity, and a reduced tolerance for ambiguity are what motivate people to bully others.

The dynamics of power dominate interactions when bullies are present at work. It is about dominating the other (Suggala et al., 2020). The actions are not welcome because they are hegemonic and frightening. Instead of allowing a relationship with staff to be characterised by partnerships or collaborations, the principal manages it by instilling fear. When executive or academic principals desire to hold as much power as possible, bullying occurs (Venet, 2023). In other words, bullies of teachers want to dictate the terms of their employment and accomplish this by instilling fear of repercussions, which compels the victims to do as they are told. It is also possible that the victim of bullying does not want to fight back or is not assertive enough, in which case they give in to the demands of the principal, who intimidates others.

2.3.4 Bullying in Educational Settings

Bullying in educational settings is a pervasive issue that affects students of all genders, often influenced by societal norms, power imbalances, and institutional policies. Research indicates that gender plays a significant role in shaping bullying experiences, with boys being more likely to experience physical bullying and girls more likely to face relational and cyberbullying (Smith, López-Castro, Robinson & Görzig, 2020). It is unfortunate that learners who do not conform to traditional gender norms (stereotypical male, or feminine) can be subjected or targeted to bullying while trying to express their sexual orientation (Espelage & Hong, 2019).

Studies have shown that boys are more frequently involved in direct, physical forms of bullying, whereas girls tend to experience more indirect forms, such as social exclusion and verbal abuse (Craig, Pepler & Blais, 2019; Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2012; Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). Nonetheless, gender-based bullying goes beyond these patterns, there is more societal influences on it including race and sexual orientation. Studies indicate that boys who display emotional sensitivity or intellectual brilliance in non-traditional disciplines may also suffer bullying; in contrast, girls who participate in assertiveness behaviour and being themselves may be judged unfavourably by their peers. (Olweus, 2013). These dynamics reflect a widespread societal expectation on gender roles and how both genders are expected to behave which is carried over to school environments opening more doors to bullying.

2.3.4.1 Learners as Victims

Bullying in schools in a school environment is a phenomenon that affects learners worldwide, leaving permanent scars psychological, emotional and tempers with their academics. The victims of bullying are impacted by the abuse that includes harassment in a sense of isolation, physical attacks, verbal and emotional attacks and cyberbullying. This results to physical, mental, and emotional implications that includes anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth, which can negatively influence their overall health and academic performance (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). The victims of bullying who are learners develop a fear of going to school which is caused by high level of anxiety and depression, resulting in increased absenteeism and a drop in academic success (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz & Del Rey, 2020). This feeling of helplessness and loneliness can continue into their personal growth to adulthood which will hinder their success and failing to build healthy relationships due to their low self-esteem.

Gender, age, and social status impacts bullying, and some groups are more or less vulnerable than others. Boys are subjects to physical bullying which includes hitting and pushing while girls are affected by relational and interpersonal bullying, including body shamming, gossip, cyberbullying and social exclusion (Smith et al., 2020). Younger primary school learners are exposed to more bullying tactics because they cannot speak up for themselves or fear reporting their perpetrator because of threats (Olweus, 2013). Additionally, learners with different sexual orientation confirming as

gay, those who are differently able and the ones who do not conform to traditional societal norms within marginalized backgrounds are excessively targeted (Craig et al., 2019). Schools that fail to address bullying are failing these learners and opening a door for continued bullying and victimization which lead to greater impact like suicide.

Bullying goes beyond harming the learner that is targeted—it causes harm and attracts negativity in the entire school community. Turning a blind eye in addressing bullying creates uncomfortable teaching and learning environment that is accompanied by fear and tension. Learners that are victims of bullying suffer from withdrawal that they are engaging with class content, group work and forming genuine relationship (Espelage & Hong, 2019). Over time, this may lead to disengagement that takes a toll on teaching and learning which will leads to lower grader performance and higher turnover of dropping out (Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). This issue goes beyond to affect learners' future career which leads to high employment rate in the country. Moreover, learners who are eyewitness to bullying are also affected—they live with fear of being next victims while other might be peer pressured to join in just to fit in.

Tackling bullying is not a one person's job—it takes a team to bring upon change, through effort from teachers, parents, and policymakers. They all have a role to play in ensuring that victims get the support they need and perpetrators are dealt with accordingly. It the school's duty to enforce strong anti-bullying policies, providing safe space for learners to report incidents, and fostering an environment that is governed by values of respect and inclusivity (Bickmore, 2011). Embedding more strategies like peer support programs, teacher training, and access to counselling have been shown to reduce bullying and create a more positive school atmosphere (Cornell & Limber, 2015). That is why there a great need to work as team to ensure active involvement that will reduce cases of bullying. Teacher must include in their curriculum, teaching learners social-emotional skills that can enhance the spirit of stand up against bullying and build resilience within them. Schools can fight against bullying with using proactive approach (Cornell & Limber, 2015), this can break the cycle of victimization while creating a space where every learner feels safe, valued, and supported.

2.3.4.2 *Teachers as victims*

While discussions about bullying in schools often center on students, research increasingly highlights that teachers, too, are frequent targets of workplace bullying. This mistreatment can come from various sources—students, colleagues, administrators, or even parents. Initially, workplace bullying research focused on the healthcare sector, as seen in Steinman's (2003) study. However, later studies, including those by De Vos (2012) and Keashly (2021), expanded the focus to other professions, particularly teaching. Research has shown that schoolteachers are among the professionals most deeply affected by workplace bullying (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013). This phenomenon, known as teacher-targeted bullying (TTB), can take many forms, including verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, social exclusion, and even physical violence (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). The consequences are significant: teachers subjected to bullying often experience heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout, all of which impact their job performance, personal well-being, and ability to create a supportive learning environment for their students (Borg & Riding, 2011).

One of the biggest reasons workplace bullying thrives in schools is the larger systemic failures within the education sector. In South Africa, for example, the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) found that 80% of public schools are not equipping students with the skills they need for future employment (Arendse, 2020). This puts enormous pressure on teachers, making them more vulnerable to mistreatment from various sources. One of the most common forms of bullying comes from students themselves—teachers frequently face defiance, blatant disrespect, and even physical aggression in the classroom (De Wet, 2010). But it does not stop there. Many teachers also experience bullying from colleagues and school administrators, whether through exclusion, belittling comments, or even deliberate attempts to undermine their work (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). The extent of this issue is staggering: research by De Wet and Jacobs (2013) found that 91% of South African teachers had experienced workplace bullying within just one year. This points to a deeper crisis, one that affects not just individual teachers but the entire education system.

The impact of bullying on teachers goes far beyond personal distress—it directly affects their ability to teach and connect with students. When teachers are targeted,

their confidence often takes a hit, making classroom management more challenging and reducing their enthusiasm for teaching (Riley, 2019). Many start to withdraw from collaboration with colleagues, shy away from leadership opportunities, and struggle to stay motivated (Tew, Potter & Jones, 2010). In more severe cases, the emotional and psychological toll can lead to long-term mental health struggles, frequent absences, or even a decision to leave the profession altogether. A study by Blase et al. (2008) revealed that 76.7% of bullied teachers considered resigning in search of a healthier work environment, while half (49.4%) were willing to leave teaching entirely due to bullying from their principals. These patterns do not just harm individual educators—they contribute to teacher shortages and weaken the education system as a whole, creating a cycle where instability and burnout lead to poorer student outcomes.

Addressing teacher-targeted bullying requires systemic change, including policies that explicitly protect educators from harassment, stronger administrative support, and professional development programs on conflict resolution. Two decades years, schools had to establish clear and confidential reporting mechanisms, ensuring that teachers feel safe to speak up without fear of retaliation (Morrison, 2007). Now, there is a need for school culture that fosters mutual respect between students, staff, and administration is essential in preventing bullying (Fauzan & Sulaeman, 2024). Providing psychological support and counselling services for victimized teachers can also help restore their confidence and job satisfaction (McMahon et al., 2014). Ultimately, recognizing and addressing teacher bullying is crucial in creating a healthy and productive educational environment—one where both educators and students can thrive.

2.3.5 Effects of bullying

Workplace bullying impacts victims' emotional, physical, and psychological health, as well as the organizational culture, which affects not just the targets but also bystanders and co-workers. The effects can be reciprocal, damaging both individuals involved and the wider workplace environment. Research on workplace stress and mental health (Conway, Høgh, Balducci & Ebbesen, 2021) has highlighted the prevalence of hostile environments in professional settings.

2.3.5.1 The Effects of Workplace Bullying on Employees

Workplace bullying can take a heavy toll on victims, leading to significant emotional, physical, and professional consequences. Victims of bullying often experience anxiety, fear, vulnerability, and diminished self-confidence (Magee, Gordon, Robinson, Caputi & Oades, 2017), which can manifest in loss of productivity, reduced job satisfaction, and increased absenteeism. According to Jacobs and De Wet (2015), bullying in the workplace leads to three main adverse effects: psychosocial impacts, psychological reactions, and a negative effect on productivity. Statistically, 19.3% of participants in their study sought professional help for emotional distress caused by workplace bullying.

Additionally, workplace bullying can lead to personal life strain, such as emotional detachment and the dissolution of family relationships (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015). Bullying also impacts teachers' job performance, creativity, and innovation, often leading to reduced motivation and missed targets (Barlett & Barlett, 2011). Teachers, in particular, report decreased job commitment, with a third of victims feeling less connected to their work and struggling with concentration (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015). Workplace bullying also has financial implications for organizations, affecting retention, turnover, and worker compensation claims (De Wet, 2014). Moreover, bullied teachers may withdraw emotionally from professional activities, thus affecting their teaching and overall work environment (De Vos, 2013). The negative effects of bullying not only hinder productivity but can also strain relationships within the school, affecting the teaching and learning dynamic.

Workplace bullying does not only impact emotional and psychological well-being but also has significant physical health consequences. Psychological stress from bullying does not just affect a person's emotions—it often shows up physically, too. Symptoms like stress headaches, high blood pressure, and gastrointestinal issues are common (Schafer, 2000). Long-term work-related stress caused by bullying has even been linked to chronic health problems, including cardiovascular issues, rheumatoid arthritis, and sleep disorders (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Sleep deprivation is especially common among bullied employees and can lead to exhaustion, nightmares, and constant fatigue (Sloan, Matyok, Schmitz & Short, 2010).

Over time, the physical toll can also weaken the immune system, making individuals more vulnerable to illnesses like colds and the flu (Namie & Namie, 2009). The emotional and psychological distress that comes with workplace bullying can be just as severe, leaving lasting marks on mental health. Many victims report feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression as common reactions to bullying (Blase & Blase, 2006). There is often a sense of helplessness and humiliation, with anxiety becoming a constant companion (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). In some cases, victims may develop PTSD-like symptoms or experience complete burnout. Teachers, in particular, can see their self-confidence plummet as a result, sometimes resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse or overworking to try to deal with the emotional pain (Sloan et al., 2010). On top of all this, bullying can deeply affect social relationships. Victims often withdraw from others, becoming irritable or defensive, which puts a strain on connections with co-workers, family, and friends (Peyton, 2003). This isolation can amplify the emotional toll of bullying, creating a cycle of distress that is difficult to break.

2.3.5.2 Workplace Bullying and Organizational and Professional Health

Workplace bullying does not affect an individual—it damages the entire organisation or workspace and that shapes the culture and atmosphere. Workplace bullying to a toxic work environment were harassment and victimization. This leads to a negative space where teamwork suffers, communication breaks down, and overall morale takes a hit (George, 2023). The victims and bystander will suffer from emotional and psychological which can lead to decreased motivation, lower performance, and a loss of creativity. This will affect the organisation in their productivity and continued success.

Turning a blind eye to workplace bullying, it sends a message that the harassment and victimization is acceptable. This affects an organisation in sense that it fosters a culture of fear, withdrawal, and dysfunction space (Hoel, Cooper & Einarsen, 2020). Employees lose their spirit of vocation and sense of commitment in their jobs and within the organisation if there is no sense of support from the management. The results will high staff turnover, increased toxicity, absenteeism, and overall poor work performance (Hoel et al., 2020). For teachers, the impact goes even deeper— they lose the sense of their vocation, professional identity and sense of purpose which affects learning and teaching. Teachers who experience workplace bullying tend to

they are withdrawal their teaching activities and the learners to avoid continued workplace bullying victimization (De Vos, 2013). This is caused by the lack of motivation that is damaged by workplace bullying. This does not only affect the organisation by it goes beyond to affect the quality of education because of the decrease in quality imparted knowledge (Bear, 2020).

Workplace bullying can put a strain on the professional's confidence and effectiveness. It is unfortunate that for teachers, there is a loss of enthusiasm and creativity in their work, making it harder to engage learners and bring innovative ideas to incorporate in the classroom (Yandi & Havidz, 2022). As the emotional and psychological strain deepens, many begin to doubt their own abilities, leading to a gradual erosion of self-confidence and professional identity (Beghetto & Anderson, 2022). Over time, this self-doubt can make it even more difficult for teachers to fully invest in their roles, impacting both their well-being and the quality of education they provide. Workplace bullying can also affect professional relationships, with teachers experiencing emotional fatigue that impairs their ability to foster positive interactions with students.

Being bullied at work can have lasting effects, often pushing people to leave their jobs—or even their entire profession. Research by Peyton (2003) and Blase et al. (2008) found that many teachers who experienced bullying seriously considered quitting. Beyond individual decisions to leave, bullying also damages trust in leadership and weakens organizational support, making employees feel less satisfied and less loyal to their workplace. Over time, this leads to higher turnover rates and makes it harder for organizations to keep good employees. Additionally, presenteeism—where employees show up to work but are mentally and physically unwell—can occur, causing stress and worsening health outcomes (Hoel et al., 2020). Victimized teachers may continue working despite health problems, but their performance suffers as a result. In extreme cases, long-term bullying may lead to hospitalization due to psychological or physical issues (Bergh, 2009).

The negative impact of workplace bullying extends beyond the individual teacher, affecting the broader educational system. High turnover, absenteeism, and declining teacher morale can destabilize the entire school environment (George, 2023).

Teachers decreased motivation and increased emotional distress create a ripple effect, negatively influencing the student-teacher relationship and the quality of education (Vartia-Väänänen, 2003). If bullying is left unchecked, it can create a cycle of dysfunction, jeopardizing the integrity of the school system.

2.4 Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Although research on workplace bullying in educational settings is more extensive in some countries than others, particularly in Europe and Asia. For example, a study in Türkiye found that 50% of primary school teachers reported experiencing workplace bullying. In Spain, approximately 20% of participants mentioned being bullied during their careers. In Croatia, 32% of teachers reported witnessing bullying, while 22% personally experienced it (Kõiv, 2015).

Further data suggests that workplace bullying is a prevalent issue in several other European countries as well. For instance, in Estonia, teachers reported frequent bullying within school premises (Kõiv, & Naruskov, 2024). A study conducted in the Czech Republic indicated that 33.9% of teachers experienced mobbing, and 43.3% were subjected to harsh treatment for over a year (Čech et al., 2017). In the United Kingdom, 67% of teachers reported being either victims of or witnesses to workplace bullying in the past 12 months. Research in the United States found that 50% of teachers were victims of bullying before the study was conducted, with similar findings in Australia, where approximately 99% of teachers reported experiencing bullying at some point in their careers (Kõiv, 2015).

According to De Wet (2006), in South Africa, about 50% of high school teachers reported that they had experienced workplace bullying. De Wet and Jacobs (2013) also found that a greater prevalence of workplace bullying was occurring in South African schools. Close to 90% of teachers reported having experienced bullying 12 months before the study (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013). In comparing the statistics above, it is a clear indication that workplace bullying is currently increasing. Even though workplace bullying is a new area of study, reports of incidents have been reported worldwide, including in the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Lesotho, Spain, Türkiye, Croatia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, India, and Pakistan (Sinha & Yadav, 2017).

It is absurd that workplace bullying is a common phenomenon worldwide, and even in South Africa, no legislation has been put in place to address this issue. Although the human dignity of teachers is safeguarded by the Bill of Rights (RSA, 1996b), along with several other national laws pertaining to their status, there is no definition of workplace bullying in South African legislation (Smit, 2014). SACE only addresses the principles that drive the education system; that is, fundamental values and respect can be of assistance in stopping workplace bullying when implemented properly (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015).

2.4.1 Workplace Bullying in Global North Countries

Workplace bullying is a widespread issue that affects employees across various industries, even in the Global North—where developed economies and higher living standards might suggest better working conditions (Österman & Boström, 2022). However, bullying in these nations often takes on more subtle forms, such as exclusion, manipulation, and passive-aggressive behaviour, which can have serious consequences for employees' mental health and job satisfaction. Defined as repeated, harmful behaviour that targets individuals, workplace bullying leads to psychological distress, decreased morale, and in many cases, job loss (Rayner, 1997). Research by León-Pérez, Escartín, and Giorgi (2021) highlights significant rates of bullying across Global North countries—including the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Spain, and Türkiye—demonstrating that despite economic advancement, workplace mistreatment remains prevalent and is often not adequately addressed. This reflects deeper issues in how workplace conflict is handled and how professional relationships are shaped within these environments.

One might assume that the Global North's strong labour laws would offer employees greater protection. While anti-discrimination and harassment laws exist in many of these countries, research shows that there is often a gap between legal protections and actual enforcement. Even in nations with comprehensive policies, workplace bullying is frequently underreported due to ambiguous definitions of what constitutes bullying, as well as the fear of retaliation (Reddy & Naidu, 2024). Many organizations fail to recognize bullying as a systemic issue, leading to victim-blaming or outright dismissal of complaints. Without clear legal frameworks and proper reporting channels, employees are left vulnerable, with little support to challenge their

mistreatment (Areej & Javed, 2023). As a result, many workers suffer in silence, afraid that speaking out could lead to being labelled as a troublemaker—or worse, losing their jobs.

Cultural norms also play a key role in shaping workplace bullying in the Global North. In countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, where individualism is deeply valued, workplace culture often emphasizes self-reliance and personal achievement (Lomas et al., 2023). While this can encourage ambition, it can also make collective action against bullying more difficult, creating an environment where victims feel isolated and hesitant to seek help (Monteiro & Joseph, 2023). The fear of social rejection or career consequences further discourages employees from addressing bullying, even when it becomes severe. To break this cycle, organizations must actively promote psychological safety—ensuring that employees feel secure enough to discuss workplace mistreatment without fear of repercussions. Monteiro and Joseph (2023) emphasize that fostering open conversations about the mental health impact of bullying is essential to creating healthier, more inclusive work environments.

2.4.2 Workplace Bullying in Global South Countries

Workplace bullying is a serious issue worldwide, but it tends to have an even greater impact in the Global South, where cultural, economic, and historical factors make the problem even more complex (Ariza-Montes, Muniz, Leal-Rodríguez & Leal-Millán, 2014). Unlike in the Global North, where workplace mistreatment is often addressed through legal protections and individual rights, many countries in the Global South face additional challenges—such as economic instability, colonial histories, and rigid workplace hierarchies—that allow bullying to go unchecked (León-Pérez, Escartín & Giorgi, 2021). Countries like South Africa, India, and Brazil show how economic pressures and cultural norms can make it even harder for employees to challenge unfair treatment.

Economic insecurity plays a huge role in why workplace bullying is so difficult to confront in the Global South. In South Africa, for instance, a highly competitive job market and high unemployment rates force many employees to endure bullying because speaking out could mean losing their livelihood (Loi & Lam, 2015). In India,

an oversupply of workers in some industries makes employees feel easily replaceable, discouraging them from reporting mistreatment out of fear of being pushed out (León-Pérez et al., 2021). Similarly, in Brazil, extreme economic inequality and a reliance on informal jobs leave many workers with no real recourse when they face mistreatment—they fear the economic and social consequences of speaking up (León-Pérez et al., 2021). These realities create workplaces where bullying is not only common but also incredibly difficult to challenge, trapping employees in cycles of fear and silence.

The lasting impact of colonialism plays a powerful role in shaping workplace dynamics across the Global South. Many countries have inherited rigid, hierarchical structures that not only normalize bullying but, in some cases, make it seem like a legitimate part of professional life. In nations like India, South Africa, and Kenya, deep-rooted cultural expectations around respect for authority and obedience—often tied to colonial legacies—contribute to environments where bullying is either overlooked or accepted as the norm (Strauss, 2021).

In South Africa, for example, the effects of apartheid still shape power dynamics, particularly in schools and workplaces, where employees and teachers often hesitate to challenge their superiors out of fear of retaliation (Castleberry, 2021). In India, caste-based hierarchies make it even harder to recognize and report bullying, as individuals from lower social groups may feel powerless to speak out (D'Cruz, 2014). In these settings, many workers internalize the idea that enduring mistreatment is simply part of the job—an attitude reinforced by cultural norms and economic instability (Pheko, Monteiro & Segopolo, 2017).

The stigma around mental health in countries like Nigeria and Kenya makes the psychological toll of workplace bullying even worse. Instead of being recognized as a serious issue, the emotional distress caused by bullying is often dismissed as personal weakness. This creates a culture of silence, where victims feel too ashamed or embarrassed to seek help (Namie & Namie, 2004). The problem is made worse by a lack of institutional support and legal protections, leaving many workers with no real options for addressing the mistreatment they face (Easteal & Ballard, 2017). Without meaningful structural changes, these deeply ingrained power dynamics will continue

to fuel workplace bullying, making it even harder for marginalized employees to feel safe, valued, and respected.

2.4.2 Comparison of Workplace Bullying: Global North vs. Global South

When comparing workplace bullying in the Global North and the Global South, stark differences emerge—not just in how bullying manifests but also in the structural factors that enable it. In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, workplace bullying is often addressed through legal protections, psychological safety initiatives, and individual rights frameworks. These nations have established policies and reporting mechanisms aimed at protecting employees from harassment and mistreatment. For instance, Germany’s General Equal Treatment Act works to prevent workplace discrimination and bullying, while in the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recognizes the impact of workplace harassment on mental health (Lippel, 2010).

Despite these legal safeguards, underreporting remains a significant issue in the Global North. Many employees hesitate to come forward due to fear of retaliation, unclear definitions of what constitutes bullying, or concerns about professional consequences (Reddy & Naidu, 2024). Even when legal avenues are available, workplace cultures that emphasize individualism can leave victims feeling isolated, making it harder to rally collective support (Yamada, 2011). While workers in these regions may be more likely to pursue formal complaints, the process can be emotionally draining, and success is not always guaranteed.

In contrast, workplace bullying in the Global South is shaped by different cultural, economic, and historical factors. Here, legal protections are often weaker, and deeply entrenched hierarchical structures make it difficult for victims to challenge mistreatment. Economic insecurity, social stigma, and colonial legacies create environments where speaking out against bullying can come with severe personal and professional risks. In many Global South countries, confronting authority—especially in workplaces that emphasize rigid hierarchies—can result in job loss, social ostracism, or even physical danger.

For example, in South Africa, teachers who experience bullying from school principals often feel powerless to report it, fearing career repercussions or alienation from their professional community (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015). The high unemployment rate further discourages workers from speaking out, as they worry about being seen as "troublemakers" in an already competitive job market. Similarly, in India, where job security is precarious and labour unions have weakened over time, workers may feel compelled to tolerate bullying to maintain positive relationships with supervisors or employers (Castleberry, 2021). Cultural values that emphasize respect for authority and silence about workplace conflicts further reinforce the normalization of bullying behaviours. In many cases, what might be recognized as bullying in other settings is simply dismissed as "part of the job" or an expected part of professional life.

While workplace bullying is a global issue, the way it is experienced and addressed varies depending on structural, legal, and cultural factors. In the Global North, formal protections exist but often fail to fully prevent mistreatment due to workplace cultures of silence and isolation. Meanwhile, in the Global South, economic and social barriers make it far more difficult for victims to seek justice, allowing bullying to persist as an unchecked reality for many workers. Creating safer workplaces requires not just stronger policies, but also cultural shifts that empower employees to challenge mistreatment without fear of retaliation or economic hardship.

2.5 Race and Workplace Bullying

De Vos (2010) identified race as a significant factor that can increase teachers' vulnerability to bullying, highlighting how teachers belonging to racial minorities might be targeted simply because of their race. This resonates with my own experiences as a queer Black female teacher—being in a minority group often means facing heightened scrutiny, where misunderstandings can easily arise and be weaponized against marginalized individuals. De Vos (2010) further suggests that miscommunication between different racial groups in the workplace can contribute to bullying, as teachers from diverse backgrounds may unintentionally misinterpret each other's working styles. From my perspective, these tensions create a hostile environment where differences become focal points of criticism, enabling bullying to take root.

While slavery has been legally abolished, deeply ingrained racial prejudices continue to shape social and professional interactions, perpetuating disparities in power and authority. Hollis (2020) argues that workplace bullying often stems from power imbalances, with those in dominant racial groups leveraging systemic privilege to assert control over marginalized individuals. Within this framework, darker-skinned individuals are frequently stereotyped as possessing physical strength and endurance but are denied access to intellectual and financial power, which is disproportionately conferred upon those with lighter skin (Hollis, 2020). These racialized power dynamics are particularly visible in educational institutions, where Black teachers often encounter obstacles to career progression, lack of professional recognition, and exclusion from the broader workplace community.

The intersection of race and workplace bullying is highlighted in literature showing that racial minorities are often disproportionately targeted in professional environments. Miller (2021) found that employees from racial minority backgrounds, especially Black individuals, are more likely to face workplace bullying, including micromanagement, exclusion from decision-making, and professional undermining. Cunniff (2011) adds that racialized bullying frequently occurs in subtle and covert ways, like withholding information, marginalizing individuals, and denying leadership opportunities. While these forms of bullying may not be as overt as verbal abuse or physical intimidation, they can have lasting effects on the mental health and career paths of Black professionals, including teachers.

Moreover, Dickens et al. (2020) introduce the concept of "double jeopardy," which highlights how Black women face workplace bullying at the intersection of both race and gender, making them even more vulnerable. As Crenshaw (1991) explains with her theory of intersectionality, Black women often experience compounded forms of discrimination that are different from those faced by White women or Black men. This is particularly visible in education, where Black female teachers tend to take on more administrative tasks without recognition, are passed over for leadership roles, and face disciplinary actions more often than their White colleagues. This resonates deeply with my own experiences, where my racial identity, along with my gender and queer identity, made the bullying I experienced more frequent and intense.

Institutional factors play a crucial role in the racialization of workplace bullying. Shelton (2015) and Ojedokun et al. (2014) argue that bullying thrives in environments where there are rigid hierarchical structures, systemic inequalities, and a lack of anti-racist policies. These institutional failings create an environment where discriminatory behaviours go unchecked, and marginalized groups are often left without protection or recourse. The absence of clear accountability or support systems allows racialized bullying to persist, making it harder for individuals, particularly those from minority racial backgrounds, to feel safe or empowered to speak out. In such contexts, racial minorities often lack institutional protection, making it easier for bullying behaviours to persist unchecked. This reality is further exacerbated by leadership failures, as many organizations—including schools—fail to acknowledge the racialized dimensions of workplace bullying. Hodson et al. (2006) explain that institutions with weak organizational coherence often become breeding grounds for bullying, particularly when there is a lack of accountability for discriminatory behaviours. This is reflected in my own workplace experience, where acts of exclusion, professional undermining, and racial stereotyping were either dismissed or normalized, making it impossible to seek recourse.

In the education sector, Black teachers often feel undervalued and isolated in White institutions, where implicit biases and exclusionary practices remain deeply embedded (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013). I have lived these realities firsthand, navigating an environment where I was expected to work twice as hard to prove my competence while enduring exclusion and hostility shaped by racial bias. As a Black queer female teacher, the intersection of my identities made me especially vulnerable to bullying, as my very presence disrupted the traditional power structures within the school. Furthermore, South Africa's historical context cannot be ignored in discussions of racialized workplace bullying. The legacy of apartheid continues to shape workplace relations, with Black professionals often facing systemic barriers to career progression (Cunniff, 2011).

Reflecting on these persistent challenges, it becomes evident that workplace bullying is not merely an interpersonal issue but rather a reflection of deeply entrenched

societal norms that allow discrimination to persist. As Crenshaw (2017) asserts, addressing workplace bullying requires an intersectional approach that accounts for the ways in which race, gender, and other identities interact to shape individuals' experiences. This necessitates institutional changes, including anti-racist training, stronger legal frameworks, and policies that actively address racialized bullying. Without such interventions, workplace bullying will continue to disproportionately affect Black professionals, perpetuating cycles of exclusion, marginalization, and psychological harm.

2.6 Gender and Workplace bullying

Gender is a significant factor influencing workplace bullying, as patriarchal power structures continue to shape professional environments. Research consistently demonstrates that women, particularly those in leadership positions or non-conforming gender roles, experience higher rates of workplace bullying than their male counterparts (Salin & Hoel, 2013). As a queer Black female teacher, my experiences align with these findings, illustrating how gender-based discrimination intersects with other identity markers to exacerbate workplace victimization.

Studies suggest that gender not only determines the likelihood of experiencing workplace bullying but also influences the nature of bullying behaviours (Salin & Hoel, 2013). Early research primarily focused on male perpetrators and female victims; however, contemporary studies reveal that both men and women can be perpetrators and victims, albeit in different ways (Einarsen et al., 2020). Women are more likely to be subjected to covert forms of bullying, such as social exclusion, rumour-spreading, and professional undermining, while men more often experience overt forms, such as verbal aggression and direct intimidation (Björkqvist et al., 1994). These gendered patterns of workplace bullying reflect broader societal expectations about how men and women should behave.

The relationship between gender and workplace bullying becomes even more intricate when minority status is considered. Wang and Hsieh (2016) examined workplace bullying in Taiwan's public sector and found that male minority employees experienced higher levels of bullying than their female counterparts. This indicates that workplace

victimization is not solely dictated by gender but is also influenced by one's position within a power hierarchy (Eriksen & Einarsen, 2004). Social dominance theory offers a valuable perspective on this, asserting that dominant groups sustain their power by marginalizing weaker or minority groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In this context, male employees in female-dominated workplaces may be particularly vulnerable to bullying, as they are perceived as outsiders disrupting the established social structure.

Supervisor gender significantly influences workplace bullying experiences. Wang and Hsieh (2016) found that employees collaborating with male supervisors reported higher levels of workplace bullying compared to those with female supervisors. This finding aligns with gender role theory, which suggests that men and women exhibit distinct leadership styles—male supervisors are more likely to adopt authoritative and competitive management approaches, while female supervisors tend to foster collaborative and empathetic work environments (Kidder, 2002; Hofstede, 2001). Additionally, research indicates that male-dominated leadership structures can create environments where bullying behaviours are tolerated or even encouraged, particularly against female subordinates (Salin, 2003). Workplace cultures that emphasize toughness and competitiveness further reinforce these dynamics, especially when male supervisors establish aggressive behavioural norms (Neuman & Baron, 2003).

Women who experience workplace bullying often endure both overt and covert forms of aggression. Namie and Namie (2021) found that female employees are more likely to face relational aggression, including exclusion from key decision-making processes, the belittling of their professional capabilities, and the deliberate undermining of their work. This aligns with research by Hutchinson and Jackson (2022), which highlights that workplace bullying against women is frequently insidious, manifesting through exclusion, gossip, and the devaluation of their expertise rather than direct confrontation.

Gendered workplace bullying is especially prevalent in male-dominated professions, where women face heightened scrutiny and pressure to conform to male-centric workplace norms (Okechukwu et al., 2014). In the education sector, although women

make up the majority of the workforce, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles. In this context, gendered workplace bullying often takes the form of systemic barriers to career advancement, such as exclusion from promotion opportunities, excessive administrative workloads without formal recognition, and microaggressions that undermine their authority in the classroom (Kelan, 2020). These challenges reflect broader societal expectations that women should be nurturing, submissive, and deferential to male authority, leading to resistance when they assert themselves in professional settings (Smith et al., 2019).

2.7 Queer Identity, Sexual Orientation and Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying remains a deeply rooted issue, especially for those who do not conform to heteronormative expectations. Research shows that queer employees often face higher levels of mistreatment, largely because cultural and institutional biases fail to protect them (Taylor & Kearney, 2018). My journey as a queer Black female beginner teacher has made this reality painfully clear—where my identity did not just set me apart but made me more vulnerable to targeted bullying. This study reflects what so many LGBTQI+ educators, particularly those from marginalized racial backgrounds, experience daily: systemic discrimination, harassment, and exclusion that not only wear down their well-being but also limit their opportunities to gain experience and thrive in their careers.

Bullying against LGBTQI+ individuals in professional spaces often shows up in both obvious and subtle ways. Overt bullying can take the form of verbal harassment, public humiliation, and blatant discrimination, while covert bullying is more insidious exclusion, microaggressions, and the quiet denial of opportunities (Rollins, 2024). In my experience, the bullying I faced was not always loud or direct, but it was just as damaging. It came through professional sidelining, coded homophobic remarks, and a glaring absence of institutional support. These moments reinforced what research has long shown—heteronormative workplace cultures do not just fail to acknowledge queer identities; they actively push them to the margins.

Institutional biases make this problem even worse, allowing workplace bullying against LGBTQI+ individuals to persist unchecked. Schools, like many workplaces, are built

around traditional norms that often exclude and silence queer identities (Vijayakumar & Rajagopal, 2013). This exclusion is especially stark in faith-based or conservative institutions, where discrimination is often justified on religious grounds. My experience reflects what Alichie (2023) describes—how Christian-value-driven schools reinforce exclusionary attitudes toward queer individuals. In these spaces, bullying is not always name-calling or outright hostility; sometimes, it is the pressure to hide who you are, the public shaming by school leadership, or the use of morality as an excuse for exclusion.

Workplace bullying thrives in environments where silence and complicity allow it to go unchecked (Parker et al., 2022). Many of my colleagues, though not solely responsible for the bullying, chose to look the other way—whether out of fear of retaliation, personal biases, or simply a belief that it was not their problem. This reflects the bystander effect, a well-documented workplace phenomenon where people hesitate to step in due to power dynamics and self-preservation (Hollis, 2018). In my case, the silence of those around me, combined with a lack of institutional support, made it easier for the mistreatment to continue. Research confirms that in workplaces without strong diversity policies and explicit LGBTQI+ protections, queer employees are far more vulnerable to bullying and exclusion (Hodson et al., 2006).

This issue is not unique to one place—it is a global reality for many LGBTQI+ professionals. Studies have shown that disparities in workplace treatment exist based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and workplace culture. In Spain, for example, 21.2% of LGBTQI+ employees reported experiencing workplace harassment, with transgender individuals facing the highest risks—33.6% reported bullying, compared to 19.5% of their cisgender peers (Devís-Devís et al., 2022). Within that group, trans women were the most vulnerable, with a staggering 45.5% experiencing workplace harassment. These numbers are not just statistics—they reflect the lived experiences of so many who, like me, have been made to feel unwelcome simply for existing as their authentic selves.

Similar trends have been observed in the United States, where 37.7% of LGBTQI+ workers reported experiencing workplace discrimination, with transgender employees

facing higher rates of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment compared to their cisgender LGB peers (Sears, Mallory, Flores & Conron, 2021). Research also shows that male-dominated workplace cultures tend to foster environments where discrimination is not only tolerated but often reinforced, further marginalizing queer employees (Whitaker, 2012). There are also notable disparities within the LGBTQI+ community itself; for example, gay men in Spain reported higher rates of workplace harassment (23%) compared to lesbians (15.7%) and bisexuals (15.8%) (Devís-Devís et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the pressing need for organizations to establish strong anti-discrimination policies, promote inclusive leadership, and create supportive work environments where everyone—regardless of their identity—can thrive.

Power dynamics play a huge role in shaping the experiences of LGBTQI+ employees who face workplace bullying. As a beginner teacher, I was at the bottom of the school hierarchy, which left me especially vulnerable to mistreatment from more senior educators and management. This reflects what workplace bullying research has long suggested—those with less institutional power are at greater risk (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015). But my experience reveals that powerlessness is not just about job position. It is also shaped by identity—my sexual orientation, race, and gender all influenced how I was treated and how powerless I felt in certain situations.

The culture of an organization can either protect or harm employees, and research shows that workplaces built on competition and rigid authority structures are more likely to be hostile toward queer employees (Neuman & Baron, 2003). In these environments, bullying is not always seen as aggression—it is often disguised as "corrective" behaviour, meant to enforce traditional norms around identity and professionalism. This reflects the broader pressures that queer individuals face in society, where acceptance often feels conditional on conforming to heteronormative expectations (Zetterlund, 2021). In reality, this kind of culture does not just harm LGBTQI+ employees—it limits diversity, inclusion, and the overall well-being of the workplace.

2.8 The Influence of Power Relationships on Bullying

Power dynamics shape every workplace, influencing how people interact and whether bullying is allowed to thrive. As Hodson (2021) points out, imbalances in authority, influence, or job security can either prevent or encourage bullying. When someone holds more power, they may use it to intimidate or exclude those with less leverage. Shelton (2015) explains that bullying often flourishes in environments where there is a clear power gap, leaving victims feeling defenceless. Similarly, Ojedokun et al. (2014) emphasize that when employees feel powerless and unsupported, bullying becomes even more rampant. This highlights that workplace bullying is not just about individual behaviour—it is deeply tied to structural inequalities and the way power is distributed within an organization.

Job insecurity only adds fuel to the fire. According to Hodson et al. (2006), stable employment builds trust, while uncertainty—caused by things like restructuring or leadership changes—creates fear and tension. In workplaces where people feel their jobs are on the line, professionalism can break down, leading to more bullying as employees scramble to protect their positions. In these situations, those in power may take advantage of vulnerable employees, while victims often stay silent, fearing retaliation or job loss (Cannon Jr, 2020). Often, bullying in these environments is disguised as “performance management” or professional feedback, but in reality, it is a way to marginalize or push out employees seen as a threat to authority.

However, organizations can disrupt these harmful power dynamics. Holland (2018) argues that bullying is less likely to take hold in workplaces with strong leadership, clear decision-making, and open communication. Hodson et al. (2006) add that institutions that protect lower-status employees and ensure power is exercised ethically create safer environments for everyone. Schools and other professional spaces that prioritize fair leadership, inclusive policies, and accountability are more effective in preventing abuse. Ojedokun et al. (2014) suggest that organizations should actively address power imbalances by promoting diversity, equity, and anti-bullying policies that specifically protect marginalized employees.

The impact of power and bullying is even more severe for employees from marginalized backgrounds. Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality theory explains how

overlapping identities—such as race, gender, and sexual orientation—shape workplace experiences. Employees who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, like Black queer women or junior staff in male-dominated fields, face compounded disadvantages. Hodson et al. (2006) point out that power imbalances in these cases are not just about job titles; they reflect systemic barriers that keep marginalized individuals in lower positions. To build truly inclusive workplaces, organizations must not only acknowledge how power fuels bullying but also commit to structural changes that protect all employees from mistreatment.

The intersection of power, workplace bullying, and identity is especially significant for employees from marginalized backgrounds. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory sheds light on how multiple aspects of identity—like race, gender, and sexual orientation—interact to shape an individual's experience of workplace oppression. Employees who belong to multiple marginalized groups, such as Black queer women or junior staff in male-dominated fields, face compounded vulnerabilities. Hodson et al. (2006) emphasize that power imbalances in these cases are not just about job titles; they are about systemic barriers that keep marginalized individuals in subordinate positions. To create truly inclusive and equitable workplaces, organizations must not only recognize how power disparities fuel workplace bullying but also commit to meaningful structural changes that protect all employees from mistreatment.

2.9 Synthesis of the Literature Findings

After the in-depth review of my literature, several aspects emerged from the existing literature. There is a relation between the aspects constructing my teacher identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher who experienced workplace bullying. In the next section, I outline and summarise all the key findings by referring to the existing literature:

- Workplace bullying is unpleasant behaviour towards a co-worker, whether aware or unaware. It is a severe issue that needs to be managed to have a healthy working environment (De Vos, 2010; Hodgkins & McNamara, 2019; Ojedokun et al., 2014).
- Repeated, intentional, and aggressive behaviour involving a power imbalance Takes various forms: verbal abuse, intimidation, professional sabotage,

exclusion. Systemic issue embedded in institutional power structures, especially in hierarchical settings like schools (Olweus, 2013; Ojedokun et al., 2014; Einarsen et al., 2020).

- Bullies justify their actions as necessary for achieving workplace goals. Victims often perceived as lacking assertiveness, making them more vulnerable. Hierarchical structures facilitate bullying, particularly from superiors. Lack of strong anti-bullying policies and weak enforcement exacerbate the issue (De Wet, 2014; Neall et al., 2021; Braithwaite, 2008; De Wet, 2010).
- Leads to anxiety, depression, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction. Physical health effects include stress-induced illnesses. Victims may withdraw from professional and social interactions. Lowers morale, increases absenteeism, and affects productivity. Diminishes teamwork and fosters a culture of fear and disengagement. High turnover rates weaken institutional stability (Blase et al., 2008; Magee et al., 2017; Namie & Namie, 2009; Peyton, 2003; George, 2023; Hoel & Cooper, 2000).
- Black teachers face professional exclusion and additional scrutiny. Structural racism contributes to systemic workplace bullying. Women, particularly in leadership roles, experience higher rates of covert bullying. Gendered expectations reinforce exclusion and professional undermining. LGBTQI+ teachers face both overt discrimination and subtle exclusion. Schools with rigid heteronormative cultures perpetuate workplace victimization (Vijayakumar & Rajagopal, 2013; De Vos, 2010; Cunniff, 2011; Salin & Hoel, 2013; Hutchinson & Jackson, 2022; Taylor & Kearney, 2018).
- Power imbalances enable bullying, particularly in rigid hierarchical structures. Job insecurity increases vulnerability to bullying. Organizational interventions, such as strong leadership accountability and diversity policies, can mitigate bullying (Ojedokun et al., 2014; Shelton, 2015; Hodson et al., 2006).
- Workplace bullying on beginner teachers is prevalent, especially if they are classified according to their gender and race. As much as we live in post-apartheid South Africa, it is unfortunate that our past is following us in the present. Queer Black female teachers are easily subjected to workplace bullying because they form part of the LGBTQI+ community, which is hardly accepted, and their skin colour pushes them into the minority race group in

private schools (De Vos, 2010; Fajana, Owoyemi, Shadare, Elegbede, & Gbajumo-Sheriff, 2011; Hodson et al., 2006; Hollis, 2020).

2.10 Conceptual Framing of My Study

My framework is designed based on the conceptual framework of Hodson et al.'s theory of bullying (2006). The framing focuses on power and powerlessness as the first dimension and organisational coherence as the second dimension, both of which are interlinked. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the conceptual framework: Hodson et al., (2006) theory of bullying in the workplace. Then, I looked at how workplace bullying is influenced by race and gender. Thereafter, I discuss the design of my conceptual framing for this study. Furthermore, I link the conceptual framework of Hodson et al., (2006) to my study and conclude the sections of the literature review and conceptual framework.

Conceptual framework is a basic analysis of other theories that acts as a guide for creating the justifications you will employ in your own work (Nord, 2019). In addition to giving the literature review structure or a focal topic, it also establishes the procedures followed and the way the data is analysed. The chosen conceptual framing was based on Hodson et al.'s (2006) theory of 'Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Context'. I tailored the conceptual framework of workplace bullying, adapted, and expanded from Hodson et al. (2006) two-dimensional model to align with my lived experiences of a queer Black female beginner teacher.

2.11 Overview of Hodson's Theory of Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Contexts

This study employed Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model to see if my experiences with workplace bullying support the idea that being bullied was a result of both the victim's (my) lack of control and the lack of order or stability inside the organisation. Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory engages with workplace bullying within the context of the school and the interactions taking place.

Shelton (2015) and Ojedokun et al., (2014) identify numerous factors that contribute to environments where bullying can take place, emphasizing that bullying is often the result of broader circumstances rather than just isolated harmful actions. Hodson et al. (2006) condense each of these components into two dimensions. According to their research, schools can take steps to reduce the likelihood that their instructors will experience bullying and should do so (Hodson et al., 2006). There are two interconnected dimensions at play, according to Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional model of bullying. The relationship of helplessness inside the organisation is the subject of the first dimension. Organisational coherence is the name given to the second dimension.

2.11.1 Power and Powerlessness as the First Dimension

Fundamentally, power and helplessness are related. There are several different power dynamics at play. Individuals with less power—such as those belonging to a minority group, working in precarious employment, or holding lower-skilled positions—are at a higher risk of being bullied. The model also aims to show how the abuse of power can take different forms or be managed in various organisational circumstances. According to Hodson et al., (2006), bullying is less likely to occur in an atmosphere where there is accountability and transparency. According to Bloch, there is a “toxic mix” that keeps South African schools from improving. This involves the uncertainty of employment (powerlessness) and ongoing organisational change in the field of education (Bloch, 2008). According to Hodson et al. (2006), this results in bullying at work.

2.11.2 Organisational Coherence as the Second Dimension

Working in a company with organisational issues (such as poor management, ineffective leadership, or an unstable work environment) makes one more stressed overall, which can affect job satisfaction, self-confidence, productivity, and health. This can influence a person’s vulnerability to bullying as well as the productivity, expenses, culture, and reputation of their school or place of employment (De Wet, 2014b). In South Africa, there are about twelve million learners enrolled in 27,000 schools, with about 400,000 teachers. Unfortunately, there are many schools with organisational issues because there are not enough managers who can operate our schools effectively (Bloch, 2009). The best way to investigate workplace bullying in schools

may be using Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory because there are so many poorly managed schools (on levels that go beyond mere organisational issues).

2.11.3 Teacher Bullying Based on Race

Race has been recognized as a significant factor in workplace bullying, particularly within educational institutions. De Vos (2010) asserts that teachers from racial minority groups may be disproportionately targeted for mistreatment. They attribute this, in part, to communication barriers between racial groups, which may result in misinterpretations of work styles and expectations, fostering conflict and hostility (De Vos, 2021). Other scholars echo these findings, emphasizing that workplace bullying often reflects broader societal power structures and racial hierarchies. According to Bergbom and Vartia (2021), racialized workplace bullying is a manifestation of systemic discrimination, where minority educators may be subjected to exclusion, verbal abuse, and professional undermining. Their research highlights how racialized bullying can lead to increased stress, burnout, and a diminished sense of belonging among affected teachers (Spady, 2023).

Furthermore, Lewis et al. (2019) argue that racial microaggressions—subtle yet pervasive forms of discrimination—contribute to workplace bullying in education. These microaggressions may include dismissive attitudes toward minority teachers' contributions, differential treatment in workload distribution, and lack of support from colleagues and administrators (Lavan III, 2024). Such experiences create a toxic work environment that reinforces racial disparities and marginalization. Additionally, research by Salin and Hoel (2020) suggests that institutional policies and leadership play a crucial role in either mitigating or perpetuating racially motivated workplace bullying. Weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies and a lack of diversity in leadership positions can contribute to a culture where racialized bullying goes unchallenged, further entrenching systemic inequalities (Salin & Hoel, 2020). Collectively, these perspectives underscore the complex interplay between race, power, and workplace bullying, highlighting the need for initiative-taking measures—such as inclusive policies, cultural competence training, and stronger institutional accountability—to protect minority educators from racialized mistreatment.

2.11.4 Teacher Bullying Based on Sexual Orientation

Academic institutions are not just places where we learn—they are complex environments shaped by power dynamics, rivalries, ideological differences, and deep-seated biases. In these spaces, workplace bullying can take many forms, often targeting people based on their gender or sexual orientation. In Lebanon, for example, where patriarchal values are still deeply rooted, men often hold the power as dominant decision-makers and authority figures (Hamieh & Usta, 2011). On the other hand, women are often expected to be submissive, obedient, and the primary caregivers (Hamieh & Usta, 2011). These rigid gender expectations spill into professional settings, where a clear hierarchy and bureaucracy often leave female teachers more vulnerable to workplace bullying than their male counterparts.

Previous studies report that workplace bullying differs across gender (Salin, 2021; Wang & Hsieh, 2016). The literature has illustrated that women are more likely to become victims of workplace bullying than men. This was also documented among schoolteachers (Taylor & Kearney, 2018). The existence of this gender difference can be attributed to social dominance theory, which states that in a society where power hierarchies exist, social groups will dominate other groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The dominant groups preserve their power by enforcing diverse forms of oppression on the less fortunate groups. As such, the differential exposure to workplace bullying by people can be attributed to cultural disposition and the social construction of gender (Gilbert, Raffo & Sutarso, 2013).

Whether a worker's gender makes them more likely to be bullied is another topic of discussion. The common misconception and argument are that male figures are more prone to engaging in behaviour of bullying and that women are more often the victims of bullying (Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021). Owing to the masculinity of men, everyone can argue that they are “bullies” at work. However, both sexes bully co-workers, although women are more frequently targeted, according to WBI-Zogby Survey research (Martinez, 2020). Being a woman in the teaching profession has been noted as a personal trait that may increase victims' propensity to become victims (De Vos, 2010).

In our language, “Indoda ayikhali,” meaning men do not cry, has led us to believe that most cases are mostly about women. It is also important to recognise that women who

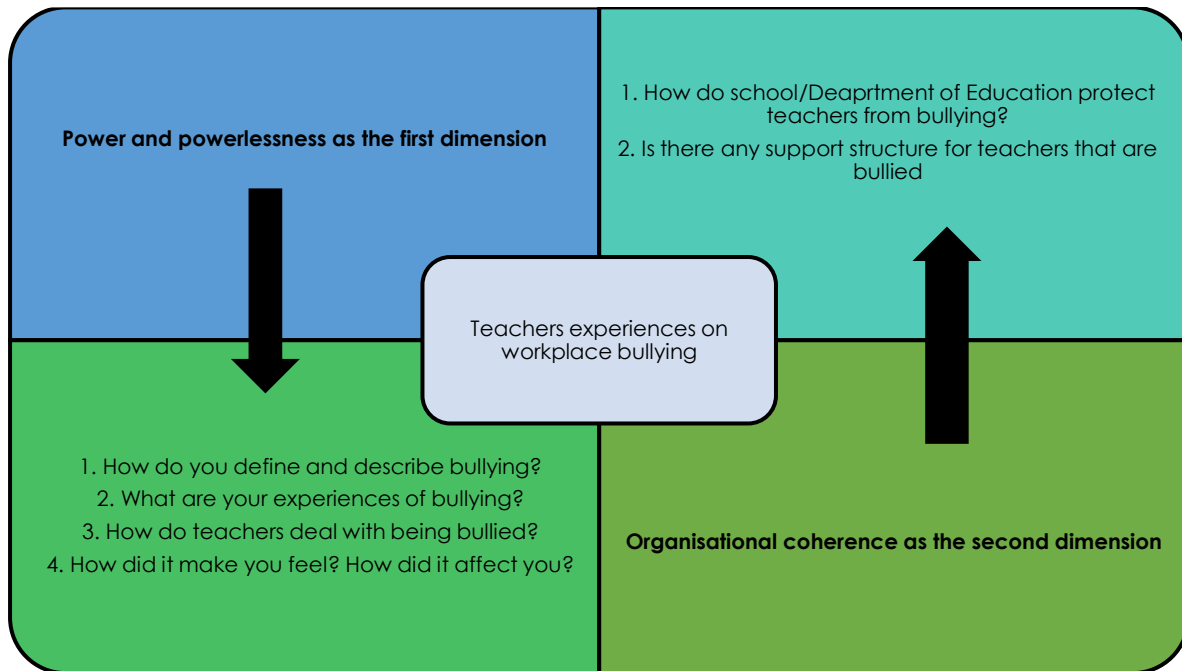
have been bullied report their experiences more often than men (Fajana et al., 2011). Owing to male reluctance to discuss inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, they rarely report such conduct (Fajana et al., 2011). Male educators may be reluctant to share their stories for fear of coming across as weak and defenceless. To lessen the stigma attached to men disclosing their experiences of abuse, academic articles must also pay attention to men's opinions of and experiences with bullying at work.

Research indicates that LGBTQI+ teachers frequently face microaggressions, exclusion from professional networks, and direct harassment due to their perceived deviation from heteronormative expectations (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). In some cases, they are subjected to biased evaluations, lack of career advancement opportunities, and social isolation from colleagues. The fear of being outed or judged often leads to self-censorship, limiting their ability to express themselves freely and fully engage with their profession. Additionally, in societies where masculinity is strongly tied to authority, male teachers who do not conform to traditional masculine norms—such as those perceived as effeminate or openly queer—may also face bullying, as their identities are seen as a disruption to expected gender roles.

2.12 Designing a Conceptual Framework for My Study

In the following diagram (Figure 2.1), the dimensions serve as analytical, comparative, and interpretive lenses for workplace bullying.

Figure 2.1: Tailored conceptual framework of workplace bullying, adapted and expanded from Hodson et al. (2006) two-dimensional model to align with my lived experiences of a queer Black female beginner teacher.



2.12.1 Functioning of the Dimensions

In designing this conceptual framing, I used Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory of bullying, as it supports the idea that being bullied is a result of both the victim's powerlessness and the chaos inside the organisation (Hodson et al., 2006). The study's focus was on the experiences of workplace bullying of a queer Black female beginner teacher. In my case, the organisation mentioned by Hodson et al., (2006) refers to a school environment. Nonetheless, the powerlessness is based on my experiences of being bullied in the workplace.

According to Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory of bullying, the two dimensions are interconnected. The first dimension refers to a lack of power, while the second relates to organizational coherence. In schools, power dynamics are shaped

by different leadership structures, with administrators and those in higher positions holding more influence (Aspinall, Jacobs & Frey, 2021). Unfortunately, individuals with less authority—such as teachers who do not hold administrative roles—are more vulnerable to bullying.

According to Hodson et al., (2006), bullying is rare in workplaces where transparency and accountability are upheld. However, my experience—as well as that of many other educators—reveals a different reality. The toxicity in South African schools makes it clear that creating a healthy and supportive work environment remains an ongoing struggle, a ‘long walk to freedom’ (Bloch, 2009). Job insecurity, a key aspect of organizational coherence, continues to plague the education system, leaving many teachers vulnerable to mistreatment and instability (Bloch, 2008). In my own journey, I have seen how these factors contribute to workplace bullying, reinforcing the patterns that Hodson et al., (2006) describe. Without meaningful interventions, the cycle persists, making it even harder for marginalized educators to thrive.

A poor leadership working environment leads to higher levels of general stress. This could lead to one being exposed to bullying because of lower job satisfaction and low productivity. It can compress one to being powerless when the one in power uses the opportunity to bully the powerless one (De Wet, 2014b). South Africa, with its shortage of teachers and high numbers of learners, lacks accountable school managers. This leads to an imbalance of power and a lack of organisational coherence. Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory is the best method for addressing teachers’ experiences in workplace bullying.

These dimensions serve as analytical, comparative, and interpretive lenses for workplace bullying. Hodson et al., (2006) reviewed prior research on organisational life to assess bullying model theories. The illusive, unstructured workplace behaviours were discovered through ethnographic research. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events (Cootes, 2024). Numerous modifications were added, some of which were previously only employed in studies of lone firms or workplaces. This produced extensive, content-coded data on bullying. Additionally, certain organisational trends were made clear (Hodson et al., 2006).

Bullying was described as behaviour that includes overt emotional abuse, humiliation, and torment by someone in a position of authority. As a result, the trust dynamics within a company may suffer greatly. In-depth observations were used in the Hodson et al., (2006) study to understand the nature of bullying. Bullying frequently takes place in a subtle, covert, or hidden way. The linear model used allowed for general bullying trends. De Wet used Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional model of bullying to examine the risk factors for workplace bullying. De Wet (2014b) discovered that certain factors (aspects within an organisation) can lead to more confusion or issues, giving the bully more power and the victim almost no voice. The researcher was able to recognise and characterise the complete range of teachers' experiences of workplace bullying by looking for elements (concepts), including absenteeism, job satisfaction, low morale, and disrespect.

Bullying at work can also result from issues with school administration, inadequate leadership, or a shifting environment brought on by new laws or regulations. The two-dimensional model helps by examining "the roles of relational power and organisational chaos" to examine teachers' experiences with workplace bullying (De Wet, 2014b). If being without control and having an unstable or poorly managed school are the main risk factors for bullying, then educational institutions need to consider ways to stabilise their institutions and get rid of poor management to close any potential windows of opportunity that bullies – typically those in positions of authority – might exploit to target beginner or insecure teachers.

2.12.2 Suitability of the Conceptual Framework for this Study

Hodson et al., (2006) theory gave meaning to my study by exploring my experiences of workplace bullying in two dimensions. The dimension made me see how race and gender influence workplace bullying inside the organisation. As gender and race fall under the second dimension, they give context to the interaction taking place in an organisation, which leads to bullying. Shelton (2015) and Ojedokun et al. (2014) state that there are contributing factors that subject employees to bullying, which, in my case, were influenced by race and gender (in the form of sexual orientation). All the factors are summarised using the two dimensions in Hodson et al., (2006) theory.

According to Hodson et al., (2006) research, schools can take steps to reduce the likelihood that their instructors will experience bullying and should do so. In the conceptual framing that I designed for this study, the two dimensions of Hodson et al., (2006) are accompanied by questions. In incorporating the questions, there is a clear indication of where the root of the problem lies because they are two sides of the same coin. What a manager deems as a push to achieve the organisational goals can be deemed as bullying to others. With Hodson et al., (2006) theory, my research questions are clear to understand. Moreover, by finding the root of the problems, there is room for change and finding solutions also helps the affected individuals.

The conceptual framework fitted exceptionally well with my study, as it focused first on my experiences of workplace bullying in an organisational context through the process of exploring Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory of bullying. In analysing and interpreting my narratives, I understood that the dimensions coexist, which means that the first dimension, which revolves around power and powerlessness, would be useless without the second dimension, which is organisational coherence. The evidence was there that the first dimension consisted of all experiences of bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher. The second dimension was about what I expected from the school environment and the management. There was a conflict of interest in my experience when it came to the two dimensions. As much as I expected that help would come my way, unfortunately, nothing turned out as expected.

2.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored different authors' voices on workplace bullying and the effect it has on employees and organisations in my literature review. I reviewed all the themes of my study while focusing on my research questions. I then synthesised my literature review findings. I provided an overview of the Hodson et al., (2006) theory of Chaos and the Abuse of Power: Workplace Bullying in Organizational and Interactional Context in 2006 as the conceptual framework. This study employed Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional bullying model to see how race and sexual orientation influence workplace bullying inside an organisation. Through the analysis and interpretation of Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional bullying theory, I developed my own conceptual framing that outlines questions relating to workplace bullying according to Hodson et al., (2006) two-dimensional theory of bullying. In Chapter 3, I

provide details on the methodological approach to the study, which covers the paradigm employed, the research design, data collection and documentation, data analysis, ethical aspects, and the quality measures applied in my study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore my lived experiences of workplace bullying as a Black queer beginner teacher. I made purposeful methodological choices to effectively conduct this study and arrive at my findings. I considered a wide variety of literature on research methodology that is relevant to this study. The research design of a research study plays a significant role in the design of the route of logical methodological strategy (Fellows & Liu, 2021). In this chapter, I described all the aspects of my research methodology; thus, the logical plan I designed to conduct this study. Additionally, I explained the justification for my methodological choices.

3.2 My Paradigmatic Perspectives

Paradigmatic perspectives originate from our worldview. A research paradigm is a collection of assumptions and agreements that professionals within a discipline have regarding how issues should be recognised and managed (Ebohon, Obienu, Irabor, Amadin & Omoregie, 2021). Nonetheless, it is a general perspective on the world. Research paradigms can be identified by their ontology and epistemology (Ebohon et al., 2021). Research relates to how we perceive the world. It explains how we view the world, our perspective of what understanding is, and the justification for understanding. It also contains our beliefs and assumptions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Maree et al., 2017). A paradigm is something we know, see, and recognise through our underlying ontological and epistemological presuppositions. The goal of conducting critical research is to alter the current structures of social organisation (Silverman & Patterson, 2021).

3.2.1 *An Epistemological Perspective*

Epistemology can be described as how we view the world and how we make sense of it. Briefly, epistemology looks at how researchers make meaning of reality and how they reveal knowledge to reach reality (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Kelly, 2021). It is a study of how we come to know certain aspects. Epistemology has the following main elements: positivism (and post-positivism), interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism,

and postmodernism, which assist the researcher in grounding their assumptions of a selected methodology (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

From the variety of epistemology's main elements, I chose the interpretivist research approach as it focuses on understanding how others experience the world (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). In short, interpretivism ensures that we do not generalise because there is constant change in the world by people and the complexity of how unique the world is. Moreover, the focal point should be on understanding and interpreting human nature. Also, there is a relationship between the researcher and society as they influence each other, but the researcher's perspective can influence how the findings are interpreted (Karagiozis, 2018; Holmes, 2020). I chose interpretivism to guide my study because I was sharing my lived experiences on how I experienced workplace bullying. My lived experiences were influenced by a variety of aspects, which included my background, sexual orientation, race, and the fact that I was a beginner teacher. This paradigm supported me and allowed me to be more focused on workplace bullying as a specific topic and lean toward shaping my own reality (Holmes, 2020).

3.2.2 *An Ontological Perspective*

My choice of study methodology was influenced by the world as it is (ontology). Already in 1988, Hudson and Ozane (1988) conceptualised ontology as a phenomenon that is concerned with the nature of reality and existence. It seeks answers from existing knowledge to answer a research question. In this study, I chose the interpretivist approach as my study is socially constructed, which allows researchers to make use of words or photographs to express and describe their lived experiences (Pitard, 2017). I made use of self-reflexivity and memory work to engage with my lived experiences. Self-reflexivity involves reflecting on how our own thoughts, biases, and experiences influence our understanding of the world (Palaganas & Estacio, 2021). So, it reminds us that reality is shaped by our subjective perspectives. This concept relates to ontology since it questions the notion of a fixed reality and emphasises how subjective events shape our perspective of the world (Palaganas & Estacio, 2021). Through this approach, I was able to critically examine how my intersectional identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher influenced my experiences of workplace bullying. Additionally, this methodology provided the

necessary tools to uncover hidden power dynamics and social structures that contributed to my lived reality.

3.2.3 A Qualitative Methodological Perspective

The lens through which you view the world has an influence on how you, as a researcher, gather, generate, and organise data. This study used a qualitative research approach, which uses words instead of numbers as data (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). In the end, this influenced how I analysed and managed the data. Qualitative research plays a role in covering subjective, human experiences and emotions (Lim, 2024). It seeks to give voice to the voiceless and assist in making sense of the world (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa & Varpio, 2015). My form of verbal narratives and descriptions of my experiences as the victim led to my decision to conduct a qualitative study. Using a qualitative approach, I addressed reality from a constructivist perspective and gained various (Bogna, Raineri & Dell, 2020). I was interested in my experiences, how I saw myself and the work environment (setting), and how I interpreted the circumstances considering social roles and structures of qualitative research.

The reason I did not make use of a quantitative research approach was because the findings were generalised. The findings of a qualitative study being descriptive rather than prescriptive is another benefit (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Consequently, my research included an account of my personal experiences. A qualitative research study is also a logical scientific investigation that tries to create a comprehensive, primarily descriptive narrative to help the researcher better comprehend cultural and social phenomena (Tracy, 2024). By using a qualitative methodology, I, the researcher, took centre stage in the study. In conclusion, qualitative research in the study enabled me to give a detailed narrative account of my actions.

3.3 Research Design

Research design is the all-encompassing plan or technique used to properly address a specific research question (Kapur, 2018). To guarantee the research produces accurate and legitimate findings, it entails delineating the framework of the study including the choice of research methods, data collecting strategies, and analytical processes (Hancock, Algozzine, & Lim, 2021). A well-organised research plan helps

to systematically obtain, analyse, and analyse data, therefore improving the credibility and application of the research results (Kapur, 2018). In this section, I explain my choice of autoethnography as a research design. Then, I look at the benefits and limitations of autoethnography and at the critiques of autoethnography as a research design. Moreover, I discuss how the “pitfalls” of an autoethnography are dealt with. Then lastly, I look at the process of data generation and collection, not leaving out the process of data analysis.

3.3.1 *Autoethnography as Research Design*

According to Remler & Van Ryzin (2021), the research design can be thought of as the main strategy or logic outlining how a research study will be conducted. The research design can be seen as the actualisation of logic in a collection of methods that improve the accuracy of data for a particular issue in a study (Gaus, 2017; Coleman, 2022). From the fundamental logical presumptions through to the study plan and data collecting, the research design gives the researcher instructions.

In this study, I employed autoethnography as the research design. Autoethnography involves the researcher being completely engrossed in their own experience while watching, writing, journaling, and reflecting (Edwards, 2021). The explanation of autoethnography that best suits my study is that by Ellis et al. (2011, p. 1):

Autoethnography encompasses three components: 'auto,' referring to the researcher's personal experiences; 'ethno,' pertaining to the understanding of cultural and societal contexts; and 'graphy,' which involves the analytical and descriptive writing process.

My choice of study research methodology was influenced by the world as it is (ontology) and how I intended to create new knowledge about it (epistemology). The same is true for my choice of the research design. It incorporates the political, cultural, and historical context of the individual (Lewis, 2019). It is described as a qualitative research technique using a researcher's personal experiences to explain and evaluate cultural ideas, behaviours, and experiences, autoethnography (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Autoethnography is a deeply personal research method that allowed me to reflect on my own experiences while also analysing them. Instead of trying to be

completely objective, it values personal stories to understand the world (Lewis, 2019; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). By connecting individual experiences with larger cultural and social issues, it helps reveal insights that traditional research might miss.

In the 1980s, there was an increase in postmodernism that opened a path for researchers to question how research was done in the 1980s, especially regarding the social sciences (Ellis et al., 2011). Researchers were concerned about the limitations of the epistemology, ontology, and axiology of the social sciences (Ellis & Bochner, 2002; Pretorius, 2024). Researchers began showing how facts and truths in paradigms that scientists used were intrinsically linked to them. Then, they realised that there were no ambitions in creating, and they concluded that universal expert narratives were impossible (De Certeau, 1984; Lyotard, 1984). This opened a door for relationships between authors, readers, and stories. For example, a 2020 study discusses how large, all-encompassing revolutionary narratives are on the decline, due to the spread of capitalist reforms and liberal ideologies (Tucker, 2020). The revelation was in understanding that stories are complex and that meaningful phenomena teach individuals about morals and ethics, which assist people who are creating their identities and making meaning of themselves and others (Adams, 2008; Bochner, 2002; Poerwandari, 2021).

For two decades, Chang and Anderson (2006) have advocated for analytic autoethnography, which emphasizes objectivity and aims to advance conceptual knowledge of broader phenomena. Analytic autoethnography, as described by Anderson (2006), takes a more structured and research-driven approach. Instead of focusing purely on personal stories and emotions, like evocative autoethnography, it aims to study personal experiences thoughtfully and systematically. Two years later, Chang (2008) concluded that autoethnography presents a tension between subjectivity and objectivity. On one hand, researchers can draw on personal experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives (subjective), while on the other hand, they can rely on factual, unbiased data (objective) (Lim, 2024). The goal is to uncover deeper insights about society and human behaviour, helping to build knowledge that applies to broader social issues. This approach requires researchers to maintain analytical distance, incorporate theoretical frameworks, and engage in systematic data analysis (Elliott & Higgins, 2023).

In contrast, Ellis and Bochner (2002) champion evocative autoethnography, which prioritizes emotional engagement and personal storytelling. This approach allows researchers to deeply immerse themselves in their lived experiences and convey their emotional realities to the audience contexts (Rybicki-Newman, 2024). I align with Ellis and Bochner's (2002) perspective on evocative autoethnography. This approach enabled me to critically reflect on and share my lived experiences, fostering a profound emotional and personal connection to the research process (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016; Lim, 2024). By embracing the subjective nature of autoethnography, I was able to build my identity, make meaning of the world, and engage with the study on a deeper emotional level, which I believe would be restricted by the objectivity of analytic autoethnography.

3.3.2 *Choosing an evocative auto-ethnography*

Evocative autoethnography is a qualitative research method that emphasizes the deep connection between personal experiences and cultural contexts (Rybicki-Newman, 2024). It aims to evoke emotional responses and foster empathy by presenting narratives that resonate with readers on a personal level. Unlike traditional analytical approaches, evocative autoethnography often employs storytelling techniques like those found in novels or biographies, blurring the lines between literature and social science (Poudel, 2023). This method allows researchers to transform private struggles into public discourse, making the research both impactful and culturally significant.

For instance, a recent study employed evocative autoethnography to explore the author's journey of identity formation within the LGBTQ+ community, using personal narratives to highlight the challenges and triumphs faced (McClure, 2021). Another example includes a researcher delving into their experiences with chronic illness, providing insights into the societal perceptions and personal implications of living with such conditions (Synnes, Orøy, Råheim, Bachmann, Ekra, Gjengedal & Lykkeslet, 2020). These studies exemplify how evocative autoethnography can shed light on individual experiences while connecting them to broader cultural and societal themes.

In the context of my research, employing evocative autoethnography was particularly suitable because it allowed for an authentic exploration of my personal experiences within their cultural setting. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the

intricate relationship between self and society, enabling a rich, nuanced narrative that traditional methodologies might not capture (Karalis Noel, Minematsu, & Bosca, 2023). By embracing the evocative nature of this method, the research not only conveys information but also engages readers emotionally, fostering a more profound connection to the subject matter (Karalis Noel et al., 2023). This method gave the freedom to express emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of judgment. Additionally, it helped uncover hidden patterns and themes that might have otherwise been overlooked in more rigid research frameworks.

3.3.3 *Benefits of an Autoethnography*

Chang (2008) enumerates several advantages of autoethnography. One of these is that autoethnography provides a research design that is accommodating to both researchers and readers (Chang, 2008). It is advantageous for the researcher since they always have access to the main source of data because they are the source (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Taherdoost, 2021). Additionally, autoethnographers have an “edge” over other researchers in terms of data collection and analysis since they use “familiar data” (Chang, 2008, p. 52). Recent scholars continue to recognize the advantages of autoethnography, particularly its use of “familiar data” derived from personal experience (Cruz, Hamilton & Jack, 2021; Tarisayi, 2023). For instance, a 2023 study explores how autoethnography serves as a reflective approach in educational technology research, emphasizing the critical analysis of personal experiences within broader cultural, political, and social contexts (Mao, Romero-Hall, & Reeves, 2024). Autoethnography gives a voice to the voiceless through writing. There is power in letting your voice be heard.

Narratives based on actual occurrences have always fascinated me. I find the type of storytelling in which the story is told from the perspective of a real person to be the most compelling. So, autoethnography gave me a voice as a leader (Williams, 2024). I had a chance to undertake a great deal of self-reflection while using autoethnography as a research design, which strengthened my argument for why autoethnography was the ideal choice for my study (Tarisayi, 2023). The reader may decide to alter their daily routine because of this self-reflection in the field of education. They may also have a better awareness of cultural differences and be able to repair the emotional scars of the past (Chang, 2008). There was healing in writing about my lived

experiences of workplace bullying, which opened my vulnerable side. Autoethnography gives therapy to the writer (Williams, 2024).

A sense of “nationality, religion, gender, education, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and geography” demands a deeper understanding to better understand oneself, and self-reflection is one way to do this (Chang, 2008, p. 52). Through self-reflection, the researcher can build their ongoing identity. The researcher gains a deeper understanding of the world which helps when they are investigating their feelings and predetermined notions of others around them (Lim, 2024). Writing in an autoethnographic style can provide a unique perspective from the more scientific styles that have long predominated (Saldaña, 2024). It can help researchers to recognise the influence that their own identities, beliefs, and values have on their research, as well as how participants may also exhibit these characteristics (Adams et al., 2014). As a teacher, I got the opportunity to write extensively about my own lived experiences with educational practices, such as curriculum modifications, in educational research. Also, I was able to provide rich data to support more conventional research techniques, such as interviews or surveys.

Throughout my teaching career, I have worked to modify and improve my teaching strategies to become both a better teacher and a better person. By using autoethnography as a research design, I was able to do a great deal of introspection which strengthened my arguments for why this type of study was the most appropriate. In addition, ever since I became a novice teacher, I have been compelled to share my experiences with decision-makers to effectively influence how workplace bullying should not be normalised in South African schools. This ideology has pushed me to complete my studies so that my voice can be heard. As a realistic individual, I am aware that there might not be much change but still, I would consider it a success if my experiences could influence even one person. Chang (2008) persuaded me with his intriguing benefits to base my study methods on autoethnography.

3.3.4 Drawbacks and Criticism of Autoethnography

As much as there are benefits with which I concur, other authors argue that there are limitations in conducting an autoethnographic study. Autoethnography has the goal of allowing the researcher to dig deep into their lived experiences within a particular

social context (Lee, 2024) because they must answer the research question. By doing this, the researcher can assist the reader who is struggling with a similar question since the reader can relate to the researcher's lived experience. Ensuring that the reader can relate to one's research is crucial. Because the process is personal, it encompasses elements of the "person" in the research; nevertheless, the autoethnographer must take care to capture the contextual elements around the personal as well (Boll, 2024).

It is impossible to switch to other research methodologies because they would not yield the same ironic and descriptive data. This is because an autoethnographic study focuses on real-life and lived experiences (Tarisayi, 2023). While Campbell (2017) was trolling on Twitter, they found and wrote on three areas of criticism of autoethnography. The first highlighted criticism was of self-indulgent and narcissistic behaviour by the writer (Dhakal & Panta, 2024). This indicates that autoethnography is subjective and could be compared to snapping a "selfie," which compromises the objectivity of the study (Campbell, 2017). In response, they said that because the author is communicating her sentiments more deeply through this "contamination," the reader is better able to understand and become more engaged. This is like displaying an advertisement that exaggeratedly promotes products. The authenticity of objective research is then questionable because when the personal and the academic converge, richer and more complex facts are produced, something that is not observed in objective research (Lim, 2024). Moreover, they emphasise that the researcher should not only talk about themselves but must provide in-depth ethnological accounts of their experiences (Bunyan, 2021).

Delamont (2007; 2009) argues that autoethnography is self-centred and lacks relevance to the broader goals of social science, which aim to investigate society and contribute to the field's advancement. Vasconcelos (2023) concurs that autoethnography has faced criticism for not being considered scientific. Furthermore, Delamont (2007; 2009) contends that autoethnography cannot be published as ethical research due to its focus. Keleş (2022) agrees that there is a need for a more analytical approach that recognizes narratives as socially situated constructs, rather than assuming they provide unmediated access to individual experiences. However, this perspective overlooks the value of lived experiences in understanding complex social

phenomena. Autoethnography enables researchers to critically reflect on their experiences while situating them within cultural and social contexts (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). By doing so, it not only generates new insights into marginalized experiences but also challenges dominant narratives and fosters empathy. This approach contributes to social science by offering unique, first-hand perspectives that traditional methodologies might miss, thus enhancing both knowledge production and ethical research practice contexts (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

It is impossible to overlook the criticism of this methodology that is present in most research that has been done. As I conducted my study, I wanted to add to the body of knowledge by producing a research study that conducts the values of honesty and integrity in sharing my lived experiences as a beginner teacher. I considered both my experiences and my social and cultural background. Carrying my study with values of honesty and integrity assured me that I was a true researcher whose findings would be used in the future. I elaborated in detail on the quality measures I employed to bolster my study's reliability and credibility in contrast to the objections or criticism already made and discussed in this section.

3.3.5 Managing the “Pitfalls” of an Autoethnographic Study

Planning a research project through to publication can be a highly rewarding experience. However, each stage of research presents potential challenges, often referred to as “pitfalls” (Shreffler & Huecker, 2021). Recognizing and addressing these pitfalls early in the process can enhance the credibility and rigor of the study. Deckers (2021), identifies several pitfalls that must be considered when applying autoethnography as a research approach. One significant pitfall involves the exclusion of others while focusing solely on the “self” (Chang, 2008, p. 54). Although autoethnography examines personal experiences, the self exists within a broader cultural and societal context; otherwise, the ethnography aspect would be invalid (Reed-Danahay, 2021). Autoethnography includes self-reflection while acknowledging the influence of social and cultural structures. Identity is shaped by ongoing interactions within society. Self-indulgence does not lead to a rigorous autoethnographic study but rather a self-exposing narrative. Therefore, maintaining a balance between personal experiences and cultural context is essential to ensuring validity in the research process (Reed-Danahay, 2021).

Secondly, I continuously reminded myself that the goal of autoethnography is to analyse and interpret autobiographical texts from a cultural perspective (Chang, 2008, p. 55). In my study, I kept in mind that society, culture, and school shaped my lived experiences, all of which I considered and examined as I studied because they helped shape my identity as a teacher. Autoethnography recognizes that personal experiences are deeply connected to culture (Edwards, 2021). It creates space for different ways of thinking, reflecting, and sharing stories, allowing for more personal and creative forms of expression beyond traditional academic methods. Edwards (2021) adds that the use of autoethnography thus creates epistemologies shaped by African scholars' first-hand accounts and experiences.

Thirdly, Van As (2023) states that relying on personal memory as the sole data source is not good for autoethnographers, even though it is a unique way of sourcing information. This is because memory is selective and may mask prior experiences. Therefore, it was crucial to avoid using a single tool for data gathering and collecting as this could cast doubt on the validity and subjectivity of my research (Wainstein, Elliott & Austin, 2023). As the autoethnographer of my study, I supported my data with a variety of tools for data collection, including conversations, documents, and artefacts. The purpose was to complement the information gathered from the memory of the researcher (Wainstein et al., 2023). Using numerous data sources gave me the chance to triangulate the data, which strengthened my validity and accuracy (Chang, 2008). As a result, the tools I used to generate my data included my self-reflexive narratives, my researcher's notebook, artefacts, conversations, and critical discussions with friends and family.

I wrote my own autobiographical narratives; therefore, the fourth problem is the belief that confidentiality does not apply (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). My study is composed of several people who participated in my experiences as a beginner teacher, even though I wrote my own narratives and protected their identities. I achieved this by using pseudonyms rather than mentioning their real names in my self-reflexive narratives. Finally, there is a widespread misconception about the true nature of autoethnography (Zavattaro, 2021). For this study, autoethnography is seen as a diary or journal of pouring out the good or bad experiences one once had or is having. Moreover, the focus is on the researcher's experiences that are highlighted to make sense of a

particular phenomenon with an emphasis on my experiences as a part of a larger social and cultural context, and the autoethnography needs to reflect this. Therefore, as the researcher, I must make sure that I explain to the reader what autoethnography entails for the study (Chang, 2021).

3.3.6 The Process of Data Generation

It was important for me to have conversations with my co-constructors of knowledge since they played the role of being present through all my life experiences as a beginner teacher. Campbell (2017) emphasises the importance of not engaging in “self-indulgent introspection” that would result in a “self-exposing story” rather than an autoethnography. Thus, the conversations I had with these role players gave me proof that I was not being a victim in my story or engaging in self-indulgent introspection.

Critical qualitative research uses semi-structured interviews as essential instruments to elicit knowledge from participants, conversations, and individuals with a variety of life experiences (Kakilla, 2021). I had physical conversations, that is, face-to-face, with my co-constructors of knowledge. Moreover, questions were set for them, which allowed me to combine various themes to promote flexibility (Kakilla, 2021). I had conversations with my mother, sister, and a colleague, who is my best friend. These conversations assisted me in invoking memories from my past.

3.3.6.1 Self-Reflexive Narratives

The process of evaluating and organizing insights drawn from lived experiences and using them to symbolize the journey toward self-realization is known as reflexive narrative (Koopman, Watling & LaDonna, 2020). Self-reflexivity involves looking back on these experiences to observe one's growth and transformation. According to Beattie (2022), self-reflexive narratives can be categorized into four types: reflexive ethnographies, complete-member researcher texts, personal narratives, and literary autoethnography.

In this study, I employed self-reflexive narratives to gather data by immersing myself in my ethnography. I shared my lived experiences within a particular culture, community, and social context. By examining my relationships with others, I aimed to better understand the phenomenon at hand. The four categories of self-reflexive

narratives, as described by Chang (2008), all revolve around the self. I included all individuals who played a role in my lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher, even though the study focuses on the self.

Fabry, (2023), asserts that self-narratives, both written and read, are effective tools for understanding the self-concerning others. Various role players influenced the construction of my identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher. In writing my self-reflexive narratives, I interpreted the roles these individuals played in certain moments and analysed how they influenced my identity as a teacher. This included educators from my primary and high school years, as well as my lecturer who introduced LGBTQI+ activities on campus.

Through self-reflexive narratives, I discovered myself by understanding others through comparisons and contrasts within the culture (Chang, 2008; Tietjen, 2020). Reflecting on my lived experiences allowed me to analyse the behaviours of key role players and how I related to them at the time. Although this process reopened emotional wounds, I found solace in the King James Version Bible (n.d, James 1:19–20): *"Understand this, my dear brothers: every person must be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not accomplish the righteousness of God."* This verse helped me maintain calmness, forgive, and understand what had transpired. By analysing other members of my society through self-reflexive narratives, I gained a deeper understanding of my experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher.

While writing my self-reflexive narratives, I used evocative language to represent my emotions. According to Poulos (2013), an autoethnographer must engage emotionally with their writing as part of the "process of discovery" (p. 45). My lived experiences and emotions were tied to specific moments in time, which required emotional engagement. Although the process was emotionally draining, it allowed me to conduct a thorough self-introspection, helping me recall and understand my experiences of workplace bullying.

3.3.6.2 *Memorywork*

Memory work explores how personal and collective memories shape identity and power, influenced by social and cultural contexts (Heersmink, 2023). It suggests that reality is not fixed but is continuously shaped by the stories we tell about our pasts. This relates to ontology since it implies that reality is always changing via the narratives, we create about our pasts rather than being fixed (Heersmink, 2023).

Memory work explores how personal and collective memories shape identity and power, influenced by social and cultural contexts (Madan, 2023). It suggests that reality is not fixed but is continuously shaped by the stories we tell about our pasts. Then, I used my reflective researcher's journal to document all my lived experiences to avoid self-indulgence and missed data (Palaganas & Estacio, 2021). The collected data gave a clear indication of how I view the world as a queer Black female beginner teacher, my lived experiences of workplace bullying, and how I made meaning of them.

In my study, memory work was pivotal in capturing the complexity of my intersectional identity and the ways in which my experiences of race, gender, and sexual orientation intersected with workplace bullying. Through reflective journaling, I was able to confront internalized oppression and process the microaggressions I experienced within the educational setting. This method allowed me to reclaim my narrative and challenge dominant discourses that often silence queer Black women (Ngqila & Makunga, 2023).

Moreover, memory work provided a platform to explore how institutional racism and heteronormativity influenced my experiences. By documenting incidents of exclusion and discrimination, I was able to trace patterns of power dynamics and structural inequalities that perpetuated workplace bullying (Kekana et al., 2023). This aligns with the work of Smith et al., (2023), who emphasize the importance of self-reflection in understanding how social identities shape one's lived experiences.

Furthermore, the process of memory work enabled me to bridge the gap between personal experience and broader social issues. By reflecting on my interactions with colleagues and administrators, I was able to identify how systemic oppression operated within the school environment (Moremi & Mokoena, 2024). This approach

not only validated my experiences but also contributed to the development of strategies for resistance and resilience.

In summary, memory work allowed me to critically engage with my lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher and make sense of the bullying I faced. It served as both a therapeutic tool and a method for social critique, highlighting the transformative power of personal narratives in shaping identity and challenging oppressive systems. I employed artefacts, conversations, and critical exchanges with my co-constructors of my autoethnography since I occasionally had trouble recalling specific details from the past. In the end, this improved my memory and enabled me to recall even more information.

3.3.6.3 *Artefacts*

To make a connection between my history and the present, I examined artefacts that I had collected over the years (Chang, 2016). Artefacts are tangible reminders of a person's history that can include, but are not limited to, documents, images, diaries, and newspaper articles (Goldthorpe, 2021). The artefacts I used included photographs of my family and me, and photographs from my first classes as a new teacher. I included a newspaper article about two teachers (international and South African) who shared their experiences of being bullied and found the courage to speak up.

I was able to make comparisons between myself and my ancestral path and be able to recall certain life events thanks to these objects. This was essential to the construction of my teacher identity, and examining these artefacts helped me to understand what information I should include in my autoethnography. The artefacts were easily accessible to me; there was no need for me to go the extra mile to find them. I used the artefacts in conjunction with other tools to help me remember because, on their own, my recollections were insufficient to address my research question.

The photographs played a crucial role in helping me recall vivid details of past experiences. Each image evoked strong emotions and brought back sensory memories, such as the atmosphere of the classroom on my first day, the expressions on my students' faces, and the feelings of anticipation and anxiety I had as a beginner teacher. Visual artefacts serve as powerful prompts for memory work, allowing deeper

engagement with past events by reactivating the emotions and contexts in which they occurred (Harper, 2022). As I examined the images, I found myself transported back to those moments, enabling me to reconstruct my experiences with greater clarity and emotional depth. These visual artefacts also provided a tangible connection to my evolving teacher identity, reinforcing how my personal and professional journeys intersected over time.

3.3.6.4 *My Reflective Researcher's Journal*

In my reflective researcher's journal, which I kept throughout the autoethnography and story-writing process, I documented my feelings and emotions at various points. Journaling helped me to process ideas or thoughts that had come up, and I was able to reflect on occurred events. According to Chang (2008), one tool that can increase autoethnography's dependability is keeping a journal. I concur with Chang (2008), but I did not intentionally only use a journal. My goal was to be as contemplative as possible to establish the strongest possible connection between "the self" and "the cultural" (Winkler, 2018, p. 1-22). This approach resonates with my own research journey, where I strive to navigate the intersection of personal identity and broader cultural forces. Through this reflective lens, I aim to uncover deeper insights into the ways these elements shape one another.

By incorporating journaling as a methodological tool, I was able to critically engage with my emotions and responses to workplace bullying, discrimination, and marginalization. Writing down my experiences provided a means to recognize patterns in my thoughts and behaviours, helping me make sense of complex and often painful events (Ellis et al., 2022). Additionally, the act of journaling allowed me to challenge internalized oppression and reposition myself as an active agent in my own narrative rather than a passive subject of discrimination (Adams, 2019). This practice not only enhanced the credibility of my research but also contributed to my personal healing and empowerment. As I engaged in continuous self-reflection, I was able to contextualize my lived experiences within broader social and institutional structures, revealing the ways in which power dynamics operate within the educational sector (Jones, 2023).

3.3.7 *Engagement with my co-constructors of knowledge*

Engagement with my co-constructors of knowledge played a crucial role in ensuring the depth and credibility of my autoethnographic study. Their purpose was to provide alternative perspectives, validate my recollections, and contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of my lived experiences (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). By engaging in critical conversations with individuals who witnessed or shared aspects of my journey, I was able to enhance the authenticity of my narratives. This aligns with the concept of verisimilitude, which emphasizes the relatability and believability of research findings (Weingartner, 2023). Through these engagements, I ensured that my study was not merely a personal reflection but a rigorous, well-grounded exploration of workplace bullying as experienced by a queer Black female beginner teacher.

3.3.7.1 *Selection of the Co-Constructors of Knowledge*

Selecting co-constructors of knowledge is about intentionally choosing people who have played an important role in shaping how you understand and make sense of your own experiences (Yu, 2021). In your autoethnographic study, this means bringing in individuals—like your mother, sister, and colleague—who were directly involved in or affected by your journey. These are the people who offered you emotional support, shared their insights, and provided perspectives that deepened your reflections and analysis (Yu, 2021).

The co-constructors of knowledge in my study are those who actively participated and supported me throughout my experience of workplace bullying as a beginner teacher. I selected my mother, sister, and colleague, who is also my best friend and girlfriend. Engaging in conversations with them was essential, as they were integral to my journey from my university days to becoming a qualified teacher. Their emotional support was invaluable, serving as my pillar of strength during challenging times. They provided encouragement and motivation, helping me navigate the difficult moments and persevere through the unbearable situations I faced.

The role of these co-constructors extended beyond emotional support. They offered unique perspectives on my experiences, helping me to reflect on my identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher. Through their insights, I gained a deeper understanding of how my social and professional environment shaped my experiences. My mother provided wisdom rooted in her life experiences, my sister offered empathy and shared experiences of navigating social challenges, and my colleague, who understood the educational environment, provided guidance on handling workplace dynamic.

3.3.7.2 *Critical Discussions with Co-Constructors of my Autoethnography*

In writing my autoethnography, it was essential to engage with the people who had a significant influence on my early teaching years. Chang, (2008: 54) and Vernon, (2023) highlights the importance of avoiding “self-indulgent introspection” that turns the narrative into just a “self-exposing story,” rather than an autoethnography. The conversations I had with these key figures—such as my mother and sister—were vital in ensuring that my narrative was not about portraying myself as a victim or getting lost in personal reflection alone.

I had meaningful discussions about my mother’s and sister’s past experiences, and how their views of the world had been passed down to me. These conversations were especially important when reflecting on my sexual orientation, as I grew up in a family deeply rooted in African spirituality and Christianity. These conversation were held between March-August 2025. As I explored my story, these exchanges provided deeper insight into how their perspectives shaped my own, particularly during my formative years as a beginner teacher. These discussions, woven throughout the data analysis process (Vernon, 2023), helped me see how my background and their influences had a profound impact on shaping my identity in the classroom.

3.3.8 *The Process of Data Analysis*

A thorough process of systematically organizing, interpreting, and making sense of collected data to find relevant information, make inferences, and aid in decision-making is known as data analysis (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023). It is a complex process that involves a variety of approaches and procedures to analyse data in different

formats, both structured and unstructured, from a variety of sources (Turet & Costa, 2022). In this section, I outline the data analysis procedure. Then I give an overview of the thematic analysis that is used in analysing and interpreting the data that was collected in this study.

3.3.8.1 *Outline of Data Analysis Procedure*

What defines the data is a crucial topic that academics examine when doing an autoethnography. There are numerous ways to gather your data because your own life is the main source. I recorded my own observations through self-observation, ethnographic field notes, and jottings. Silverman (2017) used this technique when he worked on his PhD dissertation titled “Uncertain Peace: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Intrapersonal Conflicts from Chabad-Lubavitch Origins”. Moreover, Silverman (2017) used a variety of methods for gathering data, including self-observation, in which he used a smartphone to take notes about his internal conflicts during the day and afterwards transferred them to a spreadsheet log of observations I created my self-reflective data by keeping a record of my reflections on my experiences and viewpoints on the topic. I kept this record through a reflective research journal, where I consistently documented my thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to the study.

Making a chronological list of significant experiences or events from your life that are relevant to your study topic is another method for gathering data (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). I described my experiences and how they led to my cultural self-discovery, detailed the circumstances of these occurrences, and explained why they were significant in my life, according to Cooper & Lilyea’s (2022) suggestion as a data generation exercise.

3.3.8.2 *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a technique for examining qualitative data that involves looking for recurring patterns in collected data and reporting on them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a technique for characterising data, but in the process of creating themes, interpretation is also involved (Neale, 2021). Moreover, it is a suitable and effective technique to apply when attempting to comprehend a group of experiences, ideas, or behaviours within a data collection (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). I employed thematic

analysis in this study to analyse and interpret the themes found in this study. This method allowed me to categorise certain themes to fully answer my research question. After writing my self-reflexive narratives, I proofread my narratives to identify and group similar themes and codes and then put them in a table with justifications.

To apply the thematic analysis properly, I use the six-step method by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is crucial to remember that this approach is non-linear and requires continuous back-and-forth movement throughout the data (Roüast & Schönauer, 2023). There must be constant use of reflections when developing the coding and themes (Roüast & Schönauer, 2023). The six steps are getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining, and labelling themes, and creating the report. I ensured that I had thoroughly read all my self-reflexive narratives to gain an understanding of my data before I began coding.

Examining the coded and compiled data extracts to identify potential themes with wider importance is the third phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I checked all the potential significant themes that related to the research question, and then I assigned the codes. The important thing to remember when assigning codes is to identify them clearly to avoid them overlapping. Then, I grouped them into wider themes. I constantly asked myself if the themes identified were linked to the research study (Nowell, Norris, Whitem & Moules, 2017; Roüast & Schönauer, 2023). Before placing my themes in the table, I made use of a mind map to classify themes with relevant codes. The codes that did not fall under any one theme were compiled into one category and given the name miscellaneous.

I examined the detected codes in the fourth phase to see if they shared a pattern with other codes in that subject. Throughout the process, certain themes were like each other. I merged these and created more similar and specific themes. This process was done with my research in mind. If there was no link between the research question and them, then I removed them. I then moved to Step 5, which involved defining and naming the themes. This required me to have an explanation of the theme before giving it a name (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Lastly, I had to produce a report as the final stage. Writing up the final analysis and findings description was the last step (Mishra & Dey, 2022). I drafted a story that explained in simple, concise, and logical terms how

I understood the data and why the themes and interpretations chosen were significant and accurate.

3.4 Quality Measures

The degree of validity, dependability, ethics, and utility of the research design, procedures, data, analysis, and findings are referred to as quality measures (Lombard, 2020). For this autoethnography study, I focused on credibility and reliability. Then, I made use of verisimilitude, which is defined as the degree to which a work exhibits “lifelikeness” or the degree to which it depicts or validates real life (Dyson, 2007, p. 41; Lombard, 2020). I used verisimilitude to promote reliability and trustworthiness. As researchers, it is in our best interests to pay vivid attention to the set of quality criteria. In this section, I elaborated on the significance of using credibility to ensure the findings of the study. Then, I made use of verisimilitude to show how credibility and reliability were used in my study.

3.4.1 Credibility

Credibility relates to the truthfulness and believability of the findings (Shufutinsky, 2020). The truth value considers both the setting in which the data were collected and whether the researcher has established trust in the validity of the participants’ responses (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Through my experiences, the participants recognized the value of truth (Birt et al., 2016). To enhance the legitimacy of this study, I utilized self-reflective narratives, research diary entries, and other methods of data generation. Additionally, overlaps in the data analysis further strengthened the study’s legitimacy by demonstrating consistency and reinforcing key themes that emerged across different data sources. By engaging in critical self-reflection and acknowledging my positionality as a queer Black female beginner teacher, I maintained transparency about how my experiences shaped the research process. This reflexivity contributed to the study’s overall credibility, ensuring that the findings resonated with both academic audiences and individuals with lived experiences like mine.

3.4.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is all about ensuring that the findings are solid, credible, and meaningful (Lim, 2024). In autoethnography, where personal experience

is the heart of the study, this means being intentional about how stories are told and interpreted (Keleş, 2022). It involves credibility—making sure the research accurately reflects lived experiences, transferability—allowing others to see connections to their own contexts, dependability—ensuring the process is consistent and well-documented, and confirmability—keeping personal biases in check (Lim, 2024). In my study on workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher, trustworthiness was strengthened through deep self-reflection, detailed storytelling, and drawing on different sources like journal entries and conversations to provide a fuller picture. Seeking feedback from peers or mentors ensured that my research-maintained integrity, making it not just a personal exploration but also meaningful and impactful for a wider audience.

3.4.3 Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process (Haq, Rasheed, Rashid & Akhter, 2023). It means that if the study were to be repeated under similar conditions, the results would be consistent. To ensure dependability, researchers need to provide a clear and thorough account of their research methods, data collection, and analysis procedures (Haq et al., 2023). In my study on workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher, dependability means ensuring that my research process is consistent and transparent. I have made it a point to document every step of my journey—whether it is how I gather data through journal entries, interviews, or observations, or the ways I analyse and interpret the information. If there were any changes in my approach, I made sure to explain them so that others could understand why I made those decisions. Keeping an audit trail of my thought process, the methods I used, and how my understanding evolves allows anyone who reads my work to see how I arrived at my conclusions (Coleman, 2022). This way, my research not only holds up as trustworthy but also shows that it can be followed and replicated, which strengthens the dependability of my study.

3.4.4 Relatability

Relatability in qualitative research refers to how easily others can connect to the findings or understand the research process (Vu, 2021). It is about ensuring that the

experiences, themes, or insights shared resonate with others—whether they are part of the same group or community or have had similar experiences (Coleman, 2022). In my study on workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher, relatability was crucial because I wanted others—whether they were educators, queer individuals, people of colour, or anyone who had faced similar struggles—to see themselves in my experiences. I shared not only my personal journey but also the emotional weight of navigating a challenging work environment while being part of multiple marginalized groups. By opening up about the challenges, frustrations, and moments of resilience I faced, I hoped that others could connect with my story and recognize parallels in their own lives. This made the research more meaningful and impactful, not just as an academic exploration, but as a shared experience that spoke to the broader human condition, helping others feel seen, heard, and understood.

3.4.5 *Verisimilitude*

According to autoethnographers, validity is intricately linked to the pursuit of verisimilitude, which provides readers with the sense that the experiences described are real, realistic, and plausible, suggesting that the events portrayed are indeed authentic (Ellis et al., 2011). A key requirement for the validity of autoethnographic research is verisimilitude, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identify as a crucial criterion for evaluating the value of narrative inquiry. They argue that exploring the social, cultural, and institutional narratives that shape personal experiences is essential, asserting that narrative inquiry must begin and end within these contexts. De Fina (2021) echoes this perspective, affirming the importance of contextualizing personal stories within broader social and cultural frameworks.

In my research, I drew on conversations with family and friends to reinforce the verisimilitude of my experiences. These dialogues served as evidence that I am a real person with lived experiences of workplace bullying. The process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation in autoethnography can be considered a "collaborative effort," involving both the co-constructors of knowledge and the autoethnographer (Lombard, 2020, p. 103). As a result, triangulation was achieved between my personal narrative, the insights from my co-constructors, and my role as the autoethnographer. This triangulation enhanced the study's relatability and legitimacy, further strengthening the research's validity (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, it is important to have the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong. Montreuil, Bogossian, Laberge-Perrault, & Racine, (2021), they define ethics as a set of widely recognised morals and principles that are used when conducting research and what the researcher should display towards the co-constructors of knowledge. Even when you are the sole participant, you still need to account for the others who are included in your narratives because ethical issues may arise (Montreuil et al., 2021).

In the next section, I touch on basic ethical principles, which include informed consent, potential for harm, and honesty. Then, I look at further ethical guidelines for conducting an autoethnography by focusing on my co-constructors of knowledge and myself as the sole participant.

3.5.1 Basic Ethical Principles

I requested ethical approval to include the co-constructors of knowledge in my study. I successfully received ethical approval from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education. I was the sole participant in the study, and I selected my co-constructors of knowledge, which included family members (mother and sister) and a friend (also a colleague, best friend, and girlfriend). I ensured that the co-constructors of knowledge signed a consent form that was created by me. In the consent forms, I mentioned valuable information about the study and assured them that their identity would be protected at all costs. I made use of pseudonyms to protect their real identities when I was doing my self-reflexive narratives.

3.5.1.1 Informed Consent

Before I had the conversations, I created a consent document outlining the process for my co-constructors. The consent form was in clear and simple language to avoid confusing my co-constructors of knowledge. Prior to signing the consent form, I read the form aloud to them before asking them to sign it to ensure that they were comfortable with the procedure and felt secure doing so. Moreover, I made sure that they understood that they were only the co-constructors of knowledge for my narratives and were not the participants of the study. Participation in a research study is voluntary, without any pressure (Mumford et al., 2021). I mentioned clearly to the

co-constructors of knowledge that they had a right to leave or withdraw their participation from the study if they felt any kind of discomfort. They were not even obliged to continue at any point once they had started. Furthermore, they did not have to give a reason for leaving the study.

3.5.1.2 *Confidentiality*

It is essential for a researcher to stress confidentiality and make sure that participants have the option to remain anonymous (Subramani, 2021). I affirmed that I would not reveal information about them that they would not logically want other people to know. Moreover, when I was sharing my lived experiences on how and where I experienced bullying, I kept the people and the school in my story as unidentifiable as possible. Pseudonyms were employed in this study to prevent harm from coming to those who are addressed in the narratives (Lahman, Thomas & Teman, 2023). I made use of pseudonyms when I mentioned the people who were at the school where my experiences took place, and I created a fictional school name to protect the school's image. However, the events are honest and truthful.

3.5.1.3 *Potential for Harm*

Making use of pseudonyms reduces harm to the co-constructors of knowledge or people who are part of the narratives, so I made use of pseudonyms (Foster, Haltiwanger & Krizan, 2006; Heaton, 2022). Nevertheless, a writer can opt to publish under pseudonyms to shield herself and the others mentioned in the narratives, but it comes with a limitation of "credit and recognition" for their work (Foster et al., 2006, p. 48; Dahal & Luitel, 2022). My study will not be published under a pseudonym since I am comfortable sharing my narratives and work. I am content with who I am and comfortable with everyone and anyone reading about my lived experiences.

It is necessary to pause and consider how to balance potential good and harm when involving others in your narratives (Dahal & Luitel, 2022). If there is no protection for the people who are mentioned in the narratives, the writer must consider balancing the potential for good and harm. In my study, I made a balance of potential good and harm when I was referring to a certain occurrence and the truth. If there was imbalance and harm was more than good, then I channelled my writing but kept the honesty intact, or I would rather not write about that aspect.

3.5.1.4 *Honesty*

An autoethnography researcher must possess skills and qualities that include honesty since their research focus is on the self (Grant & Carson, 2024). Therefore, when doing an autoethnography, the researcher must write about narratives that focus on the self and go deeply into their lived experiences. This process of journaling about the self requires the researcher to be brutally honest, not leaving a stone unturned and exposing themselves to vulnerability and a variety of emotions (Grant & Carson, 2024). The sense of truth and truthfulness is required when the researcher undertakes an autoethnographic study (Medford, 2006; Melville, 2025). Sometimes a writer finds themselves unable to recall a person's exact words, so they substitute something similar that conveys the same message; this is called "mindful slippage" (Medford, 2006, p. 859). Mindful slippage can lead to ethical issues, which can make people question the truthfulness of the narratives. If the writer maintains the integrity of the narratives, mindful slippage may be overlooked to some extent. However, if the writer fabricates a story entirely to benefit herself, it is unethical and untrue (Bunyan, 2021)

According to King James Version Bible, (n.d, Proverbs 12:19), "A lying tongues die quickly, but truthful lips endure forever." Medford (2006, p. 859) concurs with this verse, stating, "Writing autoethnographically forces us to hold an essential mirror to our lives, and sometimes it's more appealing to look in the mirror by candlelight than it is to look in it in broad daylight." Irrespective, an autoethnography researcher needs to hold the value of honesty, and when the researcher is not honest enough, their study is regarded as unethical (Bunyan, 2021). In this study, I ensured honesty at all costs, even if it meant showing vulnerability and portraying myself in an unbecoming way – then so be it. I have let the reader into my entire being in terms of how I created my beginner teacher identity.

3.5.2 *Extra Ethical Guidelines for Conducting an Autoethnography*

There are several ethical issues when using autoethnography as a research method because the researcher's narratives involve roles that other people have performed, and these persons are directly influenced by the researcher (Sikes, 2015). I exercised caution when I was creating the narratives so as not to "personally and socially" harm the reputation of those I featured in them by using my "narrative power" (Sikes, 2015, p. 1).

3.5.2.1 *Tender Care for My Co-constructors of Knowledge*

In using pseudonyms (Heaton, 2022), I protected the identities of my co-constructors of knowledge and made sure that they knew that participation was voluntary (Lahman et al., 2023). Before the commencement of the conversations, my co-constructors of knowledge read and signed the consent letters. It is not ethical to make use of the “element of revenge” when writing narratives (Sikes, 2015, p. 1). To avoid using the revenge element, I constantly reminded myself of the research questions to guide my sense of writing. In that regard, I shied away from self-indulging and acting as a victim.

There are guidelines that an author can follow when conducting an autoethnographic study (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). I chose two guidelines, which included “the potential misuse of interpretational and authorial power” (Sikes, 2015, p. 7). I needed to be careful that I did not use my position to falsely narrate other people’s self-reflexive narratives, which could have led to untruthful conclusions. To present and prioritise a version of their lives that suited my goals, I abstained from “violent textual practices which shaped and tamed the lives that I used as data” (Sikes, 2015, p. 2).

I documented every aspect of my self-reflexive narratives, including the negative parts. This included people who influenced my teacher identity in a traumatic way, but I made sure that I did not attack anyone for my own good. I channelled my focus on writing honestly and authentically while also being sensitive in the process. I recorded their informed consent and “respected participants’ autonomy” as well as their willing involvement (Sikes, 2015, p. 3; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). As a reminder, I was the sole participant in my study and the co-constructors of knowledge mentioned in my study cannot be declared as participants. I made sure that I did not document any aspect that I did not show to the co-constructors of knowledge mentioned in the narratives. The identities of my co-constructors of knowledge were protected by pseudonyms.

Everything documented in my narrative holds the truth, and I openly shared what was mentioned in my narratives with all the role players. I confronted my own vulnerabilities as well as those of others, and I treated my autoethnography as though it was something I wrote in permanent ink. This study holds a purpose, and all that was written will be protected at all costs. My stories may touch souls, but no harm to others is intended. However, it is not entirely avoidable, so steps were taken to reduce harm.

I was cautious not to put anyone, including my co-constructors or role players, in harm's way. The use of nom de plumes was a strategy to reduce harm to myself and others (Sparkes, 2024). I am aware of the risks associated with using my real name, but I stuck to not using a pseudonym to hide my identity. However, I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of others I referenced in my narratives. I must assume that everyone who is named in the self-reflexive narratives will eventually read it, and I hope they do.

3.5.2.2 *Tender Care for Oneself as a Primary Participant*

In the process of sharing personal stories, both the participant and the reader may find healing, so it is a therapeutic process. The sole participant is confronted with vulnerability as the researcher (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2022). One of the aspects that play a role in evoking interest in autoethnography is the vulnerability of the participant retelling their experiences (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2022). Unfortunately, as the storyteller, there is no possibility of ignoring the vulnerability because you might be revisiting parts of your story that broke you to the core and affected your mental health. During the process of self-reflexivity, I became vulnerable, and my mental health was taken to a dark space. I brought myself back to using this verse: Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (King James Version Bible, n.d, Isaiah 41:10)

Moreover, I reminded myself to focus on the idea that this study would open a new path of healing for me and aid me in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The journey of journaling my lived experiences was unpleasant, but I comforted myself by reading about other autoethnographers' lived experiences. This gave me a sense of belonging, and I was able to recognise the importance of my narratives and how others would relate to them. In the moment of being vulnerable, I was able to find my inner healing from the unpleasant experiences and stopped blaming myself. I realised how far I had come, and I was able to channel my teacher identity as a beginner teacher. My lived experiences moulded me to be a better individual and teacher.

3.6 Conclusion

The section above has addressed every facet of my research design, including an in-depth analysis of my research paradigm and how it influenced the choice of my conceptual framework. It also took a close look at my decision to conduct an autoethnography as my chosen research method and the research tools I used to generate ideas for my autoethnography. The tools included the use of memory work, artefacts, my reflective researcher's journal, and the critical discussions held with my co-constructors of knowledge. The use of verisimilitude to make my autoethnography relatable and credible was discussed. Finally, I discussed the ethical considerations that confirmed that my study has been conducted in an ethical manner. The next chapter covers my story in the form of a self-reflexive narrative.

Chapter 4: My Autoethnography

4.1 Introduction

In my autoethnography, I embody both the subject and the object of my research. As the subject, I actively narrate my lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher who has faced workplace bullying. I recount my journey, emotions, and struggles, giving voice to my personal story and how I navigated oppressive spaces. Through self-reflexive storytelling, I expose my vulnerabilities, joys, and the complexities of my identity in professional and social settings.

At the same time, I am the object of my study I analyse my own experiences critically, positioning myself within the broader socio-cultural and institutional structures that shaped them. I do not just tell my story; I also interrogate it, questioning how systemic discrimination, gender, race, and sexuality intersect to influence my professional journey. In doing so, I distance myself at times, stepping back to examine my experiences through an academic lens. By moving between these roles, I make meaning of my experiences, constructing knowledge that is both deeply personal and socially significant.

In writing an autoethnography, there is a sense of therapy because writing is a method of knowing (Richardson, 2000). Sharing our lived experiences through writing may be healing because it helps to make meaning of our lives and experiences. In doing this, we hope to enhance and comprehend our relationships and build our ongoing identity. Furthermore, writing about our lived experiences lessens prejudice, enhances personal accountability, and fosters cultural transformation (Ellis et al., 2011). An autoethnography method gives people a voice they might not have believed they had before they wrote.

Both researchers and readers can find therapeutic value in the process of writing personal narratives. In this study, I served as both the researcher and the sole participant (Oojorah, 2016), documenting my lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher who encountered workplace bullying. Through narrating my story, I sought to make sense of my identity within the teaching profession and to critically reflect on how my experiences shaped my personal and professional self.

This study is positioned as an autoethnography—an exploration of the self within a broader cultural and social context. However, I did not only focus on the "auto" (the self) but also on the "ethno" (the self within society) (Qutoshi, 2015). My analysis extends beyond personal reflection to examine the ways in which workplace bullying, particularly in a private school in South Africa, intersects with race, gender, and sexual identity. In doing so, I engage with larger systemic issues that contribute to the marginalization of queer Black female educators in such environments. To understand and make meaning of my identity, I generated my own data through writing my self-reflexive narratives and sharing my lived experiences. This chapter contains twenty-three written self-reflexive narratives, which I shared about my experiences, from my background and history to the events that happened during my first years as a beginner teacher.

4.2 The Offence of Falling in Love

Who am I? I was born in Vosloorus, Boksburg, in Gauteng. Townships are where many South African celebrities and soccer stars come from. I am “officially” the last born from my mother and father, but I have an adopted little sister. My mother is Xhosa, and my father is Venda, but the twist is that we used isiZulu as the main language of instruction and communication at home. This is because in our community everyone uses isiZulu to communicate, and we clicked in just like that. Even today, everyone believes that I am Zulu and gets shocked when I switch to isiXhosa or Tshivenda. My parents had a customary marriage, and I grew up in a strict but warm family with both my parents. My father passed away recently, on 22 September 2022; may his soul rest in peace. I come from a family with values and culture, and we were and still are Christians.

I was born on 27 August 1997, three years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, so I was born in a free country where one can be themselves. I mean, I did not hold back. I was a bubbly, smart, and loving child. I went to a Model C preschool, which was a bonus for me because I was too smart to go to the ordinary creche where children eat and sleep the entire day. During a soft, strict life, my father lost his job as a petrol attendant in Alberton. I then went to a public school called Jongimfundo Primary School. My mother supported the family on her artisan salary from her job at the former Natal Spruit Hospital, where she worked for the Department of

Infrastructure. My father got a new job as a supervisor at a Total Garage after being home for about two or three months. That did not change the dynamics at home. My parents sent me to a middle-paying high school. I thought they would upgrade me to a private school but unfortunately, that did not happen – but I was fine with it.

Before I go further, let me introduce myself:

I identify as a gay woman who holds the letter “L” in the LGBTIQI+ family, which means I am a lesbian. I am attracted to women sexually and physically. I have never dated a man in my life. All my life, I have identified as a lesbian woman.

Figure 4.1: A picture of myself as a “queer” Black baby



At primary school, I got to discover who I was even though I did not understand the labels. By “labels,” I mean how queer people identify themselves in a rainbow nation and give recognition to others who have the same or different interests. When I was in Grade 6, I started to have feelings for my female teachers. I had this edge to date them and even went further to daydream in class about being married to them. I never understood this feeling until I was in Grade 7. I had a female friend called Palesa. She was my mother’s friend’s daughter who stayed near to school. Our parents worked together. I grew feelings for her, and funnily enough, she was feeling the same. We started hanging out more, and we would kiss and hug every chance we got. Since I was an inquisitive child, I did my research on the gay community, and yes, I declared myself a lesbian from then.

Just to roll back from creche, my mother liked dressing me up as a girl, and that was normal because I was a girl and still I am. I liked girl-things too, so wearing pink and looking all sassy was me then. I had a best friend called Zama who looked like me; people even used to mistake us. Every time my mother or her grandmother took us to a mall, people would say, “Haybo’ waze wamahle amawele wakho” (your twins look so beautiful). We loved this narrative and never cared to correct people. We shared everything together, and the cute part was that our houses were opposite each other. We even had similar dreams of being teachers or nurses. The only difference in our lives was that we went to different schools. She went to a private school as her family was well off. Nevertheless, we never stopped loving each other as twins. We grew to the point that when we got to high school, we fully discovered our sexualities. I was 100% sure that I was a lesbian, and she was bisexual at that time, then later became 100% a lesbian.

Figure 4.2: A picture of me and Zama, my childhood friend with whom I discovered my sexuality.



Fast forward, high school days were upon us. First, I went to Supertsila Secondary School. I chose the school because my primary school friends were going there. It was not my first choice because, at home, we had a tradition of attending the same school as our siblings. I changed that ideology after multiple engagements with my parents, trying to convince them, and they agreed. The school was not even of a high

educational standard. It was a typical public school with overcrowded classes, no chairs, and late delivery of stationery. I did not care about those dynamics because, on the second day at school, I met, as I said then, “Sthandwa sam (my love), love at first sight.” I was delusional to the extent that I would stalk her in the corridors. I am referring to my then-teacher, Mrs Grace. I saw her through a window. She was so beautiful with a gracious smile. From that day, I daydreamed about her, and I would even have night dreams about her. Now, I had a purpose: to wake up and go to school. Trust that I never missed school even when I was sick. I did my research about her, just to know her more. I knew it was madness, but I was truly in love. I wonder what I knew about love at that age.

On 14 February 2010, I made sure to get her a gift for Valentine’s Day. I fooled my father with lies about money that was needed for school. I bought her flowers and a cup, but I was scared to give them to her. She used to give me anxiety and butterflies in the stomach at the same time. These were the signs that I was in love, to be honest; no one would convince me otherwise. I asked my gay friend Mzala to give her the gifts. My friend came back with the response that she had said, “Thank you, and why did I not bring the gifts to her myself?” I laughed with fear but was grateful that she took the gifts. Later that day, after break, she came to my class. She was profoundly serious, and she pointed at me to talk outside. My heart was pounding like sangoma drums as I stood up. I recall the conversation like it was yesterday:

Mrs Grace: Hey, nana.

Me: Hi, Ma’am.

Mrs Grace: O’sharp? (Are you okay?)

Me: Yes, Ma’am

Mrs Grace: Danki nana for the gifts. I appreciate them. (Gives me a hug).

Me: (Shivering with butterflies in my stomach ... she smells good...so I thought).

Mrs Grace: (glancing at me with a smile). Why didn’t you bring them to me?

Me: I was simply scared, Ma’am.

Mrs Grace: Sa le ka goes phoxa? (Have I ever embarrassed you?)

Me: No, Ma'am.

Mrs Grace: Then you should never fear me. (Gives me another hug)

Me: (she feels the same way I feel) Thoughts ***

I remember going back home with a smile. I could not believe I got hugs from her, my crush. The moment I got home, I put on my school jersey nicely and kept smelling her scent. I prayed that day that I would dream about her. I wondered why I thought the feelings were mutual. She was older than me and not even a lesbian. A week later I did something so unimaginable that I am even embarrassed to share this part of my narrative. I saw Mrs Grace laughing closely with Mr Dwaza (a male Xhosa teacher). I was so jealous, and my feelings were hurt for the first time. I was delusional to even think that she liked me like that. She liked me as a child, not as a partner in a romantic relationship. I made it a point to get her number from one of the learners she was close with. The jealousy grew increasingly by the day. One day, I sent her a message at school immediately after seeing her with Mr Dwaza again. The message said, "Grace, you are man-eater."

By stalking her, I had found her name on the internet. I am embarrassed about my behaviour to this day, but on that day, I did not stop there. Due to anger and being delusional, I felt cheated on. At home, there was a tradition that we ate at 7:00 p.m. Right after eating, I went to my room and thought everything through and how hurt I was. I made a call to her, and I changed my voice. The phone call was answered by her son. Due to fear, I did not say much except for, "Hello, I want to speak to Grace." I used a bold man's voice, and then I quickly dropped the call as the phone was handed to her. The following day at school, everything was tense. It felt like everyone knew what I had done. She came to my class unexpectedly, and she looked angry. I felt anxious again and at that point, I knew, I knew that she knew it was me. After break, I felt that all the teachers who had taught me on that day were giving out bad energy while uttering words like, "You guys think we are friends. Sies!" and "Imagine how old we are. Stop the nonsense of thinking we are your friends." I could feel that the words were directed at me but were uttered to everyone. I wished that the day would just end at that moment.

Amid the confusion, with one period left before the end of school, one of the cleaners, known as Mama Naka, came to the class to call me. I was called to the office; my heart dropped immediately. When I got to the office, I saw Mrs Grace in tears, and she was holding a pipe to hit me. During that time, corporal punishment was not a big trigger, and it was allowed. She got madder when she saw me and gave only one instruction, “Give me your numbers.” At that moment, I lied; I gave her my numbers but changed the last two digits. I made the situation worse; she started telling me how I almost ruined her marriage. I was hurt just seeing her cry, the disbelief of the chaos I caused. She wanted to hit me so badly, but the other teachers stopped her. I wished that she would hit me so I could take away the pain I had caused her. I made a little prayer at that point, asking for forgiveness for everything I had caused. She asked for my mother’s number, and I gave it to her, so she was called to come to school.

When I got home, my mother asked me why she had been called to school. I lied and said I did not know. I was afraid that my sexuality would be exposed, and I would have to explain myself to my Christian mother. I had never felt this way my whole life. I lost myself and went into depression. My mother went to the school. Everything was explained to her, and I saw my mother crying for the first time. I had only seen her crying at family funerals. I was so hurt and embarrassed about how I had put my mother in this situation. I confessed my sins while I was comforting my crying mother. I remember how those teachers who were present in the meeting made the gay community look so sinful and wrong. They humiliated me as they were scolding me. At that moment, I deserved it. I went outside and ran straight to my favourite teacher, Mrs MomV, who was like a mother to me. I remember running to her arms, and she just let me cry until I was okay. She accompanied me back to the meeting and defended my sexuality. I will forever be grateful to have met such an amazing soul like her. The case ended with apologies, and no suspension was given to me as I was a top learner in Grade 8, and it was my first offence. Funnily enough, I called this offence “the offence of falling in love.” My mother reported everything back home, but my father was overly sweet to not punish me as his last born, and my siblings became supportive from that moment.

From that day, my life changed for the worst at that school and at home. At home, they made sure that I never had a phone again, which was painful growing up and seeing

my peers with phones. I accepted the punishment and focused more on my studies. My mother made sure that she preached and advocated that being gay was an evil deed and against God. She would go as far as making me a point of prayer. She would make hurtful comments when the likes of Somizi, who is proudly gay, popped up on the TV screen. Every time we watched shows that included gay people, she requested that the channel be changed. Her words were used to break me:

Ngeke mina ngizale intombazane bese ijike izenze umfana

(I did not give birth to a girl child that will change to be a boy)

Ngigambulala mina umntana ungenza imikhuba yobutabane

(I would kill a gay baby)

Cabanga uzale ingane bese ingenwe yidemoni lobutane

(Imagine giving birth to a child with the demon of being gay)

I drowned myself in depression. I cried myself to sleep. Studying was the only thing that kept me sane. I hated being at home or even being around my mother. My father used to defend me all the time, but some days, he was on nightshifts, which meant I would be bullied by my mother. The bullying started at home. I started having severe anxiety. I wished my mother would just hit me so she could let this “stalking a teacher” story die. Some days, I wished to kill myself. My personality changed from being a bubbly child to being an arrogant one.

Sadly, school was supposed to be a place where my peace was, and I was able to be myself. Mrs Grace had not been teaching Senior Phase, and then suddenly, she was given Life Orientation Grade 8. My heart was shattered. I knew what was coming for me. My anxiety levels went higher than I thought possible. It was not even Term 2 yet. It was going to be a long year for me. Mrs Grace did not hold back in bullying me at every chance she got. She made remarks that broke me emotionally at the age of 14 years. She would say:

“You will never make it in life.”

“Imagine God blesses you with a lesbian child? Sies, it can never be me.”

“I would never date a low-life kid.”

The words were like the words of my mother. I lost myself in the process. Many questions and statements emerged in my mind, “Why me?” “I deserve this treatment,” “Being dead is better than living,” and “Commit suicide and let people be at peace.”

I lost myself, and I decided to end it all. We were done writing our November examinations, but schools were not closed at that time. I remember how the day was beautiful and sunny at home with my siblings. It was after a heavy night of tears and anxiety. I came to the realisation that I did not deserve to live after hurting the people I loved. I lost it right there and then. I felt that as much as it was beautiful, it would end in tears. I started asking my siblings how they would feel if I died. I went further to even give them a wish list for my funeral. According to an African proverb, when you are incredibly happy, then a tragedy occurs. In my happiness, I started to hear voices that it was time to end this life of shame. I recall my mother’s and Mrs Grace’s words sinking in with their voices. I went to take the poison for rats and drank it. I thought it would give the same reaction, but, no, it simply gave me time to say my forever, last goodnights.

4.3 Finding Hope in Darkness: A Cry for Help

Death knocked right after I had had a nice dinner filled with laughter. Funnily enough, I forgot that I had drunk rat poison during the day. A few laughs down the road, and I began to feel nauseous, so I ran to drink water. I went straight away to lie down on my bed. The nausea was then followed by vomiting, so I called out to my nephew, and he called everyone else. I got weaker and weaker. I could hear my mother praying while asking what I had drunk or eaten. My brother-in-law started the car so they could rush me to the hospital. On our way, I could hear my mother praying and begging me not to close my eyes. In the blink of an eye, I lost consciousness, but I could hear everyone around me talking. The doctors kept asking me what I had eaten, but I could not respond. I could hear them saying that it was poison due to the foam coming out of my mouth. A few days later, when I had regained consciousness, I went straight to my delusional thoughts that I wanted Mrs Grace to call me and visit me in the hospital. I remember asking the nurses multiple times to call the school, but Mrs Grace never came. On 3 December, I begged to be released because it was my mother’s birthday.

After this occurrence, I sought deliverance from God. I was losing myself over someone who did not care about me. To this day, I have never told my family what I drank on that day and what I went through. I changed schools because I was not coping mentally at that school. I then attended VoslooComp high School, where my mother had a friendship with the principal. On arrival, they took me into the office to explain a few basics. It seemed like my mother had told the principal about the behavioural issues I had had at the previous school. The focus was on discussing discipline, but they did not know that my New Year's resolution was clear – I wanted a fresh start. I promised myself that I would never ever put myself through situations like before again. I was happy and excited about the fresh start; it felt like I had been given another chance at life.

On the second day of the school reopening, I was going into Grade 10. Then, I met another beautiful teacher, just like Mrs Grace. The difference was that she would wear boyish clothes. It felt like God was evaluating me at that point. I prayed that I would not be tempted in any way, and I remembered my mother's tears. It clicked right there and then that I would never hurt my family in that way again. Later that day I found out that she did not stay far from my home when I saw her passing by in her car. By the third day after that week of school reopening, I had made friends who accepted my sexuality. I started looking more butch (masculine), and I was well-known since I was the only lesbian out of the closet at that time. I was quiet and shy, and girls were throwing themselves at me, but I was extremely focused academically. By the end of the week, the teacher had asked about me from my friends. I got more nervous because of my history; I thought that she knew me as a stalker. I avoided her all the time by hiding every time she came my way.

The following week, I decided I no longer wanted to use transport, but I would take a taxi to school. While I was waiting for a taxi, she passed by and stopped for me to take a ride. I hesitated and acted like I did not see her. She then hooted; my heart dropped, and I went straight to anxiety level. I went to the car. I was greeted with a not-so-happy face because she had noticed that I acted like I did not see her. Our conversation in the car went like this:

Ms Mtika: Molo sisi, unjani ... Kuthen' umile while ndilinde wena.

(Hi sis, how are you? Why are you just standing while I am waiting for you?)

Me: Molo Ma'am, uxolo andikubonanga. (There and then I realised she was Xhosa).

(Hi Ma'am, apologies I did not see it was you)

Ms Mtika: (Smiles)... "Umtsha eskolweni? Wenza grade bani?"

(Are you new at school? What is your surname? Which grade are you doing?)

Me: Yes, Ma'am, Yabo, and I am in Grade 10.

Ms Mtika: Ooh ungu Yabo. Is Lucky Yabo your brother? Do you know who I am?

Me: Yes, he is my brother, and no, Ma'am, I do not know you.

Ms Mtika: Ndingu' Ma'am Mtika bendifundisa ubhuti wakho u. Lucky. He was a good child. He was like a son to me...

(I used to instruct your brother)

She went on and on, telling me about my brother. I just listened and nodded throughout. At that moment, I started to read her energy. She was nice and had a positive energy. I discovered that she was a Life Orientation and isiXhosa Home Language teacher. I felt like I wanted to do more research on her, but I immediately remembered that it never ends well when I do so. I was inquisitive about her sexuality, but I told myself that it was none of my business and that I should respect the teacher-learner relationship to avoid the past repeating itself.

4.4 The Vocation

I found my voice in teaching. I remember my Geography teacher constantly reminding me of how good I was on this teaching journey. He would let me teach his Geography classes and my classmates would affirm how well they understood me. I underestimated this vocation within me because I also carried the role of being a nurse very well. I never did research on the teaching profession due to focusing on sciences more. I was going to make a good nurse because of having TLC (tender loving care).

I would even go as far as cleaning up after learners who had vomited or nursing their wounds when they injured themselves at school. My mother also had an influence; she loved me as a nurse, and that was all she would talk about when I uttered the word “career.” It made sense for her to love nursing as she was working at the hospital. She would go as far as telling me every minute she got about the nursing students at work. Fortunately, the more I was given a chance to teach my classmates, the more I fell in love with the idea of being a teacher. Teaching was the best way to impart knowledge about sexuality and sexual orientation, and my voice would be heard through this vocation. As teachers, we play a role in fostering values and shaping a learner’s future. As I had changed schools, I was mentally, emotionally, and socially in a better space. It was then that I was able to process everything that had happened to me.

Figure 4.3: A teacher who influenced my vocation.



I remember thinking, “If I was a teacher, I would have managed the situation much better.” I mean, yes, I was in the wrong but to mistreat a learner who was already vulnerable and in need of help was barbaric. Teachers are there to mould and channel learners in the right direction. Moreover, Mrs Grace was old enough to know better. I just wanted to be shown a way and corrected. She could have just sat me down, made me understand the gay community, and then punished me accordingly. Learners act the way I did because it is a cry for help, and they cannot express themselves well.

It is fortunate that there are teachers who discipline with love and mould with love, which is what learners always need. Throughout the entire process of being in that school, some teachers saw beyond my mistakes. They saw potential in me. Mrs Mom and Mrs Momo made me realise that not all teachers are the same. I got to love teaching through them. I grew to understand that learners are not the same so treat them accordingly and never use their mistakes to suppress them. Instead, use their mistakes to align them for the future. Unwanted behaviour can be fixed and moulded with love. Learners are teachable, and they learn as they grow. The following photographs were taken in 2015, the year I was matriculating.

Figure 4.4: Me, my classmates, and teachers who influenced my teacher identity.



4.5 Welcome to Freedom: Hello Tuks

I made a point of focusing more on my academic excellence, so when I reached matric, I did very well, and I earned a bachelor's pass with distinctions in Business Studies, Geography, English First Additional Language, and Life Orientation. I was immensely proud of myself. I woke up early on the day the results were published and went to fetch my statement. I remember how proud my teachers were. My Geography teacher asked me what I was planning to do in the future, and I proudly said that I wanted to do teaching. He said, "Good choice, which is your journey." At that point, I did not make sense of his words because I was just overjoyed with the results. Sadly, I did not apply early enough for the university academic year in 2016. I went from pillar to post trying to get a space, but unfortunately, I was not lucky. I, therefore, took a gap year, but I was not bothered by that. I got myself a job assisting my teachers with

marking. While marking for my teachers, I felt that I was finally practising my vocation. Everything felt so real, and I knew my career path from there. The plot twist is that I applied for a different course at the University of Johannesburg. I applied for a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree because I thought that it would lead to teaching. The prospectus showed teaching as one of the careers. I was accepted for that course, and I was excited, but little did I know that I would have to do a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) to be a teacher. This was in 2017. I was devastated; everything was falling apart. I did not have funding or accommodation. Everything was puzzling because I had received good marks. But God's communication was there, although I decided not to listen. My world was shutting down. I did not understand anything and to make matters worse, the majors were Politics, Religion, and Philosophy. I hated going to school because I did not know anything, and I had no passion for what I was doing.

One day, I woke up and decided to discontinue my studies. I felt like God's son, Jesus, was working within me. I did not even let my parents know. I went straight to the administration offices and deregistered. I felt a huge sense of relief. I was so proud of myself, and I thanked God on my way home. He prepared my parents' hearts before I even got home because when I broke the news to them, they just supported my decision. I went back to the drawing board to align myself and prepare for the following year. It did not bother me that two years had gone down the drain; I mean, I was young, and I had a vision to worry about years. I will forever be proud of the decision I took that day.

Through the process of reflection, I then remembered that I had started the process of application at the University of Pretoria but had never completed it, so I took the time to finish my application. I applied for a bursary through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and I made sure to apply for the right course, which was Bachelor of Education. I applied for all the phases just to be on the safe side. After I had completed all my applications, I was immensely proud, and I mentally prepared myself for the journey. I drew myself closer to God as I effortlessly prayed for his intervention on my applications.

I prayed while referring to the verses:

King James Version Bible (n.d, Matthew 21:22) – And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.

King James Version Bible (n.d, Luke 1:37) – For nothing will be impossible with God.

King James Version Bible (n.d, 2 Corinthians 5:7) – For we walk by faith, not by sight.

I had never stopped appealing my ancestors' opening doors for me. The journey was exceptionally smooth. I got my acceptance letter for admission and accommodation, and the bursaries came in handy. I chose to use NSFAS because there were advantages that came with it. One of them was that I was assured to study for four years without paying a cent. If I continued doing well, NSFAS would not cut me off. Everything was falling into place, and I was excited to be in residence. I could smell freedom from afar. I could not wait to be amongst other students and explore life.

It was 2018, February, we were moving into Res for orientation week. I was lucky to be placed at House Ekhaya. My family delivered me to the Res and said their last goodbye prayers. The moment they left, I could not believe how everything took a turn. I was reminded of what happened at UJ. I remembered the importance of listening to God. If I had listened to Him, I would have started my degree a long time ago, but that did not matter because everything happens at the right time.

We were introduced to our House Committee (HK) members, who took diligent care of us. We even met our house parents, Ma' V and Uncle 'A. It was a blessing to have a new family that was so welcoming. I remember that on the first day, Ma'V had a session with us called "Step Forward." She would ask a question, and we would be required to step forward if we related to it. She asked questions relating to our background and traumas that we might have gone through. Then, she went on to ask a question about the gay community. I proudly went to the circle alone. Mind you, our eyes were closed till you got into the circle. Then boom, I opened my eyes, and I was alone. It did not bother me but my then and now friend did not bother to go inside the circle. She was not comfortable then. After the session, we had a conversation with

Ma'V in which she asked about my life, and she reassured me that I was in a safe space at Hayani. I even wished I were having the same conversation that I had with my parents.

During my first year, I engaged myself with different LGBTQI+ organisations, including "Up & Out." I was exposed to genuine queer people who showed me love. The space I was in was comfortable, and I got to be myself. Around September, my Literacies in education (JLZ) lecturer, Dr Makoti, engaged and involved us in Anti-Discrimination Week. The experience I gained during that week was amazing. The great part of Anti-Discrimination Week was that we, as people of the LGBTQI+ community, got to express ourselves, and we were unapologetic about it. I remember the great words of my lecturer, Dr Makoti, that I carry with me until today: "The LGBTQI+ community do not want to be accepted; they want to be celebrated."

In 2019, I joined the well-being committee at Res. It was composed of diverse people, including my now girlfriend as a leader and my friend agreement. Approaching July, we planned an event that changed the lives of the Res students. July is International Pride Month. We took it upon ourselves to host an event that spoke to the queer family. We invited Dr Makoti to be one of the speakers. She touched on all the bases of the gay community and coming out. The students were happy and learned to stand up for who they are. There is no shame in being who you are.

The comfort and acceptance that I received at the University of Pretoria is unmatched. I even discovered my leadership skills, which pushed me to bring about a change within the UP system. The house parents gave me the first route to leadership that paved my way up at the university. Ma' V convinced me to join the Res HK. I was worried about wearing a dress as an HK at Res. There was a policy on how an HK must dress. I was uncomfortable wearing dresses. Ma' V made one visit to my room and assured me that I could wear pants. It was funny that I broke the record. During the entire history of Tuks residences, I was the first queer woman to be allowed to wear pants. My sexuality was truly celebrated, not just accepted.

My journey opened doors for me within the system. I even reached the highest leadership of all, which was being part of the Student Representative Council of 2022.

Dr Matete and Dr Jorrisen took diligent care of me in the Department of Student Affairs (DSA). I will always applaud the University of Pretoria on how welcoming they are to the queer family. There was no day that I was ever discriminated against at the university.

Figure 4.5: Celebrating Anti-Discrimination Week and LGBTIQ+ Pride Month at the University of Pretoria



4.6 The End of Freedom

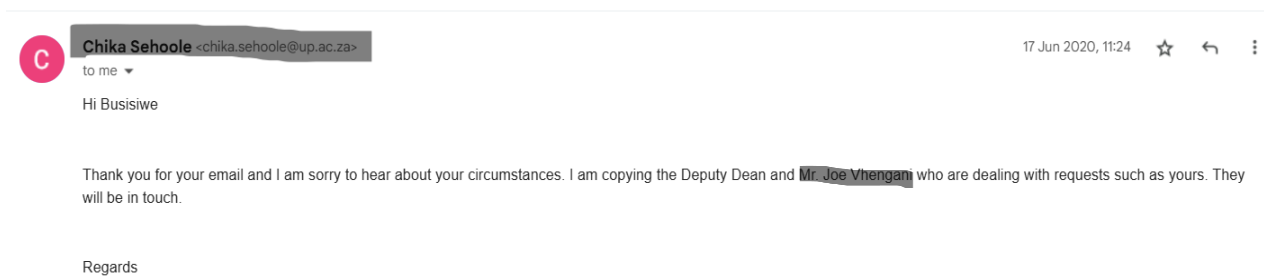
My years at the university were the biggest blessing in my life. Yes, certain days were better than others. The bad days came every time when I had to lose my freedom to be myself. I remember how I would pray and ask God to remove holidays from the calendar. I knew that it was impossible, but I would ask anyway. I could not bear the feeling of leaving Res and going straight home. My family was always happy to welcome me back home, although the truth is that I was never happy to go home. The discrimination of queer people at home by my mother was too much for me as a queer activist. I could not bear the comments she would make. Someone could even ask how I survived home. The truth is that I was born with a thick skin, and I always told myself that I did not care who said what, but this is who I am. I never changed who I am because of the stones of hate that were thrown at me, but I took the bricks and built a queer mansion that is extraordinarily strong. I understood where my mother was coming from, but I have never allowed her intrusions to change who I am.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, I also hit rock bottom. The excuses I made for my mother led to my episodes of depression. Now that I was forced to stay at home, reality did hit. Every word and action of hate put out there by my mother hit straight to the heart. I went back to the drawing board to find ways to cope with all the hate. I remember how I used my NSFAS money to buy a TV, a DSTV decoder, and headphones. The

DSTV, TV, and music were my coping mechanism. I even decided to take care of my sister's child to avoid the situation at home. Avoiding my mother was the best way to cope, but it never removed the depressive episodes. I cried myself to sleep to be okay emotionally. Thanks to COVID-19, I am this strong. I never stopped advocating for queer people. Eventually, my mother decided to let me be because I never changed who I was to make her happy.

I remember being part of the list of students who had to return to Res. The funny part is that I forced myself to be on that list by directly sending an email to the Dean of the Faculty. I sent an email to Prof. Chika Sehoole in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding my circumstances, and Figure 4.6 is the response.

Figure 4.6: Letter from the Dean in 2020



4.7 My Career vs My Sexuality

Being a teacher requires courage. Then, try being a queer teacher and see if this career is doable. No memo is in favour of queer teachers. Careers are truly limiting for who we are. We always must adapt to policies put out there that are less accommodating to us. The last year of teaching practicals required me to engage with my career for a full six months. The experience was amazing, but it felt like we were acting for marks. I did my teaching practical at the Pretoria Institute of Learning. It was a private school full of foreign teachers, but that never bothered me. The problem was how they found the gay community taboo and wrong. The culture shock, discrimination, and homophobia were the worst. I am not one to disclose my sexuality to everyone I meet. I mean, you can tell the moment you engage with me. I am a very observant person who really likes to argue. They never saw that I was part of the queer family due to a strict dress code policy. Nonetheless, I would defend the queer family

every time the topic came up. In all honesty, my defences would kick in. I still laugh about it today. All they would say is, “In our country, it is not allowed.” The argument was not constructive because, at the end of the day, there were no critical thinkers who produced solutions to eradicate the problem.

My first teaching job came as a shock. I remember that I was not even looking for a job in 2022 because I was occupied with my university job and studying for honours. One day, I was busy with my school assignments at the computer laboratory at Res. A teaching post popped up on the teaching vacancies group, so I jokingly applied. Then, the following day, I was offered an interview, to which I went. I scored my first teaching job at my first interview. God really blessed me. I did not want a job, to be honest, but I went with the flow anyway.

Let me recap on how diverse the panel was. I was allowed to ask questions, and I had only one question: As this is a school driven by Christian values, does the school accept other learners who are not Christians and those who are different? Everyone on the panel wanted to quickly address my question, and that was cute, to be honest. They all assured me that everyone was welcome at the school.

My gaydar (a feeling that you are talking to one of the queer members) was extraordinarily strong towards the executive principal. She was just glancing with a smile throughout the whole interview. It was uncomfortable to some extent but also cute. From my first day, the school was amazing, and the environment was welcoming. I had found my queer family; I mean, the school was queer-diverse. The directors and most of the teachers were part of the queer family. I was very fond of the school right away. The executive principal, who was a proud lesbian, was married to one of the directors. I truly concur that momentous change in private became a home away from home. I felt like I was cruising in my career without having to hide who I was. What a blissful journey 2022, my first year of teaching, was.

Figure 4.7: The most supportive management team



4.8 Learners vs My Sexuality

Little ones are always curious about everything. I was allocated to be a class register teacher for Grade 7B. On the first day, they had already Googled me. It was the shock of my life. They saw a post on the University of Pretoria's Reach Out and Give (UPRAG) website when I was interviewed about the gay community during Pride month. The learners flooded me with questions. Trust me, they did not just stop checking on me via Google, they also went to my TikTok account where my account name was accompanied by the rainbow flag.

It was a shock how they got to understand my life by being little detectives. I quickly put a stop to it by denying every allegation about my sexuality. I did not want them to focus on my sexuality because it was not yet time for me to discuss it with them. I decided to put up boundaries for the purpose of mutual respect. My dress code made it worse for them because they would make comments like, "Ma'am you like dressing like a tomboy and it looks good on you." I still did not see a need to let them be aware of my sexuality.

The little ones shaped my identity in the most amazing way. I came to realise that one's dress code has nothing to do with the gay community. I also realised that labels within the lesbian's family are unnecessary. I changed my dress code for my comfort, not because of the learners. They made me realise that I am just a woman who loves another woman. The little curiosity in their voices gave me the reassurance that labels just add confusion to our queer journey. I was able to enjoy the life of just being a

lesbian without labels. It was, and still is, amazing to me how my learners are so welcoming to the queer family. I continuously teach them how to accept, celebrate, and respect others for being who they are. I thought the journey would be difficult with my learners, but it turned out to be the best of the best.

Figure 4.8: Me and my kids in 2023 celebrating Valentine's Day and my birthday.



4.9 Advocating for Anti-Bullying School Environments

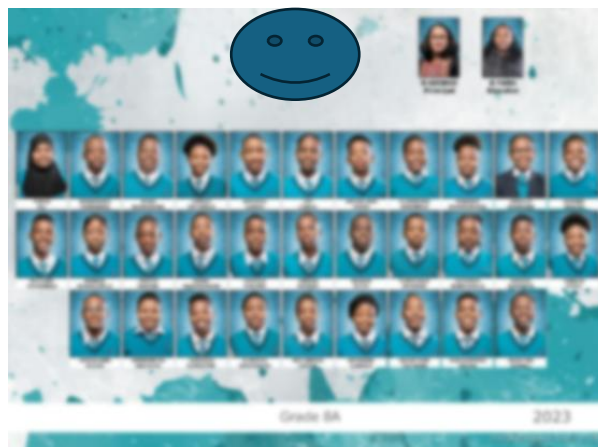
As educators, it is imperative to recognise the profound impact that bullying can have on learners' emotional and academic well-being. To me, advocating for a bully-free school was not just a moral obligation but a significant responsibility. We have seen many cases of suicide due to bullying. There are truly severe effects of bullying, which include long-term psychological damage that includes anxiety and depression. So, it was and still is crucial to create a safe home for every learner, including queer learners and to provide support which fosters learner development and enhances academic excellence.

At Great Change Private School, the main type of bullying that occurred was cyberbullying. There was an incident, for example, which was directed at a queer learner. The bullies created a "shade room" where they would say the most nasty and derogatory things about other learners and the admin, who would share their stories on Instagram. The comment that was made about the Grade 11 boy was, "Noma ungathini uwumfana and uchama uhleli phantsi wena stabane" (No matter what you say, you are a man and pee sitting down, you gay). This was the most painful

occurrence I had ever encountered. The learner could not even stand up for himself, so we stood up for him.

I oversaw the prefects, and we ran an awareness campaign that not only focused on queer people but on bullying at large. We made sure that we promoted inclusivity and respect amongst the learners. Stricter policies were drafted that clearly outlined the consequences of bullying and being homophobic towards queer learners and other learners at large. We used Life Orientation to integrate social-emotional learning into the curriculum to enforce bullying awareness. We engaged teachers to use their register-class time to build a culture of openness and a safe space to allow learners to share their feelings without fear of rejection and retaliation. All our strategies with the prefects changed the school culture into a more welcoming space than ever.

Figure 4.9: Me and the 2023 learners



4.10 Eyewitness of Workplace Bullying

Before I became a victim, I became an eyewitness. A new teacher had been employed, and he was a gay man. He had a bubbly personality and was a people person. Being the favourite at that point did not blind me to the workplace bullying and homophobic reaction towards him. He was teaching Information Technology with six months of teaching experience. I wondered why the management had hired him. I wondered in the first place because from the moment he arrived, I noticed a stark contrast between how he was treated and how other new teachers were welcomed. Typically, when a new teacher joined the school, there was a sense of support, guidance, and at least a

basic effort to integrate them into the system. However, with him, it was different. The atmosphere felt tense, and from the beginning, there were subtle yet obvious signs that he was not being embraced as a valued member of the staff.

What made me wonder even more was the way management interacted with him—there was no attempt to mentor or assist him in adjusting to his role. Instead, he was often scrutinized, dismissed, and put in tricky situations without any real support. The hostility from some colleagues was evident in their eyerolls, whispered conversations, and reluctance to engage with him professionally. It was as if his presence alone was an inconvenience to them. I could not help but question if he were hired only to be set up for failure, to be an easy target for bullying, or as a way for management to maintain control by singling out those who did not fit their expectations.

It was the month of June 2023 when Themba was accused of conspiring with a learner to steal another learner's mobile phone. Everyone was in disbelief at the occurrences of that day. It was a normal examination day, and he was invigilating Grade 11. A Grade 11 learner asked Mr Themba if she could go to the toilet, so he went to fetch toilet paper from a bag for her. The learner came back, and the examination ended, and that was when the victim learner noticed that her phone was missing. She had put the mobile phone into the bag right before the examination while all the other learners were watching. The management changed Mr Themba with negligence while the suspect walked free. After the management had checked the cameras, it was said that Mr Themba turned his back to the cameras to cover the theft that was taking place. The whole was not making sense and sounded made up to me.

The management showed signs of wanting to fire Mr Themba. They even threatened that they would fire him if he made any more mistakes after the incident of theft, and he signed a warning for a fabricated story. This whole incident gave his colleagues much happiness because they continuously uttered these words, "Vele ama gay ayaphapha and anesdina" (Gays are too forward in nature and irritating). They found joy in Mr Themba's hurt, and they could not hide their happiness about his downfall. I could see this through their actions, body language, and the way they spoke about Mr. Themba when he was not around. When the fabricated theft incident happened, instead of showing concern or support, some of his colleagues smirked, whispered

among themselves, and even laughed when his name was mentioned. They made no effort to hide their satisfaction with the trouble he was facing.

During lunch breaks, I noticed how he started sitting alone, whereas before, he had tried to engage with the other teachers. The once friendly greetings from some colleagues turned into cold nods or complete avoidance. I overheard conversations where they openly ridiculed him, saying things like, “He thinks he’s special, now look at him,” and “People like him are too much, he had it coming.” Their words were laced with homophobia and resentment, as if his mere presence had irritated them.

Beyond that, when he walked into a room, the energy shifted people would suddenly go quiet, exchange glances, or pretend to be busy. Some even got up and left as if they did not want to be associated with him. The isolation was deliberate. He was being pushed out not just by management but also by his own colleagues, who took pleasure in his suffering instead of offering him the professional support and camaraderie every teacher deserves.

The second occurrence was when the management barged into his class without any notice. Usually when you are going to have a class visit, you are notified. He was made to feel incompetent and stupid in front of the learners. They went as far as questioning his intelligence right in front of the learners. He was asked questions on the subject that he had just been given, and they knew that he had no subject knowledge about Information technology. They took over the class while shouting at him about the assignment he had given a learner. He left the school in tears that day. I wished I could take the pain away from him. He went into a deep depression and started missing work. The very same week that he had had enough of everything, he decided to resign over a text message. No one deserved what happened to him.

My heart dropped on his behalf. He did not deserve such treatment. They could have trained and supported him, not drowned him in depression. I wondered if I was going to be “next,” but that thought was quickly followed by tears. His journey made me feel a great deal of resentment towards homophobic people. I wished I had the power to defend him, but the fear was of risking my journey. If they could treat him like that,

then what about me? I reserved my opinion while I died inside. All I could do was sympathise with him and offer my support at that point.

4.11 Colleague Relationship: The Principal

During my first two years of teaching, I met an amazing soul who was part of the queer family. I met the former executive principal in my interview, and she hired me. She was the executive principal at that time. I also met another amazing soul, the former academic principal, who was the high school academic principal. My journey at Great Change Private School was paved by their enthusiastic lessons and the training they gave me. They both saw the best in me and believed in me. They made my teaching journey easy and bearable. They guided and moulded my teaching and taught me leadership. I am an amazing, hardworking, free-spirited teacher because of them. Great Change Private School directors are diverse within the rainbow family and teachers of the queer family.

My colleagues are the most amazing individuals who have acknowledged and celebrated my sexuality. They looked beyond my sexuality and embraced the change that I brought at Great Change Private School. In any professional environment, the significance of collaboration cannot be overstated. Among the myriad factors that contribute to a productive workplace having amazing colleagues stands out as particularly paramount. These individuals not only enhance the work experience through their skills and expertise but also foster an atmosphere of support and motivation that is essential for personal and collective growth.

Amazing colleagues often possess a unique blend of qualities that make them invaluable assets to any team. Their ability to communicate effectively allows for seamless exchanges of ideas, promoting innovation and creativity. Furthermore, they exhibit a keen sense of empathy and understanding, which cultivates an inclusive environment where every team member feels valued. This supportive dynamic encourages individuals to share their thoughts openly, leading to more robust problem-solving strategies and improved overall performance.

4.12 Change of Senior Management

It was the beginning of June when the former executive principal announced that she was resigning as an executive principal. My heart was shattered; it felt like a breakup. I chose to become deaf to the news. On 31 June 2023, the reality knocked, and I felt anxiety within me. I felt lost, we cried as colleagues because we could smell the change in our lives drastically. The role of an executive principal is significant, as they shape the educational system at a school. She was a leader who was not just running the administrative management of the school, but she fostered a positive, rainbow-school culture. She was a breath of fresh air; she guided pedagogical practices and strived for academic excellence. In her position, she made sure that our matriculants obtained a 100% pass rate. Our mental health was given consideration, and we spent most days just being happy as a family. Great Change Private School was a home away from home.

The change brought profound implications for the learners, teachers, parents, and even how the school was governed. It is never easy to accept change, but we swallowed the hard pill. When the newly elected principal resumed office, I thought there would be fresh perspectives and innovations that would refresh the school environment. I knew that there was going to be potential change and change of leading styles, but I never expected such a twist of things. The newly elected executive principal was introduced. She was from our neighbouring private sister school. We could smell trouble from far away, just from her introductory speech.

As colleagues, we understood that she carried a unique vision for the school, but you cannot shove your unique approach down our throats. As a leader you must be able to learn the culture and adapt where necessary. You cannot come into a diverse school and start to change policies to suit yourself. The change created an atmosphere that discouraged creativity among the teachers. The new executive principal saw us as competition instead of grooming us to be better educators in the education system. This impacted community relations negatively. She failed to prioritise building relationships with teachers, learners, and parents. Instead, there was more drifting, which led to staff meetings turning into battlegrounds. The teachers continued to resist her leadership style and policies.

4.13 Story within a Story: Distracted by the Smell of the Skunk

A detailed storyline of how I experienced bullying in Great Change Private School follows. The perpetrator was the newly appointed executive principal. I will author a story within a story by embedding my lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher facing workplace bullying within a broader narrative about identity, resilience, and institutional power. This layered storytelling will allow me to critically reflect on personal struggles while situating them within the systemic challenges faced by marginalized individuals in professional spaces.

4.13.1 First Incident

It was Term 2 in July 2023; it was freezing cold on that day. We had all gathered in the staff room as colleagues, waiting for the newly elected executive principal to address us. She came and glanced around and saw that I was wearing a hoodie and a jacket. Towards the end of the meeting, she addressed the issue of teachers dressing professionally. It was okay for her to address the issue, but to make an example of me for unprofessional dressing by wearing a hoodie when I was the only teacher wearing a hoodie that day felt like a personal attack. When she mentioned the hoodie, my colleagues stared at me with a smirk. Right after she had adjourned the meeting, my colleagues started laughing at me. I was very embarrassed and needed a room to hide. She noticed that everyone was laughing at me but turned a blind eye. I decided not to put the whole incident into my heart and mind.

4.13.2 Second Incident

This incident took place in Term 3. When I came to the school, the dress code had been given to me, and I had read it. I understood that the rules stated the dress code policy, which I had been introduced to by the SACE. Also, the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) office at the University of Pretoria had emphasised it. But ever since I had been at the school, we were told that on Wednesdays and Fridays, we could wear casual dress since it was sports day. I oversaw cheerleading, which meant that I needed to be comfortable on that day. I was wearing a round-neck male t-shirt, which meant that my upper body was fully covered. I never expected the events that followed were about to tear my heart. I had never experienced homophobia in my life. I had always been treated with respect at the school, and I was accepted for who I am from the top management.

In a blink of an eye, my day was ruined. I was called into the office by the newly elected executive principal. She had a printout of the dress code policy on her desk. I could sense how tense the room was. She then read the dress code policy as though I was too dumb to read it myself. She outlined that it was wrong to wear a t-shirt in the school and it was against policy. I outlined what had been happening at the school and that we were allowed to dress casually on sports days. She was a very defensive and arrogant person by nature. She failed to listen to what I was saying. So, I decided to leave the office and go straight to my Head of Department (HOD) to complain. It was fortunate that the academic principal was passing by, and she promised to address this matter with her.

However, after school, I was called into the office again. Little did I know that I was going to be issued with a verbal warning for not clocking out twice. The sad part is that I was assisting with the November examination papers that had been done incorrectly, so I had stayed late for those two days and the office was locked by the time I left. I had alerted her on those two days of not clocking out. It took me by surprise that I was asked to assist with this question paper since I am good at setting question papers, and the Department of Education facilitator needed the question as soon as possible. I agreed to sign the verbal warning as part of the procedure, but I swore on that day to never assist when asked again because clearly, I was being used at this school. Also, I knew that it was revenge because I had told the academic principal about the dress code issue that had occurred, and I am sure she called the newly elected executive principal out.

I wonder why I thought the warning was the last bang on my heart. The academic principal was present at the meeting, and she then outlined the issue of the dress code. She made it clear to the newly elected executive principal that on school sports days, we were permitted to wear casual dress due to the activities we did with the learners. Moreover, I was covered up and looked professional. The newly elected executive principal replied with the following:

- Sports days do not mean a teacher must look unprofessional.
- Policy is policy, and we cannot change it to accommodate t-shirts.
- Learners must look up to a professionally dressed teacher.

Every point was said in an arrogant and forceful manner. She was degrading me and showing a lot of hate towards me. You could see she was feeling the insubordination which was not even the case from my side. We just wanted her to understand the procedure that had been there before her arrival. I tried to reason with her, and I ended up mentioning that people have different sexualities, and they should be made to feel comfortable within the system since they have rights in South Africa. She then emphasised her theories and perceptions about how I should dress like a lady. It clicked to me that the main issue had to do with me dressing like a man. She went as far as suggesting that I wear dresses and tops, at least. I had never felt so disrespected as at that moment. My anger was piling up, so I ended up disclosing my sexuality to her. Her response was:

- This is a Christian value-driven school. We follow the Bible and what is right by it.
- We cannot just accept “ANYTHING” (referring to the gay community).
- At the end of the day, you are not a man, and you must consider how the learners perceive you.

Her words shattered me deeply. I remember going silent. The academic principal was left to reason with her alone. She even tried to reach common ground, but the newly elected executive principal’s arrogance was way beyond her, and the meeting was adjourned. I left the office with a heavy heart and tears in my eyes. I went to the staffroom and tried to speak to my girlfriend and colleagues who were there. I was sure that I was going to resign that day. The academic principal ran after me and begged me not to resign and to send an email to human resources (HR) about this issue because she would try to talk to her again. I left the school with many mixed emotions. I even called the former executive principal, and we cried together. She calmed me down and made sure I left laughing.

4.13.3 Emotional Damage

I found it difficult to share my feelings, express my needs, and control my temper. I remember wanting to hit the wall. I cried to let my anger and emotions out. I am a tough cookie to crack, but she was able to crack me. My emotions manifested in various forms, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Trauma developed

from all the events, and I could not bear being at this school. The experiences led to profound alterations in my emotional landscape and resulted in long-term psychological repercussions. I was diagnosed with severe depressive episodes. All the neglect I had avoided from my childhood trauma came back. If I could have ended my life at that time, I would have.

4.14 Stories about Others: Victims Coming Together

Workplace bullying did not end with only me. Two more colleagues became victims of the newly elected executive principal. I have addressed how HR intervened and how injustice was served in the end. Now, I will tell the stories of Ms Stella and other teachers.

4.14.1 Ms Stella's Incident

Ms Mothomi is the HOD of Commerce. She is a curvaceous woman by nature, and she has never limited herself in terms of the clothes she wears. Even with her body structure, she still looks respectful and professional. She has never encountered any judgements or nasty comments from the management over the last four years that she has worked at Great Change Private School.

One day during Term 1, Ms Stella was wearing blue jeans and a shirt as usual. We can attest as colleagues that we have seen her wearing blue jeans with no issues before, and we are allowed to wear them, so it has never been an issue. Suddenly, the newly elected executive principal had a problem with blue jeans when Ms Stella wore them because of her body structure. She said with no shame that Ms Stella was “showing off her curves.” This was beyond bullying; it was also body shaming of a professional teacher. Women with curves already face societal stereotypes that link physical appearance with skills and capability. The newly elected executive principal did not hesitate to print out the policy and give it to Ms Stella for her to familiarise herself with it. She had to cover up as a high school teacher because the boys would be sexually aroused by her curves (in the words of the newly elected executive principal). She proceeded to order her to wear black clothes that were baggy to cover her curves.

I found myself being part of the scene where Ms Stella was addressed aggressively. I remember how she broke down in tears, and all her confidence was gone. I would never have wished what the newly elected executive principal did to Ms Stella on my worst enemy. She showed no remorse; instead, she was smiling sarcastically. Ms Stella lost her self-esteem because every morning thereafter, she would ask how she looked. She even wore black for the whole week. However, she took a stand and sent an email to HR about how she had endured workplace bullying.

4.14.2 *Being held Hostage.*

One thing about the newly elected executive principal. You would think she had changed for a few days, and then she would start again. It was during Term 2 when another change took place. A new academic principal was appointed because the previous academic principal had resigned due to family responsibility. She went back to India. A new academic principal was appointed for the high school. Already the working environment was so toxic that the teachers hated to even be in the same staffroom with the newly elected executive principal. We knew that the new academic principal would not even stand up for us in any way because she was new and still needed to build a good relationship with the newly elected executive principal.

During Term 2, the teachers prepared the final November question papers. We were given a due date of Friday to submit them. All the teachers did everything as per the memo and submitted their papers on that Friday. The following week, the new academic principal was supposed to check the question papers, but she did not do so until the next Friday afternoon. There were mistakes on the papers that the teachers had submitted so the newly elected executive principal took the decision that all the high school teachers were not going anywhere until the teachers had fixed their papers. She went as far as asking Malume, the gate security guard, to lock the gates and to open them only for the primary school teachers.

This decision was not communicated to the high school teachers at all. It was only when we went to sign out that we heard the rumour and thought it was a joke until we wanted to go out. I was the first high school teacher who drove their car to the gate. I hooted several times with no response until Malume shouted that he was instructed to lock the gate because no high school teacher was going that day until the bosses said

so. Our cars were in convoy, ready to leave the premises. We all jumped out of our cars and went to the office to confront the new academic principal. She just laughed and said that she was also locked up until all the teachers had fixed their mistakes.

The newly elected executive principal did not bother to leave her office to address us; instead, she was on the phone throughout. We ended up calling the heads of academics and that was when the gates were opened. The newly elected executive principal denied that she had instructed Malume. The worst part is that she was laughing and being sarcastic when confronted. Two teachers were even crying because one had left a sick mother at home, and the other had left a sick child. The newly elected executive principal went as far as twisting the story she told to the management, saying that it was a language barrier problem and Malume did not understand English.

4.14.3 *Being Aggressive*

The newly elected executive principal did not just bully us; she went as far as verbally abusing the teachers. Her tone and body language when addressing the teachers in the staffroom left everyone disliking coming to the staff briefings in the morning. The situation escalated when it was discovered that pictures of teachers sitting in class had been taken by the newly elected executive principal without their knowledge. These pictures were shown to Ms Zarh by the receptionist, who had received them from the newly elected executive principal. Other teachers later heard from the receptionist that these pictures were being used as evidence, and warnings were expected to be issued against them.

When the issue was raised, the newly elected executive principal became defensive and refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing. Instead, she reacted aggressively, shouting at the teachers and threatening to give them official warnings. Following this incident, Ms Zarh became a target of victimization and was frequently shouted at in front of her colleagues. The newly elected executive principal even reported Ms Zarh to HR, accusing her of being rude and showing an “attitude” in the morning briefings.

It did not end there. The second occurrence took place when some teachers were complaining about the discipline at the school. The primary school teachers felt that

the learners did not care about the demerit system. A demerit system is when learners are given a demerit that alerts the parents as to what a learner has done wrong. When they reach fifty demerits, they go to detention. However, the teachers felt that this system was not working out because the learners' behaviour was not changing. Ms Gran addressed this issue, and she was told in front of her colleagues that she must retire because she was failing as a teacher and that her age no longer allowed her to chase young learners. Ms Gran's eyes were filled with tears. She was so broken that she never uttered a word in the staff briefings again.

4.14.4 Intervention of HR

HR at Great Change Private School tried to consolidate and unite the teachers and the school management team (SMT), which was the newly elected executive principal in this case. In the case of the dress code, the newly elected executive principal humbled herself and apologised to us for how she had managed herself. She even apologised for discriminating against me based on my sexuality. HR then decided to suspend her for a week, and I was happy with the outcome of that case. I could say that justice was served in that regard.

Unfortunately, the newly elected executive principal never changed. Instead, she went from trying to improve to being the worst leader I have seen in all my years of leadership. The work toxicity went from being mild to being unbearable, especially after she had held us hostage and had pictures taken of the teachers. As teachers, we decided that enough was enough. We decided to do a petition to address the difficulties we were facing and to ask for HR intervention. This petition was not done for the newly elected executive principal to be fired but for us to reach common ground and to be able to work well together. We did not know that we were biting ourselves by drawing up this petition.

In this case, injustice was served on a silver platter. HR made me realise that racism and fascism will govern if a leader is White. After an email was sent to HR, a meeting was scheduled with all the high school teachers. We had hoped that everything would be fixed and, finally, we would have a healthy working environment. To our surprise, they had a meeting with the newly elected executive principal before us, which was weird since we were the ones who had complained. HR came into the meeting in

defence mode instead of addressing our concerns. The following were some of the excuses that were made for the newly elected executive principal:

- Addressing her tone: “That is who she is. You all need to understand her, and she cannot change to accommodate you all, but we will talk to her.”
- Addressing her interference in academics: “She is your senior, and she must be on the lookout always, and if she wants to take pictures, then so be it.”
- Intimidation and victimisation: “As a leader, she must be harsh sometimes to correct the wrongs. She has been protecting all of you seated next to her. Next time, she must give a warning because you all deserve it.”
- “She will never be fired; instead, we can fire all of you seated here because you all have made a lot of mistakes. You are all so unbearable for her that she cannot hold briefings in harmony because of the attitude you all give. As much as you all do not come to this toxic environment, same to her.”

I could mention many of the responses from HR that broke us as teachers. We had thought that speaking to HR would be safe and they would assist us. Unfortunately, they made it clear that she would never be fired and instead, we were the target. They made it seem like she was the target, and we were bullying her. We were made to seem delusional and unprofessional. I could never heal from that day. From that day forward, we all went into our quiet era. Then she started being petty and reporting the teachers who did not want to participate in the staff briefings, even smiling as she spoke.

4.15 Conclusion

In this chapter, I shared my personal lived experiences using self-reflexive narratives. These self-reflexive narratives were primarily derived from memory work. This helped me to pinpoint the main themes that addressed my research questions and were related to my study. In the next chapter, I identify the themes and sub-themes stemming from my data. By employing thematic analysis, I analyse and interpret my data and discuss my findings in conjunction with my theoretical framework and relevant existing literature in the field.

Chapter 5: Analysing and Interpreting the Data

5.1 Introduction

The study employed thematic analysis, as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2014), to analyse and interpret the data collected (Byrne, 2022). This approach was used to address the following research questions: How did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher? Why did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher in the way that I did?

Given the personal and social nature of the research questions, autoethnography was selected as the research design. This choice was informed by Chang's (2016) and Cooper & Lilyea's (2022) argument that autoethnography provides a means of exploring personal experiences within broader social and cultural contexts. In line with this research design, the researcher (myself) reflected on and shared personal lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher who faced workplace bullying. These experiences were examined within their sociocultural context, drawing on Adam and Bochner's (2011) notion that personal narratives are intricately linked to cultural understandings.

In Chapter 4, I outlined my lived experiences of workplace bullying, while also providing a detailed description of the sociocultural context that framed these experiences, from my upbringing to my entry into the teaching profession. This chapter not only captured these experiences but also established the necessary context for the analysis and interpretation of the data. The current chapter focuses on thematic analysis and the interpretation of the autoethnographic data, where I sought to extract meaning from these personal experiences while considering the broader societal factors that influenced them.

5.2 The Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

I shared my stories by writing self-reflexive narratives since autoethnography is a form of narrative research. The focus was on my own storytelling while paying attention to the “told” and “telling” (context and structure) of my stories (Nkouaga, 2021). Data analysis began the moment I began writing my self-reflexive narratives and throughout the process of thinking about my story. I honored my voice and what message I was seeking to convey (Nkouaga, 2021). Since I was employing memory work, I decided

what was relevant and what would make meaning of my study, so this process was all about analysing (Chang et al., 2013). Throughout the process, I recognised that memory work and self-reflexive narratives played a crucial role in assisting me make meaning and interpret my lived experiences. While I was analysing the self-reflexive narratives, I developed a chronology of the momentous events of my lived experiences and the turning points in my journey that shaped me as a beginner teacher in a certain way. It was beneficial that I considered story development techniques (Pelly, 2024), as I considered “others” who influenced how the narratives flowed, and I considered the sociocultural context of the setting of the narratives. Therefore, there was no separation in the analysis of the autoethnography from the data collection as I was thinking analytically while writing the self-reflexive narratives (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

The coding, grouping, and regrouping of the data was part of the analysis of my data, as it was important to organize them into themes and elements (Chang et al., 2013; Mihás, 2022). I used the thematic analysis method to examine and comprehend my autoethnographic information (Wagner et al., 2012; Leung, 2021). Through this technique, I was able to code my data and then pinpoint the overarching themes that surfaced from my introspective stories. I interpreted the deeper meaning of my self-reflexive narratives, which was a more holistic method. I had a deeper look at my themes in the self-reflexive narratives with the processes of sociocultural context and conceptual framing, adding depth to my study (Leung, 2021). I was able to classify the underlying themes and sub-themes that emerged from my self-reflexive narratives through this technique to code my data. Each theme was then clearly conceptualized and a fitting name that reflected its key ideas. Producing the report, which summed up the results and connected them to the research objectives, marked the completion of the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Clark & Braun, 2021).

My autoethnographic study employed an analytical technique that combined self-analysis and cultural analysis (Chang, 2021). Paying attention to one’s own experiences while focusing on larger societal perceptions and settings has been described as involving two interconnected aspects: personal reflection and the examination of broader social contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 2002; Chang, 2021). Firstly, the broad theme that emerged from my self-reflexive narrative included the experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity. This theme relates to my

origins, who I am, and how my background has shaped my identity as a teacher. The second emerging theme focused on the experiences in the workplace. Teaching has been my vocation, and despite the challenges I faced, it never changed the fact that I am a teacher who continuously evolves in their professional identity. All the themes and sub-themes have been explained in depth in the section below.

5.3 Themes and Sub-Themes Stemming from My Data

The following table, Table 5.1, outlines the main themes and sub-themes in a tabulated format. This is followed by a detailed analysis in conjunction with the relevant, existing literature in the field.

Table 5.1: The main themes and sub-themes of the study

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
5.3.1 Experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity	5.3.1.1 Experiences of religion and culture
	5.3.1.2 Experiences with former teachers
	5.3.1.3 Experiences during my tertiary education
	5.3.1.4 A synthesis: Developing my sexual identity
5.3.2 Experiences in the workplace	5.3.2.1 Experiences as an advocate against bullying
	5.3.2.2 Violation of my sexual identity
	5.3.2.3 Experiences of race influences in the workplace
	5.3.2.4 Experiences of gender influences in the workplace
	5.3.2.5 Teacher-perpetrated Bullying
	5.3.2.6 Experiences of being part of a collective of teachers

	5.3.2.7 Experiences with learners and my vocation
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5.3.1 Experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity

In the process of analysing and interpreting my narratives (Leung, 2021), my background played a huge role in shaping my sexuality and gender identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher. Therefore, I identified it as the main theme. Then, sub-themes emerged, and they focused on the experiences of religion and culture, experiences with former teachers, experiences during my tertiary education and a synthesis: the development of my sexual identity and my experiences of workplace bullying.

5.3.1.1 Experiences of religion and culture

You cannot build a stable house without a solid and solid foundation. Our backgrounds play a huge role as the first foundation of our lives. Good and supportive parents always make sure to lay the best and most solid foundation in their children's lives. Our lives are shaped by the foundation our parents lay. There is a clear indication that parental involvement can enhance a child's life positively, and that can be seen through increased academic performance, social skills, and emotional well-being (Nokali, 2024). This emphasizes the importance of parents being able to establish nurturing home settings that support their children's academic and emotional endeavours.

My narratives describe the good foundation of my background. Both my parents played a supportive parental role in my life. This led to me striving for success and being an academic achiever. My parents went to the extent of introducing me to God Almighty in my early years. They instilled cultural beliefs and societal norms in my preliminary stages of growing up. In my teenage years, I was never destroyed during adolescence as my behaviour changed. Through the support and love I received from my parents, I got to be a social butterfly and a curious child who always wanted to learn anything new. In the world of discovery, I got to discover my sexual orientation.

My sexual feelings navigated around women instead of men. I did a lot of research on the gay community, and that shaped my identity as a queer Black woman.

The transition from primary school to secondary school for teenagers is a crucial developmental milestone that is frequently marked by a variety of difficulties (Donaldson, Moore & Hawkins, 2023). The beginning of high school brought many changes to my life as I was in a stage of discovering “who am I.” Transitioning from the familiar primary school to that complex secondary school setting required me to adjust on all fronts – socially, emotionally, and academically (Donaldson et al., 2023). At that stage, I left my friend/girlfriend with whom I had discovered my sexuality and started finding myself again. This time was overly sensitive for me because I had not shared my sexual discovery with my parents. This meant that there was no support to help me transition better to secondary school. Children who have minority overlapping identities may face additional challenges that might negatively impact their mental and self-esteem (Nadal, King, Sissoko, Floyd & Hines, 2021).

In the process of transitioning, I felt like I was losing myself because my feelings were now conflicting with how I grew up. My feelings for women were growing stronger each day. One day, I could not hold it in anymore and I acted on my feeling of loving a teacher. This route in my life opened a can of dislike and rejection from my mother. She found out about my sexuality in an unsettling setting. The rejection was so loud that the relationship between me and my mother became very cold. It felt like I did not fulfil her expectations, and I disrespected her cultural beliefs and societal norms that I was taught in my early years of growing up. Parental disapproval can cause mental instability that can have serious psychological effects that last far into adulthood (Jhang, 2018; Nadal et al., 2021). Children who are under the umbrella of LGBTQI+ need all the support they can get from their parents to fully understand who they are. The moment the parents support their queer children, then they can protect them from the homophobic community. A sense of belonging contributes to healthy mental health (Haim-Litevsky, Komemi & Lipskaya-Velikovsky, 2023).

Jhang (2018) and Ream & Peters (2021), suggests that negative health consequences, such as a higher likelihood of substance addiction, homelessness, and suicide attempts, are significantly predicted if parents reject their gay child. In my narratives, I describe how I drowned in depression because of the rejection I received

at home. As much as I wanted to understand their side that no parents think or wish for their child to be gay, I could not resist the pain they put me through. This stage of rejection comes with many hurtful words that children can carry for the rest of their lives. Due to anger, my parents tended to be mean and unapproachable. All that roamed around in my mind was suicide because I saw no reason to live.

Disowning a child because of their sexual orientation is a grave betrayal of parental acceptance and support, and it frequently causes depression and mental issues (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021). My narrative revealed how I landed in the hospital because all I wanted was my parents' attention, love, and acceptance because they had disowned me. Rejection undermines the child's sense of identity; you even start to question your sexual orientation. This rejection intensified my feelings of loneliness and, to a lesser extent, stress, which had a negative impact on my health compared to my heterosexual peers. Owing to the absence of a strong familial support system, I was more susceptible to abuse and social exclusion (Nadal et al., 2021). The rejection then opened a door for my high school teachers to bully and emotionally abuse me because they understood there was no support for my sexual orientation at home.

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, this experience can be analysed through the dimensions of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. My lack of power as a marginalized queer Black student made me more vulnerable to bullying, aligning with the first dimension of powerlessness (Ream & Peters, 2021). The absence of support from my parents and the school environment further compounded this vulnerability. Additionally, the failure of my high school to establish a coherent and supportive environment allowed bullying to thrive, reflecting the second dimension of organizational incoherence. The intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation amplified my vulnerability, consistent with the theoretical framework (Hudson, Myer & Berney, 2024). This framework allows a deeper understanding of how structural and personal factors intersect to create a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ youth.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals the broader societal implications of exclusion and discrimination faced by queer individuals (Ream & Peters, 2021). By identifying the structural failures within the educational system and the lack of parental support, we can advocate for more inclusive policies and mental health resources. This approach

not only validates the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ youth but also paves the way for safer and more supportive environments that promote acceptance and emotional well-being.

5.3.1.2 *Experiences with former teachers*

My high school teacher had an influence on the development of my sexual orientation, and that cannot be understated because of the ways in which her behaviour and attitude impacted the way I perceived gender and sexual identity. According to research, self-esteem among LGBTQI+ children is enhanced by teacher support (Eisenberg, 2024). My case was fortunate and unfortunate because two of my best teachers were in support of my sexual orientation, and others resorted to bullying me, so I changed my ways. Those two teachers who embraced inclusivity made it easier for me to navigate the nuances of my identity. The presence of understanding teachers fostered a culture in which talking about sexuality was accepted, enabling me to explore these subjects without worrying about being judged (Eisenberg, 2024).

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, this experience can be analysed through the dimensions of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. The supportive teachers helped create a safe micro-environment that momentarily disrupted the powerlessness I felt as a queer Black learner (Eisenberg, 2024). However, the overall lack of organizational coherence within the school system allowed other teachers to engage in homophobic behaviour and bullying, further reinforcing my vulnerability. This imbalance between support and discrimination highlights the tension between individual allies and the broader institutional failures that perpetuate bullying (Stephenson, 2024).

Teachers have a crucial role to play in shaping learners in the school environment. It is unfortunate that teachers can reinforce negative, homophobic, and harmful behaviours, including bullying, towards gay learners (Kahle, 2020). In my narratives, I described an incident that occurred because of unacceptable social behaviour where I romantically desired my teacher and acted on it. My behaviour was wrong, and the school had a right to punish me in that regard. Nonetheless, the bullying by teachers that followed the case being closed was unacceptable. The affected teacher would make discriminating comments, and she made me feel uncomfortable to the extent

that the teachers would ridicule me in front of other learners. Studies show that educators' perspectives on LGBTQI+ problems frequently mirror larger societal standards, which can either lessen or increase bullying incidents (Kahle, 2020; Russell, Bishop, Saba, James, Ioverno & Brenick, 2022).

On the other hand, inadequate training regarding LGBTQI+ matters for educators can sustain settings that are hostile or even antagonistic to learners who are experimenting with their sexuality (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022). Owing to the lack of training that is provided, teachers get to project their personal beliefs onto learners who are exploring their sexuality (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022). Those teachers would even find it uncomfortable to have conversations with learners about sexual orientation. Clearly, this gap needs to be filled by equipping teachers with the necessary tools and skills that they need to effectively support the diverse learner population. To assist policymakers and educators in comprehending the difficulties of tackling educator bullying and discrimination in educational institutions, policies must be put in place that focus on anti-discrimination of the gay community (De Beer, 2020). In the end, encouraging learning environments plays a crucial role in helping learners develop healthy sexual and gender identities.

Hodson et al.'s (2006) model further illustrates how the lack of coherence in teacher training and institutional policy perpetuates a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ learners. My experience of discrimination and ridicule from certain teachers was not an isolated incident but a reflection of the school's failure to create an inclusive and supportive environment. This aligns with the theory's assertion that bullying thrives in environments where there is organizational chaos and a lack of accountability (Ehiahuruike, 2023). In my experience, such environments not only enable workplace bullying but also silence victims, making it difficult for them to seek justice or support.

Due to the discrimination and homophobia that I received at that school, I changed schools to protect my mental health. My narrative reveals how I was accepted and celebrated for my sexual orientation at the new school. According to Pedler (2018) and Osterman (2023), teachers need to know the importance of belonging. The moment a learner feels a sense of belonging; they get to shape their identity (Osterman, 2023). In my narrative, I described how I even started excelling in my academics and I promised myself to never repeat the same mistakes of my past. The

new school promoted diversity and anti-bullying, which led to effective lessons that benefitted learners in the classroom. Moreover, the school was facilitated by a sense of belonging. I concur with Seisa's (2020) views that a school that fosters a sense of belonging in the classroom is a school that contributes to excellent academic achievement. The learner's focus is shifted away from worrying about bullying and discrimination because they are given a sense of belonging. Learners who exhibit strong feelings of belonging in the classroom or school are typically more motivated and committed to their academic work (Osterman, 2023). The school moulded me and helped me shape my identity as a queer Black learner, which prepared me for university. In the next section, I discuss the role played by the university in shaping my identity.

5.3.1.3 *Experiences during my tertiary education*

Sexual orientation identity evolves within societal aspects which include higher educational institutions like universities (Hall, Dawes & Plocek, 2021). In my narrative, I describe how the University of Pretoria shaped my identity in a variety of ways, and it had an influence on both my academics and personal growth. The moment I got the acceptance letter; I felt a great deal of victory because I could smell freedom on my way. The rejection at home was weighing on me, and I drowned in deep depression. A vital getaway for many suffering from depression brought on by their homes is frequently university life (Worsley, Harrison & Corcoran, 2021). The university provided me with an opportunity to socially interact with other people in the gay community and experience autonomy and personal growth. In my narrative, I describe how my residence house parents welcomed us, as different as we were in terms of culture, race, sexual orientation, and background.

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, my experience can be analysed through the lens of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. The powerlessness I experienced at home due to rejection and lack of acceptance was counterbalanced by the supportive environment at the University of Pretoria. The university's inclusive policies and support systems provided the organizational coherence necessary to foster a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQI+ students. This coherence allowed me to regain a sense of control over my identity and facilitated my emotional and social healing (Stern, Njelesani & Howe, 2022). Through this

process, I came to understand that reclaiming my identity was not just an act of survival but also a form of resistance against the forces that sought to diminish me.

Learners can explore their identities and interact with a variety of peer groups, thanks to their newfound independence, which helps lessen feelings of constriction and discomfort related to home life (Abramson, 2023). The university served as a therapeutic space for me because I began my process of healing to fight against the mental issues of past traumas. In my narrative, I described how I was able to even join queer transformation organizations within the university. I was able to find and position myself in my identity. Learners can explore their identities and engage with diverse peers, which assists in alleviating feelings of limitation and distress related to familial life (Abramson, 2023). For many, the university environment fosters a sense of belonging and community where you meet peers on similar journeys as yours and mentors who support you throughout.

The involvement in extracurricular events and engagement in anti-discrimination organizations opened a platform for self-development and growth (Ream & Peters, 2021). I participated fully in anti-discrimination programmes and hosted an LGBTIQI+ awareness event. I learned a valuable lesson from my supervisor: “The queer community does not want to be accepted but rather to be celebrated.” My participation in several student organizations helped me to strengthen my existing interests and explore new ones, which helped me to develop a more unified sense of who I am. Thus, my academic career and sense of self have been influenced by my time at university.

Hodson et al.'s (2006) framework highlights how the university environment, through its structured and coherent support for LGBTIQI+ students, mitigated the effects of past traumas and provided a platform for empowerment. By fostering a space where diversity was celebrated, the University of Pretoria allowed me to reclaim my identity and thrive academically and socially. The university's inclusive policies and affirming spaces not only validated my experiences but also gave me the confidence to engage in scholarly and activist work that challenged systemic inequalities. This transformation was crucial in shifting my perception of belonging—from merely existing within an institution to actively shaping and contributing to its culture of inclusivity (Miranda-Wolff, 2022).

5.3.1.4 *A synthesis: Developing my sexual identity*

My sexual identity has been shaped by many factors, including religion, culture, my relationships with former teachers, and my experiences in higher education. These influences have not only influenced my identity but have also intersected with my experiences of workplace bullying. Growing up in a community with strong religious and cultural norms, I often felt out of place. The conflict between my developing sexual identity and the traditional values around me created internal struggles and a sense of isolation. This struggle was made worse by external pressure to conform, making self-acceptance even harder (Misawa, 2015; Olivera, 2022).

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, this internal struggle can be viewed through the lens of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. My lack of power stemmed from the cultural and religious expectations that suppressed my sexual identity, while the absence of support systems in these environments reflected a lack of organizational coherence (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). This theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of how systemic structures perpetuate feelings of alienation and contribute to vulnerability to bullying (Branch, Shallcross, Barker, Ramsay & Murray, 2021). In my experience, these structures not only created a hostile work environment but also normalized exclusion, making it difficult to challenge or resist the bullying. The lack of institutional accountability further reinforced my sense of invisibility, highlighting how deeply embedded these power dynamics are.

My experiences with former teachers also played an important role in shaping my identity. Supportive teachers provided safe spaces for self-exploration, while negative experiences, such as discriminatory remarks or biases, reinforced feelings of being different. These early interactions showed how much educators can influence the self-esteem and identity development of queer students (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022). In this context, Hodson et al.'s model illustrates how the supportive teachers temporarily disrupted the powerlessness I felt, creating safe micro-environments. However, the discriminatory actions of other teachers and the broader lack of institutional support revealed the incoherence within the educational system, which allowed bullying to persist (Branch et al., 2023).

University life brought both opportunities and challenges. It introduced me to diverse perspectives and allowed me to connect with like-minded individuals and allies. However, institutional biases and a lack of representation often made it difficult to navigate my identity with proper support. The contrast between newfound freedom and systemic barriers highlighted the complexity of being a queer Black woman in academic spaces (Hollis, 2018; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). By applying Hodson et al.'s model, the supportive queer transformation organizations and inclusive university policies functioned as forms of organizational coherence, empowering me to reclaim my identity. However, the lingering biases and lack of representation within academic spaces reflected the ongoing struggle against structural inequalities that fuel workplace bullying (Stephens, 2024).

These experiences have had a lasting impact on my encounters with workplace bullying. People with intersecting marginalized identities — such as being Black, female, and queer — are more vulnerable to workplace bullying and discrimination. Hollis (2018) explains that Black women's intersectional identities can lead to career disruptions due to bullying, while Misawa (2015) highlights how racist and homophobic bullying creates unique challenges for queer individuals of colour.

Hodson et al.'s (2006) framework further explains how these overlapping experiences of marginalization contribute to my vulnerability in the workplace. The power imbalance caused by race, gender, and sexual orientation, coupled with the lack of organizational coherence in enforcing anti-discrimination policies, perpetuates bullying and career instability (Vareta, 2022). Understanding this intersectionality is essential for creating supportive environments that address the unique challenges faced by people like me. Recognizing the connections between these factors can help us understand the root causes of workplace bullying and guide us toward building more inclusive and supportive professional spaces.

5.3.2 Experiences in the Workplace

My identity as a teacher was shaped by various professional experiences, which are reflected in my narratives. I discussed this as the second theme of the study which is experiences in the workplace. The sub-themes that emerged included experiences as an advocate against bullying, violation of my sexual identity, experiences of race and

gender influences in the workplace, teacher-perpetrated bullying and the experiences of being part of a collective teachers. All the sub-themes are discussed in this section.

5.3.2.1 *Experiences as an advocate against bullying*

Bullying is a prevalent issue in contemporary society, particularly in schools, with long-term psychological effects on learners. Namie and Namie (2011) define bullying as an unacceptable social behaviour inflicted on others by someone in a position of power. As educators, it is imperative to recognize the profound impact that bullying can have on learners' emotional and academic well-being (Esquivel, López & Benavides, 2023). In my narrative, I described how I actively advocated for a bully-free school, ensuring that no learner would experience the pain and victimization I endured in high school due to my sexual orientation. Research by Gusfre, KStøen & Fandrem (2023) highlights that bullying by teachers negatively affects learners' academic achievement and mental health.

One incident that shaped my advocacy was when a gay learner was cyberbullied with the homophobic comment: "*Noma ungathini uwumfana and uchama uhleli phantsi wena stabane*" (No matter what you say, you are a man and pee sitting down, you gay). The learner experienced severe emotional distress, including anxiety attacks and suicidal thoughts. Bickmore (2011) argues that open communication between learners and school officials is critical in addressing bullying. I immediately intervened, ensuring the learner received counselling and that the family was supported in navigating acceptance. This experience not only reinforced my dedication to creating a safe environment for all learners but also helped me heal my inner child (Souers & Hall, 2016).

Beyond individual interventions, I implemented school-wide anti-bullying strategies. As the teacher in charge of prefects, I led awareness campaigns that promoted inclusivity and respect. According to Spurling (2024), effective anti-bullying interventions involve educators, parents, learners, and administrators working collaboratively. Through Life Orientation lessons, we integrated social-emotional learning to raise bullying awareness and encouraged teachers to use register-class time to create safe spaces for learners to share their feelings without fear of retaliation.

My passion for advocating for anti-bullying environments was deeply personal, stemming from my own experiences of being bullied by teachers due to my sexual orientation. Teachers can reinforce harmful behaviours through homophobic and discriminatory actions (Kahle, 2020). Ms. Botolo, one of my high school teachers, orchestrated relentless bullying that led to my depression and suicide attempt. The lack of institutional support during that time reflects Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional model of workplace bullying, particularly the powerlessness dimension, where victims have little control while perpetrators exploit organizational weaknesses to reinforce their dominance. In such environments, unchecked authority fosters a toxic school climate, leaving victims isolated and vulnerable. This experience fuelled my commitment to ensuring that no learner under my care would endure similar victimization. By advocating for anti-bullying initiatives, I aimed to disrupt harmful power imbalances and create a structured, inclusive environment that aligns with Pedler's (2018) and Miranda-Wolff's (2022) argument that a sense of belonging fosters academic excellence and emotional well-being in learners. Advocating for a bully-free school was not just a professional duty but a personal journey of resilience and healing. Research by Burger, Strohmeier & Kollerová (2022) highlights that teacher has the power to significantly transform the school climate by implementing focused anti-bullying interventions. My lived experiences shaped my teacher identity, reinforcing the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments where every learner feels valued and protected.

5.3.2.2 *Violation of my sexual identity*

In my narratives, I described how the executive principal invaded my sexual orientation. I was put on the spot to forcefully reveal my sexuality. It was done in arrogance and only to receive immediate rejection. Her exact words were, "This is a Christian value-driven school. We follow the Bible and what is right by it. We cannot just accept "ANYTHING" (referring to homosexuality)."

My experience of having my sexuality violated served as a poignant reflection of how social expectations and personal identity interact. This invasion of my sexual orientation manifested through microaggression, bullying, and overt discrimination. Moreover, it developed from deeply rooted societal norms about sexual orientation, which are common manifestations of this invasion (Alichie, 2023). The aggression

directed at me had a significant psychological impact because it jeopardized my mental well-being. The instant rejection and humiliation took me back to the dark space of depression that had taken me years to come out from.

In analysing and interpreting my narratives, I realized that the encounters had psychological repercussions. People who identify as LGBTQI+ frequently go through a difficult journey that includes various phases, including coming out, acceptance, self-awareness, and denial (Alichie, 2023). Every stage has its own set of difficulties that, if confronted with hostility or a lack of support from peers or family, can aggravate feelings of worry or depression (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022). I feared rejection, so I found it difficult to embrace my identity, and that led to internal conflict. The whole experience felt like I had little power and authority, and I was subjected to workplace bullying by those with greater power, who, in my case, was the newly appointed executive principal.

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, this experience can be analysed through the lens of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. The executive principal's actions represented an abuse of power within an institution that lacked coherence in protecting LGBTQI+ rights. The absence of clear anti-discrimination policies and support systems for queer employees allowed the principal's behaviour to thrive. This aligns with Rollins (2024), who highlights that marginalized sexual orientations are often targeted in workplaces where institutional structures fail to protect against discrimination. Additionally, Tran et al. (2023) argue that the lack of inclusive policies creates an environment where microaggressions and bullying are normalized.

Workplace bullying is a widespread issue that negatively affects people, including those whose sexual orientation differs from heteronormative norms (Taylor & Kearney, 2018). Gay community employees face a set of issues that include discrimination based on sexual orientation identity. According to research, bullying at work is more common among people with marginalized sexual orientations, and it can have serious psychological repercussions (Rollins, 2024). Furthermore, McGregor and Vance (2023) emphasize that the psychological toll of workplace bullying is exacerbated when queer individuals lack access to mental health support and advocacy networks.

These experiences can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and a decline in work performance.

By analysing and interpreting my data, I can attest that these experiences had negative consequences that went beyond momentary psychological distress and hindered my professional growth and my vocation. According to Lim and Hwang (2023), workplace discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals often results in reduced job satisfaction and career stagnation. This further illustrates how the absence of organizational coherence within the school system contributed to my marginalization and emotional distress. Moving forward, addressing these issues requires the implementation of comprehensive diversity and inclusion policies that protect LGBTQI+ employees from discrimination and provide mental health resources to support their well-being.

5.3.2.3 *Experiences of race influences in the workplace*

Workplace bullying at Great Change Private School was pushed by race. The executive principal was White, which meant that the White teachers were excluded from being victims of bullying. The bullying was influenced by Black hate, which derives from systematic racism and societal norms. Unfortunately, Black employees were the target of verbal abuse, body shaming, homophobia, and degrading statements, which succeeded in embarrassing them. I could mention multiple cases of how the White teachers were never addressed about their dress code and unacceptable behaviour. The White teachers were even allowed to wear tights and spaghetti tops. The historical powers that were given to White people opened a door for workplace bullying, which meant that the Black minority endured marginalisation in the workplace.

Small incidents like “coffee drinking milk” were only given to a White teacher when they asked for it, yet a Black person would not benefit if the roles had been reversed. The Black women experienced unique challenges, which included both racial and gender bias at Great Change Private School. The White colleagues might have faced bullying, but they did not face the same intersecting prejudices as the Black teachers, a dual burden that resulted in higher stress levels and psychological discomfort.

There was a clear division in the staffroom. One side was for the White teachers, and the other side was for the Black teachers. The racial segregation line was so thick that the interactions were even in Afrikaans on the White side while the Black teachers were spoken to in their African language. I wished to just stop it all. No one is born racist; racism is a taught and learned behaviour. These actions created a hostile work environment, which had a negative impact on productivity and staff retention.

Being Black and female does set one up to be exposed to hostile situations like workplace bullying. Research highlights that Black women occupying careers like teaching are likely to face gendered racism, which creates what is referred to as "double jeopardy" at both academic and professional levels (Dickens, Jones & Hall, 2020). Even post-apartheid, Black women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, which contributes to their vulnerability in workplace settings where power dynamics favor dominant social groups (Hall & Dickens, 2020). This underrepresentation makes Black women more susceptible to workplace bullying as they are perceived as inferior within organizational hierarchies. Furthermore, research by De Vos (2010) suggests that racial disparities and miscommunication between racial groups exacerbate workplace bullying, particularly when power imbalances exist between White and Black employees. It is imperative that those in leadership positions adopt deliberate and initiative-taking strategies to transform the workplace culture and dismantle the power structures that foster bullying and discrimination (Hall & Dickens, 2020).

Minority ethnic groups like Black people can get exposed to workplace bullying. This stems from the apartheid era experienced by Black people before 1994. Members of Black ethnic groups may be more likely to be the targets of bullying if they work in an environment where they are the minority, and the management is composed of White people (Cunniff, 2011). As seen in my narratives, the Black teachers were a target, whereas the White teachers were off limits. The White teachers were even permitted to wear spaghetti tops and tights. The occurrences that I described in my narratives included the trust that was given to White teachers rather than Black people.

5.3.2.4 *Experiences of gender influences in the workplace*

There is a gap in the workplace when it comes to gender differences. The impact of workplace bullying differs across genders. Being in a school where the executive principal was a woman already removed the men from being victims of bullying. Men are masculine beings who are less emotional. It was difficult for the newly elected executive principal to attack the men rather than the women. The existence of this gender difference can be attributed to social dominance theory, which states that in a society where power hierarchies exist, one social group will dominate another. Automatically, my male colleagues held power over her. I noticed how she held herself most of the time when addressing the men. She showed a sense of respect that was not present when she addressed the women. As such, the differential exposure to workplace bullying by people could be attributed to cultural disposition and the social construction of gender. As she was a Christian, I guess what God said in verse 1 Timothy 2:11-12 did have an impact on her: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” King James Version Bible (n.d, Timothy 2:11-12).

In South Africa, two contradicting studies have been conducted. While Cunniff & Mostert (2012) indicated that South African men reported higher rates of workplace bullying than women, Adewumi & Danesi (2017) found no significant difference between men and women’s experiences of bullying. These findings align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which suggests that individuals are categorized into social groups, and those in minority or less powerful positions may face heightened risks of mistreatment. In my narratives, I align more with Adewumi & Danesi (2017).

In analysing my data, it is no secret that the female teachers, including me, were victims of workplace bullying. The newly elected executive principal was a Christian woman; she gave more respect to the male teachers than the female teachers, whom she saw as competition. This behaviour reflects the concept of lateral violence, where marginalized groups may turn against one another to navigate power imbalances within hierarchical structures (Jackson & Sadler, 2022). Our neighbouring countries like Ghana and Kenya have highlighted similar patterns (Mukolwe, Okwara & Ajowi, 2016). The under-representation of Black women in leadership positions in the

education sector is a global issue, contributing to the persistent marginalization and systemic workplace bullying they experience.

Using Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional bullying model, this experience can be analysed through the dimensions of power and powerlessness and organizational coherence. The executive principal's preferential treatment towards male teachers and the targeting of female staff reflects the power imbalance that characterizes bullying environments. Additionally, the lack of accountability within the institution exemplifies the absence of organizational coherence that allows such behaviours to persist (Rollins, 2024).

Through the process of analysing and interpreting my narratives, I noticed that my male co-workers were automatically in a position of authority over the newly elected executive principal. I observed that she frequently controlled herself when speaking to them compared to when she spoke to the women. There was a feeling of respect. Cultural inclination and the social construction of gender might be blamed for the different exposure to workplace bullying experienced by men and women. She was a Christian; therefore, I suppose that what God stated, did resonate with her: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (Holy Bible, New International Version, 1 Timothy 2:11–12).

Recent studies further corroborate the argument that Black women face unique forms of bullying in the workplace due to their intersectional identities (Ngqila & Makunga, 2023). In the education sector, this often manifests as exclusion from leadership roles and increased scrutiny of their professional conduct (Kekana et al., 2023). Moreover, Smith et al., (2023) emphasize that such experiences of discrimination can lead to emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction. To address these issues, Moremi & Mokoena (2024) advocate for diversity training programs and mental health support systems to create more equitable work environments.

5.3.2.5 *Teacher-Perpetrated Bullying*

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most significant social issues affecting vulnerable groups in South Africa, including women and children. Statistics reveal that one in three women in South Africa will experience gender-based violence

in their lifetime, with schools being no exception to this pervasive issue (Eaton, 2019; Deane, 2024). Schools, which should be safe spaces for learning and development, have instead become breeding grounds for power abuse, bullying, and discrimination, particularly against female teachers and learners (Feijó, Gräf, Pearce & Fassa, 2019).

Teacher-on-learner bullying is a widely overlooked but deeply ingrained problem in the education system. Research shows that learners can experience various forms of bullying from teachers, including emotional, physical, and verbal abuse, such as intimidation, threats, and humiliation (Esquivel et al., 2023). These experiences often mirror the dynamics of gender-based violence, where power imbalances create a culture of fear and silence. Studies indicate that teacher bullying can have devastating effects on learners, including academic decline, severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Gusfre et al., 2023).

In my personal experience, I faced bullying after I stalked a teacher—a mistake that should have been met with discipline and guidance, rather than sustained emotional abuse and victimization. Instead, Ms. Botolo systematically orchestrated bullying against me, ensuring that other teachers joined in my humiliation. She sought to break me emotionally, knowing that I had been disowned by my family and had no advocate to support me. She openly mocked my sexual orientation, made homophobic remarks in front of my peers, and encouraged other learners to ridicule me. The psychological toll of this targeted bullying led to severe depression and ultimately resulted in a suicide attempt that left me hospitalized. Research has shown that victimized learners frequently suffer from emotional distress, anxiety, and a deep-seated mistrust in educational institutions (Gusfre et al., 2023).

Contrary to common perceptions that bullying is mostly perpetuated by male figures, studies indicate that female teachers can also be perpetrators of bullying against learners (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022). The feminization of teaching, where women dominate the profession but remain marginalized in leadership, creates a culture of internalized competition, displacement of power, and hierarchical struggles. Female educators, particularly those in subordinate positions, may exercise power over learners as a means of asserting authority or coping with their own professional victimization (Harris, Barnes, Boyd, Joseph & Osatuke, 2022).

To understand teacher bullying within the broader institutional framework, Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional model of workplace bullying provides a critical lens. The first dimension—powerlessness—illustrates how learners are inherently vulnerable due to their subordinate status within the school system. The second dimension—organizational chaos—demonstrates how weak institutional oversight enables abusive teachers to operate with impunity. Schools with poor governance, unclear disciplinary policies, and lack of accountability mechanisms are more likely to foster environments where bullying thrives. Robertson (2023) argues that schools lacking strong leadership tend to experience higher instances of teacher-perpetrated bullying, reinforcing a cycle of systemic victimization and institutionalized abuse.

In my own journey, not all teachers failed me—Ms. Vabaza and Ms. Molefe became my pillars of strength, offering the acceptance and support I so desperately needed. They saw beyond my mistakes and embraced me as a young, vulnerable gay learner, ensuring that I felt safe, valued, and celebrated. Their encouragement helped me regain my mental health, academic focus, and self-worth. This experience shaped my teacher identity, reinforcing my commitment to fostering inclusive, supportive, and non-discriminatory learning spaces.

5.3.2.6 *Experiences of being part of a collective of teachers*

In analysing and interpreting my narrative, I came across the role that was played by Human Resources when we stood together as colleagues to report workplace bullying. HR policies are significant in addressing issues such as workplace bullying among queer teachers (Hollis & Yamada, 2021). However, as highlighted in Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimensional model of workplace bullying, power dynamics within organizations can perpetuate bullying, especially when perpetrators hold positions of authority or are protected by institutional structures. In our case, HR did not come through for my colleagues and me because the bully continued to work as if we were not being abused. This aligns with research showing that organizational coherence and a lack of accountability often allow workplace bullying to persist (Ojedokun et al., 2014).

Instead of addressing the issue, the perpetrator was shielded, reinforcing the hierarchical power imbalances that contribute to bullying (Hodson et al.'s, 2006). No

counselling was even offered to the victims; we continued as usual, silently carrying the weight of our trauma. De Wet & Jacobs (2013) suggests that failing to offer mental health support further entrenches the victim's sense of helplessness, exacerbating the long-term psychological impact of bullying.

The perpetrator was not even sent for comprehensive training programmes, which are essential when dealing with a diverse group, including people with different sexual orientations (Hoel, Lewis & Einarsdóttir, 2021). Hodson et al.'s (2006) model emphasizes that bullying flourishes in environments lacking organizational coherence, where interventions like diversity training and accountability measures are absent. The HR department needs to implement transparent reporting procedures that will enable and empower victims to open without fear of repercussion (Hollis & Yamada, 2021). Without these safeguards, victims remain silenced, and the cycle of bullying persists.

In my narrative, I articulated that HR did not assist us, the victims; instead, we were threatened. This reflects the dimension of powerlessness in Hodson et al.'s (2006) theory, where victims are left vulnerable due to the absence of structural support and the overwhelming dominance of the bully's power. Addressing workplace bullying requires dismantling these power structures and fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and active support for marginalized identities (Collins, 2024).

The role of the HR department in addressing workplace bullying is multifaceted and essential to promote diversity in the working environment (Hollis & Yamada, 2021). Effective HR management should ensure that they employ strategies that strictly focus on the challenges posed by a multicultural workforce in addition to establishing policies that support diversity Ludwig (2022). Regular HR procedures frequently fail to manage cultural diversity, which, if left unchecked, can result in discrimination (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). Therefore, updating policies to meet the needs of the employees is important and HR should live by transformative strategies throughout. Schools should create safe spaces for teachers to deal with workplace bullying. In dealing with all issues relating to workplace bullying, there can be improvement in job satisfaction.

In analysing and interpreting my narratives, collaboration with my colleagues emerged as a sub-theme. This collaboration was a revelation for me that when people come

together to eradicate workplace bullying, they can show the bully that they do not fear them. As I described, the bully was the executive principal, who was very defensive and disregarded the teachers' opinions. She even went to the extent of humiliating teachers to show she was in power. The teachers felt unable to offer suggestions or have a voice, which led to a sense of contempt and mistrust.

All we wanted from the newly elected executive principal was collaboration, as she was new to the school. In my narratives, I describe how she came with a mentality of changing the culture we had built at the school. As a person who had occupied leadership positions in the four years of my undergraduate studies, I understood that the change of leadership would mean a change of day-to-day routines. Change can be phased in slowly, but the newly elected executive principal enforced a whole change in the culture. Her expectations clashed with those of the teachers. This led to the teachers refusing to engage with or support her ideas. For example, when there was a theme of civvies like "All Shades," the teachers would not participate, and they did not encourage their learners to participate. The teachers would boycott every event and idea she put on the table. The working environment changed to be bitter to the extent that in the staffroom, we would not say a word even when she greeted us.

In an ideal scenario, I could have worked well with the newly elected executive principal and gained knowledge and development from the experience. It was unfortunate that all I gained was resentment, and that made me wonder if I really wanted to continue to pursue this career path. My colleagues felt the same. I remember how me and my colleagues used our lunch breaks just to offload all the hurt and cry together. We took the healing process upon ourselves. The sad part was the fact that the White HR management stood up for their race. This led to some teachers starting to look for other jobs, and the staff turnover was high. The toxic environment shaped and constructed my professional character as a beginner teacher.

5.3.2.7 *Experiences with learners and my vocation*

The relationship between me and my learners was unique and held many dynamics. As a teacher, I not only played the role of imparting knowledge through my professional expertise, but this role also involved an interpersonal aspect (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). During my experiences of being bullied, my learners were the only reason for me to show up at work. They made me look forward to coming to work. Those morning

hugs and unique handshakes made me realize how much I love my vocation regardless of the toxic environment I am in.

After being ridiculed in the morning briefings, I went to class with tears in my eyes. I could not bear the pain anymore, so I started telling stories to my learners, and they would function as my mini psychologists. We made it a game for them to produce solutions to the story I was telling. They helped me heal because I could tell the story as if I were talking to my psychologist. I did not mention real names because I did not want them to think badly of the school and the principals. My “kids” would give advice that was pure and honest. I would offload before I started the day’s teaching. My strategy worked like magic. We went beyond just talking to even have a crying session and screaming session where we let our emotions out. After therapy sessions with my learners, we would pray together and depart to our lessons to start the day. These moments would enhance my vocation as a queer Black female beginner teacher.

Teaching is my vocation (Barak & Shoshana, 2022), and no one can ever take that away from me. All that I went through in my beginner years of teaching did not change who I am. I might have broken down a few times but that did not change the mere fact that I am a teacher and one who holds a Bachelor of Education (Honours) and is pursuing her master’s degree at the University of Pretoria. I reminded myself a few times that I had this and that no one would ever have power over me. I kept in mind that my being overly qualified might put fear into others, but that does not give anyone a right to bully another person. As teachers, we serve the purpose of building the next generation that is strong and supports one another (Barak & Shoshana, 2022).

Teaching is not only about imparting knowledge (Beyer, Zhai, Royer, Markeeva, Anil & Kolesnikov, 2022). As a teacher, I have a profound commitment to building intellectual growth and nurturing the holistic development of my learners (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). I never stopped nurturing and supporting my learners. I continued with anti-bullying campaigns, training prefects, and building a strong cheerleading squad. I served my purpose regardless of the treatment at the top and with or without the newly elected executive principal’s support. I strived for the best. In my beginner years of teaching, I came to realise that teaching is not solely about delivering content but inspiring the curiosity of my learners and unleashing their true potential. I extended beyond teaching in the classroom and cultivated a teaching environment that makes

learners feel valued and empowered to have a voice. I gave the voice that was taken from me by my mother, my teacher, the newly elected executive principal, and when I was an eyewitness to bullying to my learners for them to be able to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter of my study, the two themes from the data analysis and interpretation stage emerged, precisely capturing my experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher. Through analysing my data, I realized all the themes and sub-themes interpreted my lived experiences of workplace bullying. My two research questions were addressed by the sub-themes that emerged. My first research question was: How did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher? The first main theme, which was my experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity, answered my first research question. This theme included sub-themes such as experiences of religion and culture, experiences with former teachers, experiences during my tertiary education, and a synthesis of the development of my sexual identity and my experiences of workplace bullying. These elements helped me understand how my background shaped my identity and contributed to my experiences of workplace bullying. My second research question was: Why did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher? The second main theme, which was my experiences in the workplace, answered my second research question. This theme included the sub-themes of experiences as an advocate against bullying, violation of my sexual identity, experiences of race and gender influences in the workplace, and experiences of being part of a collective of teachers. These workplace experiences helped me make sense of the factors contributing to the bullying I endured. My conceptual framework also provided guidance in answering my first question on the sub-theme of the influence of race and gender on workplace bullying. In the next chapter, I give recommendations, suggestions, and reflection and I conclude my study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Reflection

6.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I summarise and provide an overview of my study from Chapters 1 to 5 and reflect on my methodology. In addition, I attempt to address my research questions and provide further details on the findings of my study. I make recommendations for future research that are based on the struggles and findings that I encountered when conducting this study. I conclude this chapter with my final reflections and the conclusion.

In Chapter 1, I gave an overview of my research. I analysed my own lived experiences as a queer Black female beginner teacher who experienced workplace bullying. I positioned myself within my autoethnography, which was centred around the context and background in which this study was conducted. I provided a rationale on four distinct levels in depth to explain my motivation for completing my study, which included personal, professional, conceptual, and scholarly justifications. The focus and purpose of the study was not left behind as they set a reminder to me as the writer as to why I did this study. I provided clarification on the key concepts, namely gender identity, queer Black female beginner teachers, autoethnography, and bullying in the workplace in South Africa. An overview of the research design, an autoethnography, and the conceptual framing were outlined as they positioned the study. Quality measures and ethical considerations were put in place to ensure that correct measures were followed to limit the risks of my study. Finally, I provided a brief outline of the study.

In Chapter 2, I outlined the importance of the literature review and the key role it played in my study. I presented a solid foundation of the existing literature on workplace bullying both in the Global North and Global South countries. Moreover, I looked at the effects of workplace bullying and how it affected both Global North and South countries. I then synthesised my literature review to see common aspects of workplace bullying. I delved into my conceptual framework, which is Hodson et al.'s (2006) two-dimension theory. I looked at the workplace based on race and sexual orientation. The intensive overview of my conceptual framing ended with a brief explanation as to why it was suitable for my study.

In Chapter 3, I discussed my research design. I began by outlining my qualitative research approach and then elaborated on the significance of my research design and how it connected to my study. I made use of the interpretivist paradigm's ontological and epistemological presumptions to delve into my research paradigm. An extensive look at my research design and its implications for my autoethnography was covered. I then investigated the research tools that served as the basis for my autoethnography. Moreover, the use of memory work, artefacts, my researcher's notebook, and insightful discussions with my co-constructors of knowledge of my autoethnography were all included. I made use of thematic analysis when I processed and analysed the data. I used verisimilitude to ensure the relatability and credibility of my study. In concluding the chapter, I explained how I produced an ethical study through ethical considerations.

In Chapter 4, I used self-reflexive narratives to tell my autoethnography. I shared my lived experiences. The narratives were documented in the most authentic way, though they might not be in chronological order. The narratives were told from my background and the beginner years of my teaching career. I shared my lived experiences that built my teacher identity. The story entails how my sexuality led to experiences of workplace bullying. My narratives have shaped how I view my teaching career today. Using the self-reflexive narratives allowed me to express my most emotional moments that were critical as a queer Black female beginner teacher. In telling my narratives, I connected with my past and found healing.

In Chapter 5, after writing about my lived experiences, I analysed and interpreted my narratives. I explored the narrative analysis method in analysing the research findings that I collected from the data. I outlined my themes and sub-themes in a table. There were two main themes that emerged from my narratives: experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity and experiences in the workplace. The two main themes had sub-themes which included: experiences of religion and culture, experiences with former teachers, experiences during my tertiary education, a synthesis: The development of my sexual identity and my experiences of workplace bullying, experiences as an advocate against bullying, violation of my sexual identity, experiences of race and gender influences in the workplace, teacher-perpetrated bullying and experiences of being part of a collective teachers.

Chapter 6 provides a conclusion and reflection on the study, summarizing key findings from previous chapters and addressing the research questions. It reviews the study's focus on workplace bullying experienced by a queer Black female beginner teacher, highlighting how systemic structures, intersectionality, and power dynamics influenced these experiences. The chapter reflects on the challenges of using autoethnography as a research method, the emotional toll of recalling personal experiences, and the transformative journey toward healing and advocacy. Recommendations are made for policy changes, teaching practices, and future research to create safer, more inclusive educational environments. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the academic journey, resilience, and the significance of amplifying marginalized voices in education.

6.2 Reflections on My Research Design

In my undergraduate and honours academic years, I was only introduced to quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. I never had thought that there was something like an autoethnography research method. In attending my cohorts, I never understood why Dr Yolandi Woest would even suggest that we use this research method. I was deeply confused as to how telling my narratives would enhance curriculum and instructional design and development. I saw myself not achieving my master's, and I wanted to change the course. However, I took it upon myself to do some research on autoethnography. Understanding what autoethnography entailed gave me an opportunity to share my lived experiences. I had thought that I would only share my stories then the rest was history, which is simple. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Edwards (2021) concurs that autoethnographers must look beyond sharing their lived experiences. I then ensured that I also analysed and interpreted my lived experiences in a sociocultural context (Qutoshi, 2015; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, Davey & Jenkinson, 2023).

There were a few issues with having to recall all my lived experiences. My lived narrative originates from the way I grew up. This was an advantage for me since I was the primary source, which meant that I had access to my data throughout the study (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Braun et al., 2023). Nonetheless, for the validity and credibility of my study, I had conversations with my co-constructors of knowledge, who played the role of being present throughout my lived experiences. Thus, the critical

conversations I had with these role players gave me proof that I was not being a victim in my own story or engaging in self-indulgent introspection (Campbell, 2017; Zouaoui, 2024). This was emotionally exhausting because some experiences were buried, and I thought I would never review them again. Through the progression of my study, I got a grasp of it and opened myself up more. I got to ask more questions in my conversations and understood that this study was a reflection of my life and a construction of my identity.

One of the challenges was sharing some of my lived experiences that were buried. I felt embarrassed and exposed, as if there was a voice of judgement whispering in my ears. The eagerness to finally find healing overpowered those thoughts and voices, so I fully accepted the research design challenge. One of the aspects that play a role in autoethnographies evoking interest is the vulnerability of people retelling their experiences (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2016). Unfortunately, as the storyteller, there was no way I could ignore vulnerability because I was revisiting parts of my story that broke me to the core and affected my mental health. Moreover, I reminded myself to focus on the idea that this study would open a new path of healing for me and aid me in always speaking out.

There were moments when the weight of it all felt unbearable. The constant push to prove myself in a workplace where I felt unseen and unheard drained my energy. There was a point when I had to step back from my studies because the emotional toll of trying to balance my academic work with the relentless pressures of workplace bullying left me completely overwhelmed. The isolation and exhaustion blurred my vision of success, making me question whether I had the strength to keep going. I remember sitting in my room, surrounded by books and notes, feeling paralyzed by the fear that I might not be able to finish what I had started.

In that quiet space, something shifted. I reminded myself why I began this journey — to amplify voices like mine, to carve out a space for queer Black women in education, and to tell the stories that are often silenced. I leaned on the support of loved ones, immersed myself in self-reflection, and allowed myself moments of rest without guilt. It was through revisiting my purpose, reliving both the struggles and the small victories, that I found the resolve to continue. Each challenge became a chapter in my story,

proof of my resilience and a reminder that my experiences, no matter how painful, were valid and worth sharing.

Another aspect that I struggled with in using autoethnography was understanding that this study must be academic in nature, even though it is self-centred. I produced ways to ensure my study was academic, credible, and trustworthy. So, I ensured that my data was generated through self-interviews, memory work, critical conversations with the co-constructors of knowledge, and consulting personal journal entries (Wagner et al., 2012; Lim, 2024). Even with the challenging work of data collection, autoethnography needs critical thinking skills and the skill to know how to turn a self-centred study into an academic one (Karalis et al., 2023). All gratitude goes to my supervisor for assisting in acquiring these skills, and in the end, I was confident to use autoethnography as my research design.

6.3 Responding to my Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to make meaning of my own experiences of bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher. The purpose birthed the following research questions:

- **How did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher?**

Through analysis and interpretation of my autoethnography, two main themes, each of which had sub-themes, emerged, and guided me in responding to my research questions. Then my first research question was answered by my first main theme, which was my experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity. The connection between my past, present, and future has been integral in shaping my teacher identity and understanding the key findings of my research. My past experiences—including the struggles of being a queer Black woman in a society that often marginalizes such identities—have influenced my present reality as a beginner teacher navigating workplace bullying. Acknowledging where I come from has allowed me to accept my current self, while also recognizing that each challenge I face contributes to my personal and professional growth.

The study's findings strongly support Hodson et al.'s (2006) assertion that power dynamics play a crucial role in workplace bullying. My lived experiences indicate that since I was in lower position within the school hierarchy—particularly beginner teachers—I was more vulnerable to bullying. This aligns with the first dimension of Hodson et al.'s model, which emphasizes the relationship between power and powerlessness in shaping experiences of victimization.

The study also confirms that a lack of organisational coherence contributes to workplace bullying, as proposed by Hodson et al. (2006). Findings indicate that schools with unclear policies, inconsistent leadership, and weak accountability mechanisms create an environment where bullying thrives (Murphy, 2024). In sharing my lived experiences, the instability within school leadership led to unchecked power dynamics, enabling workplace bullying to persist. However, while Hodson et al. (2006) emphasize structural disorganization, this study highlights the role of cultural and institutional biases in reinforcing disorganization. Specifically, I noted that school environments that fail to acknowledge diversity and inclusivity worsen bullying, particularly for LGBTQ+ educators and those from racial minorities.

The findings support the claim that workplace bullying is not a monolithic experience but rather shaped by intersectional factors (Mayne & Craig, 2024). The narratives of queer Black female beginner teachers illustrate that experiences of bullying are deeply intertwined with racial and gender identities. This expands upon Hodson et al.'s (2006) model by incorporating an intersectional lens, as proposed by scholars such as Bergkamp, Olson & Martin (2022) who argue that overlapping social identities create distinct experiences of oppression. In my own experience, the intersection of my race, gender, and sexual orientation compounded the discrimination I faced, making it clear that workplace bullying is not just about power hierarchies but also about deeply ingrained societal biases. My reality as a queer Black female beginner teacher was shaped by multiple layers of exclusion, reinforcing the need to view workplace bullying through an intersectional framework that acknowledges these complexities.

I experienced workplace bullying as a queer Black female beginner teacher due to a combination of intersectional discrimination, power dynamics, and cultural influences. My race, gender, and sexual orientation played a central role in shaping how I was

treated at work. As Veldhuis (2022) argues that marginalized identities often face compounded discrimination, which was evident in my experience. Additionally, my status as a beginner teacher placed me at the bottom of the school hierarchy, making me an easy target for those in positions of power. Research on workplace bullying confirms that individuals with less authority or institutional support are more vulnerable to mistreatment, which aligns with my experiences of being bullied by school management (De Vos & Kirsten 2015; Plimmer, Nguyen, Teo, & Tuckey, 2022).

Furthermore, my advocacy for a bully-free school environment intensified the hostility I faced. While I believed that promoting inclusivity and respect would foster a safer environment, it instead marked me as a threat to the existing power structures. Many colleagues remained silent or complicit, reflecting the bystander effect, where fear of retaliation prevents intervention. This organizational culture of silence and fear allowed bullying to persist (Salin, 2021). Although my findings align with broader workplace bullying research, my study uniquely highlights the role of religious and cultural beliefs in reinforcing discrimination. Unlike general studies on workplace harassment, my experiences were shaped by Christian and cultural norms that were used to justify exclusion and discrimination against me.

Despite these challenges, my past experiences of being bullied as a learner influenced my teaching philosophy, strengthening my commitment to protecting students from similar harm. My research underscores how beginner teachers from marginalized backgrounds are often forced to navigate both professional and personal adversity. While bullying negatively impacted my mental and emotional well-being, it also deepened my resilience and reaffirmed my dedication to education. My study contributes to workplace bullying research by showing how advocacy, power hierarchies, and cultural norms intersect to shape the experiences of queer Black female educators in ways that are both personal and systemic.

In conclusion, this discussion has demonstrated the complex interplay between power, organisational coherence, and intersectional identities in shaping workplace bullying experiences (Daly, 2023). While the study's findings align with Hodson et al.'s (2006) theoretical framework in several ways, they also highlight important nuances, particularly regarding the role of race, gender, and sexual orientation. By integrating

these insights, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying and offers valuable recommendations for creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments (Daly, 2023).

- **Why did I experience bullying in the workplace as a queer Black female beginner teacher in the way I did?**

My second theme – experiences during the emergence of my sexual identity – played a role in answering my first research question. My study emphasizes that my identity as a teacher clashed with my lived experiences of workplace bullying. As a queer Black female beginner teacher, my professional expectations did not align with the reality of my workplace, where I faced discrimination and hostility. Shelton (2015) and Ojedokun et al. (2014) state that various factors contribute to workplace bullying, and in my case, these were deeply tied to my race and gender, particularly in the form of my sexual orientation. I recognized that race, gender, and sexuality significantly influenced how I was treated in my workplace (Hoel et al., 2021).

My experiences as an advocate against bullying made me a target for bullying, reinforcing how those who challenge oppressive structures often face retaliation. Some colleagues supported me, while others remained silent or complicit, reflecting the bystander effect, where individuals hesitate to intervene due to fear or workplace culture. My past experiences of being bullied as a learner shaped my approach to teaching and strengthened my commitment to protecting students from similar harm. Despite the workplace bullying I endured, I remained dedicated to my vocation and found fulfilment in teaching.

Across multiple chapters, the findings reveal that power dynamics play a central role in workplace bullying. As Hodson et al. (2006) theorized, individuals in lower organizational positions are more susceptible to victimization. The study confirms this by illustrating how beginner teachers, particularly those from marginalized identities, are disproportionately targeted. However, an important extension to Hodson et al.'s (2006) framework is the intersection of power with race, gender, and sexual orientation. While their model focuses on hierarchical power struggles, this study demonstrates that queer Black female beginner educators face additional layers of

discrimination that compound their experiences of bullying (Noyes, 2022). These factors shape workplace interactions in ways that extend beyond simple hierarchical positioning (Noyes, 2022).

The study supports Hodson et al.'s (2006) claim that workplace bullying is worsened by weak organisational structures. Findings from multiple chapters especially chapter 4, indicate that inconsistent policies, poor leadership, and ineffective accountability measures create environments where bullying thrives. My autoethnography experiences demonstrate that schools with unstable leadership are more prone to allowing workplace bullying to persist unchecked.

Findings across multiple chapters confirm that workplace bullying is shaped by intersecting identities. My narratives of a queer Black female beginner teacher illustrate that my experiences of bullying are not solely based on hierarchical power but are also informed by racial and gendered oppression. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which argues that overlapping social identities create distinct experiences of discrimination. Both overt and subtle forms of bullying were reported in the study, reinforcing existing literature that workplace victimization manifests through both explicit abuse and covert exclusion (Hecker, 2024). I described instances of microaggressions, professional sidelining, and discriminatory practices that limited career progression in chapter 4 (Weiner, Cyr & Burton, 2021). These findings challenge Hodson et al.'s (2006) framework, which primarily focuses on explicit power struggles, by demonstrating how systemic bias operates through implicit mechanisms as well.

The study highlights the profound emotional and psychological effects of workplace bullying. My lived experiences reported experiencing isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt, which negatively impacted my professional confidence. These findings align with research by Hollis (2018), which links workplace bullying to mental health challenges. However, this study extends previous research by illustrating how these effects are intensified for those who belong to multiple marginalized groups (Conway et al., 2021).

6.4 Recommendations Originating from My Study

After identifying my main themes and sub-themes in response to my research questions, there are recommendations that I want to suggest as a queer Black female beginner teacher who experience workplace bullying. The possible suggestions originating from my study are divided into policy on workplace bullying, recommendations for teaching practice, and suggestions for future research. The suggested recommendations are as follows:

6.4.1 Policy on Workplace Bullying

- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa must collaborate with the Department of Education in producing a policy specifically focusing on workplace bullying. The policy must clearly state the reparations for not adhering to the policy.
- Furthermore, the Department of Education must put a policy on the accommodation of teachers of LGBTQI+ in place to make clear that they must not be discriminated against as it also infringes on their human rights. The Bill of Rights emphasises that everyone's dignity, equality, and freedom must be given the utmost respect (RSA, 1996b), so the right of a teacher's dignity is significant and must be valued.
- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) must ensure that SACE updates their dress code policy to accommodate the different sexual orientations of teachers. This policy must apply in both private and public institutions or schools.
- The DBE must issue another policy that addresses initiative-taking transformation and having anti-bullying campaigns and training for teachers. These workshops and training must be compulsory for all teachers. Clear descriptions of bullying behaviours, reporting protocols, and sanctions for offenders should all be included in such policies (Niven, 2024).
- There should be a policy dedicated to the celebration of LGBTQI+ learners and teachers at school at least once a year. This policy should also apply in religious schools to avoid seclusion of gay learners in those schools.

6.4.2 Recommendations for Teaching Practice

- All universities should offer a practical course that offers education in emotional intelligence and empathy. Students should go for six-monthly work-integrated learning practical sessions, so they know not only the content but can also practise emotional intelligence and empathy.
- Queer Black female beginner teachers should equip themselves with knowledge on workplace bullying. They can avoid being victims of workplace bullying by being able to speak up and act if they feel threatened. Therefore, it is important for queer Black female beginner teachers to know their rights and act upon what they believe is right.
- Queer Black female beginner teachers should be given an opportunity to have a voice in recommending ideas to the senior without fear. Queer Black female beginner teachers have the power to produce transformation ideas that can enhance teaching and learning.
- Queer Black female beginner teacher teachers must build solid foundations with their colleagues for strong social support system to reduce the negative impacts of bullying (De Vos, 2012). Fostering teamwork within schools can build trust and make the working environment endurable for everyone. The management must also play their part in organising frequent conflict management and team-building training. This will assist in building connections between colleagues to lessen workplace bullying (Birmingham, Holt-Lunstad, Herr & Barth, 2024).
- There has been fear in queer Black female beginner teachers to report or address workplace bullying. Schools must come with strategies for queer Black female beginner teacher to be able to report workplace bullying. Moreover, victims must be offered counselling by the school, which should prioritise mental health resources for employees affected by bullying. Providing access to counselling services can help victims cope with the psychological impact of their experiences (Birmingham et al., 2024).

6.4.3 Suggestions for Future Research

- For future research, there is great need for more autoethnographic research studies that will focus on the workplace bullying of queer Black female beginner teachers and gay teachers. The autoethnographic research would provide deeply personal insights into the emotional and psychological impact of workplace bullying. It will also highlight the systemic factors that contribute to workplace bullying. By amplifying the voices of those directly affected, these studies can influence policy changes, shaping more inclusive school cultures, and offer practical strategies for creating safer, more supportive working environments for all educators.
- Future research should investigate why workplace bullying in education is not addressed as thoroughly in South Africa as learner bullying in both public and private schools. While learners' well-being is rightly prioritized, the lack of attention to educators' experiences of bullying can have serious consequences for teacher retention, mental health, and overall school culture. Understanding workplace bullying is essential to ensure that educators receive the same level of protection and support as learners, fostering a healthier, more sustainable educational environment for everyone.
- For future research, studies should focus on addressing the effectiveness of evidence-based strategies and interventions on workplace bullying. Understanding which approaches successfully reduce bullying, support victims, and promote positive diverse workplace cultures is crucial for implementing changes and improving the well-being and retention of educators.

In identifying my themes and sub-themes, I knew that they would not just contribute to my study but would also pave the way for future scholars. I felt a deep sense of responsibility, knowing that the insights I uncovered could inspire others to explore further, building on my work and bringing new perspectives to the table. I know that workplace bullying of queer Black female beginner teacher is an important phenomenon and teachers should be able to address the issue. It is also important for the queer female beginner teachers to be given support and respect for who they are. Workplace bullying has been a prevalent issue worldwide that needs to be dealt with. The DBE and HR have failed multiple teachers. I hope my study and findings reach a

wide variety of schools and the DBE. I wish my recommendations to reach policymakers who will take a stand and change our South African education system for better.

6.5 Challenges Experienced During my Study

The academic journey has been one of difficult paths and multiple challenges. I began this journey immediately after the loss of my father in September 2022. I did not take time to fully grieve because I believed that my life continued. The worst thing that I did was to use this study as a getaway distraction plan to escape grief. The limitation was that I was still sensitive about my dad's passing and now the study needed me to be vulnerable. Vulnerability was a no-go area for me. This part of my journey was mentally damaging because I was battling with acceptance and opening myself up for this type of research design. I would not recommend that anyone bottle-up their feelings because it hinders their success. It took some time for me to finally enjoy and engage with my study. The route to healing is unknown and caters for individuality.

The worst challenge was that I was still working at the school where I experienced workplace bullying. Imagine the whole experience of seeing the perpetrator every day after you wrote a piece about her the previous night. The stories kept on piling up as she would do something every day that could be regarded as bullying. More stories stressed me, and I could not reach the goal set for Chapter 4. I ended up struggling to finish the chapter. I had an opportunity to get another job and that is when I was able to finish Chapter 4.

This was such a pivotal moment in my journey. As a new queer Black female beginner teacher, I was determined to prove myself, especially since I was on probation. I threw myself into my work, aiming to meet expectations and leave a positive impression on the management. But the more I invested in the classroom, the less energy I had for my studies. By the time I returned home, I was physically drained, barely able to muster the motivation to open my books. It felt like there was always something pulling me away — a meeting, a lesson plan, a learner who needed extra attention. The days blended into one another, and before I knew it, I was missing cohort sessions, the very ones where I could engage with my peers, share ideas, and get guidance from my supervisor. These missed moments added another layer of frustration because it was not just about the knowledge I was missing, but the sense of connection and growth

for which I was yearning. It felt like I was caught in a tug-of-war between two demanding worlds, both requiring my full attention but leaving me with none to give.

The journey felt like a roller-coaster at times, full of difficulties, but I held on and kept pushing myself. Looking back, I would not recommend trying to work while doing your dissertation because the pressure can be overwhelming. Balancing both can leave you physically and emotionally drained, and it is hard to give your best when you are stretched so thin. If possible, I would suggest seeking a bursary or scholarship that can provide financial support, so you do not juggle work and academic demands. Having that financial stability would allow you to focus fully on your dissertation, making the process a little more manageable and a lot less stressful.

6.6 Final Reflection and Conclusion

The journey of completing this thesis was bittersweet. Some days, I did not even have the strength to open my laptop. The anxiety of receiving feedback from my supervisor, felt like unending journey. This journey taught me that when you are sure you have missed certain points or feel stuck, it is often a sign that you are on the brink of something important. At first, I do get frustrated, thinking I was not getting it right, but over time, I realized that these moments of doubt were part of the process. Some days I was so certain and excited about my writing but then the corrections or feedback from my supervisor would be overwhelming, sometimes making me question my abilities. It felt like every yellow mark or comment erased my progress, and I struggled to balance gratitude for the guidance with the sting of self-doubt. Yet, over time, I realized that each piece of feedback was not a setback but a step toward refining my voice and strengthening my research. It was in those moments of revision that my work truly grew. I could have given up, but God Almighty and my ancestors carried me through. Even the change of scenery gave me more strength to keep on going.

At the beginning of my study, I was certain that I would not like to do an autoethnographic study because I could not understand the basics and how to structure my writing. This was the first challenging factor, I never thought that this research design was beyond just telling your lived experiences. I taught myself how to analyse and interpret my lived experiences in a sociocultural context. I remember that I did not even know how to create themes and sub-themes but through the assistance of my supervisor I acquired that skill. This research design is my favourite because I

took my time to do research on it. Now, I can finally say that this research will be the route to my PhD.

Through this whole experience, I reflected on my lived experiences. Wounds that did not heal were opened. This was challenging because I was still at the school where I experienced bullying, and the stories kept unfolding. I used to step into self-indulgent moments and victim mentality, but the moment I remembered the purpose of this study then I would quickly switch. Through this whole experience, I was able to observe first-hand how my identity as a queer Black female beginner teacher was created and developed.

Through my study, I found healing and peace of mind. I was able to embrace and carry my scars proudly without fear or favour. I grew emotionally and psychologically because this study gave me an opportunity to have critical conversations within myself. I had a chance to understand that bullying stems from the past and people were afraid to seek help. Through my study, I fell in love with my career repeatedly because this study gave me a voice to continually talk about bullying and sexual orientation. I realised the importance of building good relationships with your colleagues. These pictures resemble the fact that “I carry my scars with pride, and nothing can ever stop me from loving my vocation.”

Figure 6.1: Picture of queer Black beginner teacher—Busisiwe Yabo.



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