

Chapter 7

Homophobic Bullying in South African Schools: Theory Into Practice Solutions (TIPS)

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ABSTRACT

Homophobic bullying in schools is a global phenomenon. However, on the African continent, the phenomenon is rife because homosexuality is regarded to be un-African and is often linked to Western culture and colonial influence. These misconceptions about homosexuality have resulted in a culture of homophobia being inculcated into major structures of the society including schools. In this regard, this chapter aims to explore and describe the problem of homophobic bullying in South African schools. Particular attention is paid to cases of school-based homophobic bullying as primary sources of data as well as secondary sources of data from extant literature, textbooks, and journals articles. The chapter employs the Epstein Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence to proffer practical solutions and recommendations to address the problem of homophobic bullying in South African schools. These are school-, family-, and community-based solutions and recommendations based on the principles of social justice, inclusion, diversity, and equality.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the South African media has been inundated with media reports on the rising incidents of school-based violence. Bullying is reported as one of these violent incidents in schools. School-based bullying is a widely researched topic in South Africa, however, particular research on homophobic bullying, either in schools or elsewhere, remains dormant. This dearth of research on homophobic bullying on the African continent is mainly attributed to some of the reasons raised by Johnson (2007) which include:

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- Denial of the frequency of homosexual behavior in Africa.
- The resistance by African research review panels to approve research on homosexuality.
- A general unwillingness among otherwise rigorous researchers to address issues of same-sex sexuality due to their discomfort with homosexuality.
- The hesitancy of those who are in same-sex relationships to expose themselves to potentially judgmental researchers.
- Homophobic stigmatization faced by researchers themselves when addressing issues of homosexuality.

Homophobia, in simple terms, refers to prejudice, stigmatization, and discrimination of people who are homosexually inclined, particularly gay and lesbian individuals. Peate (2005) describes homophobia as the irrational fear of, hatred against, or disgust towards homosexual people. Nickerson (2016) provides a broader definition of homophobia as:

A pervasive irrational fear of homosexuality. Homophobia includes the fear heterosexuals have of any homosexual feelings within themselves, any overt mannerisms or actions that would suggest homosexuality, and the desire to suppress or stamp out homosexuality. It includes the self-hatred of homosexuals who know what they are but have been taught all of their lives by a heterosexual society that persons like themselves are sick, sinful and criminal. (p. 10)

Bullying on the other hand is defined by the American Psychological Association as a threatening and aggressive behavior directed towards people or individuals who are usually perceived to be smaller or weaker than others (Singh, 2016). Bullying is often characterized by the imbalance of power between perpetrators and victims. For this reason, Rivers (2011) asserts that:

There will always be power relationships in social groups, by virtue of strength or size or ability, force of personality, sheer numbers or recognized hierarchy. Power can be abused; the extent definition of what constitutes abuse will depend upon the social or cultural context, but this is inescapable in examining human behavior. If the abuse is systematic – repeated and deliberate – bullying seems a good name to describe it. (p. 6)

Based on the definitions of homophobia and bullying, homophobic bullying, which is the focus of this chapter, can be defined as conscious, willful, and deliberate hostile behavior that is perpetrated against homosexual people. This kind of behavior is usually influenced by the principles of heterosexism and heteronormativity. Heterosexism refers to an automatic assumption and belief that everyone is and should be heterosexual, and that other sexual orientations are unhealthy, unnatural, and a threat to the society. Heteronormativity on the other hand is an idea, dominant in most societies, that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation, and that only sexual relations between men and women are acceptable (Mampane, 2017).

Based on their sexual orientation and gender non-conformity, homosexual learners are more vulnerable to bullying as compared to their heterosexual counterparts. To corroborate the latter, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2016) presents following three studies that were conducted in three different countries:

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