

CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVE SCRIPTS THROUGH FILM AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY AMONG TVET COLLEGE STUDENTS

N. D. Ngidi

Human and Social Development Department,
Human Sciences Research Council, Pietermaritzburg
Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology
School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa
e-mail: nngidi@hsrc.ac.za

M. A. C. Dlamini

Department of Student Counselling and Health
Durban University of Technology
Durban, South Africa
e-mail: melusid@dut.ac.za

ABSTRACT

We describe an initiative aimed at addressing homophobia and destabilising heteronormativity in higher education. The initiative was implemented in 2014 at a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and involved 20 newly formed peer educators and one lecturer from the college. We focussed on work which emphasised the creation of a safe and welcoming environment for gender non-conforming students. In particular, we made use of film and transformative pedagogy to address homophobia at the TVET college. Through analysing the participants' reflections, we found evidence that the intervention facilitated students' critical thinking and self-examination, while helping them find alternative ways of bringing about social change and gender equity in their 'day-to-day praxis'. The initiative further provided space to forge new ways of talking about and addressing abuse of LGBTI students; thus enabling an appreciation of the resourcefulness of film. Overall we highlight the potential value of film and transformative pedagogy in addressing homophobia and disturbing heteronormativity among students in a TVET college.

Keywords: film, heteronormativity, homophobia, transformative pedagogy, TVET college

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed (LGBTI) people are protected by the equality clause of the Constitution, which states that no person should discriminate against another person based on their sexual orientation (Reddy 2006; Msibi

2009). The recognition of LGBTI as individuals deserving equal rights like all other citizens has been lauded in this country and abroad. Yet, a number of studies have identified homophobia, particularly in and around institutions of higher education, as a challenge for LGBTI individuals (Wells and Polders 2006; Bennet and Reddy 2015).

The LGBTI community in South Africa, like the rest of the African continent, continues to experience many forms of violence and victimisation – including sexual abuse/rape, gay-bashing, hate speech, domestic violence, attack on their property, physical abuse/assault and domestic violence – in their homes, communities and even in institutions of education (Msibi 2009; Wells and Polders 2006; Jagessar and Msibi 2015). Studies have identified homophobia as both prevalent and under reported. For example, Wells and Polders (2006) found high prevalent rates of victimisation (37% of their respondents had experienced victimisation in the form of hate speech) against LGBTI people, but very few of these incidents were reported to the police (only 18% of hate speech incidents were reported to the police).

Gender non-conforming students in South African institutions of higher learning experience similar violence and research on their victimisation abounds. Studies further point to the perilous effects of heteronormativity on the LGBTI student (Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy 2015). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of interventions, reported in the literature, which seek to address this phenomenon, particularly in the higher education environment. The aim of this article is to reflect on, and describe, an initiative aimed at challenging heteronormativity, and in particular homophobia, with twenty students and one lecturer from a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa. The project relied on film and transformative pedagogy to challenge heteronormativity. Therefore, the article is guided by such questions as: How valuable is film in teaching about and challenging homophobia, and what can we learn by applying the notion of transformative pedagogy to address heteronormativity? We draw on the authors' recollections and the reflections by participants of a workshop that focused on addressing homophobia.

BACKGROUND

Homophobia in South Africa

There is wide acknowledgement that while the South African Constitution makes provision for human rights, equality and inherent dignity of all citizens, there remains a discrepancy between these 'constitutional ideals' and the lived realities of vulnerable citizens (Hames 2012; Msibi

2012; Bennet and Reddy 2015). Furthermore, legal frameworks and provisions like those that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation seldom automatically translate into social acceptance for LGBTI persons (Hames 2007). As a result, while the human rights discourse has (technically) sanctioned the free expression and performance of non-heteronormative sexualities and identities, there continues to be a rising rate of verbal and physical attacks on gay and lesbian persons (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy and Moletsane 2010). These escalating levels of violence perpetrated against lesbian women and gay men require attention.

The assumption of heterosexuality as a norm is deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs and those who are not heterosexual often experience gross levels of alienation (Mkhize et al. 2010; Sigamoney and Epprecht 2013). Sanger and Clowes (2006) argue that heterosexuality in South Africa remains strongly entrenched in day-to-day praxis. The disturbing reality is that homophobia is ubiquitous within the South African environment (Mkhize et al. 2010) and instances of homophobia are often tolerated in many communities, thus contributing to increased victimisation and discrimination of LGBTI populations (Sanger and Clowes 2006). Homophobia is a form of social discrimination which can be defined as an irrational fear, hatred or disgust towards LGBTI (Msibi 2012b). It is rooted in socially and culturally learned prejudices. However, this has not been forthcoming. Instead, violence and explicit hate speech have become normalised while the dignity of individuals who are perceived to be of different sexual orientation are seldom fully respected by communities (Wells and Polders 2006).

Central to homophobia is the underlying core element of anti-homosexuality which suggests that it is shaped by broader social and institutional forces instead of simply being a question of individual attitudes and prejudices (Mkhize et al. 2010). Therefore, any attempt at challenging heteronormativity is often greeted with passionate resistance (Francis and Msibi 2011). Research also shows how heteronormativity is upheld through promoting heterosexuality as the only 'normal', 'healthy', and 'natural' pattern of human behaviour (Msibi 2009; Henderson 2015). Subsequently, any other form of sexual identity is perceived as deviant, unnatural, deadly, un-African, dangerous and anti-religion (Wells and Polders 2006). Non-heteronormative identities in this regard are understood as 'produced through genetic abnormality, personal choice and socio-psychological causes such as trauma and abuse inherent in certain kinds of heterosexual encounters' (Sanger and Clowes 2006, 45).

Homophobia, heteronormativity and higher education

The higher education space in South Africa remains a highly contested terrain for non-normative sexual identities (Hames 2007). Homophobic acts are perpetrated in these spaces (Jagessar and Msibi 2015). Furthermore, heterosexuality is discursively promoted as ‘normal’ as opposed to homosexuality which is seen as abnormal (Hames 2012). As a result, higher education institutions have become sites of oppression and discrimination for LGBTI students because of persistent prejudices against relations that defy the heteronormative paradigm (ibid). Thus, reflective of the wider South African context, institutions of higher education are social spaces in which there is discontinuity between the constitutional provisions and the experiences of persons that express same-sex sexual desire. It is argued that social justice and equity for persons who fall outside the heteronormative paradigm have been increasingly compromised and exploited within the academic space (Hames 2012; Jagessar and Msibi 2015).

Msibi (2012a) and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014) found that derogatory terms – such as *isitabane*, *double adaptor*, *moffie*, *sis bhuti*, *Jason and Senzo*, *Adam and Steve*, *Eve and Eve*, *brother-sister* – were used by heterosexual students to refer to and belittle LGBTI students. Such instances of intolerance towards students who deviate from heterosexual desire illustrate the pervasive nature of heteronormativity even among the student population. In his study, Msibi (2012a) further found that students did not want to be associated with queer identifying students and further revealed an immense fear of being perceived as or even ‘becoming’ LGBTI.

Based on her experience with teaching content on LGBTI issues in higher education, Nzimande (2015) found that, while some students demonstrated open-mindedness about LGBTI people, a majority displayed homophobic attitudes and voiced homophobic utterances. For example, utterances such as ‘gays and lesbians just need a thorough beating so that they can stop acting up’ were common in Nzimande’s class (2015, 77). Such utterances are a problem for LGBTI students not only in the classroom (Nzimande 2015) but also in the university residences, which often harbour intolerance for gay and lesbian students (Jagessar and Msibi 2015).

Clearly, gay and lesbian students are exposed to normalised homophobia which positions same-sex attraction as abhorrent and unacceptable in higher education spaces. As stated above, some students have established strategies for defending homophobic cultures, thus creating an unsafe space for LGBTI students who live in such an environment (Jagessar and Msibi 2015). Homophobia or any other LGBTI-related discrimination among students is also framed within broader social and institutional forces instead of simply being a question of individual attitudes

and prejudices (Mkhize et al. 2010). Thus, in viewing tertiary institutions as spaces in which students live and learn, it is important that interventions engage students directly in seeking to challenge homophobia.

While the transformation discourse has resulted in the diversification of social spaces in higher education (Msibi 2013), this has not been widespread considering the proliferation of heteronormative gender constructions within these institutions. This is evidence of how prejudice against LGBTI persists despite 'inclusive' policies. Msibi (2013) has further noted an existing culture which continues to silence LGBTI concerns in higher education, both as worthy pursuits in research and their centrality in transformation policies. Such silences about LGBTI realities and experiences, especially in the higher education context, endanger students because they allow for homophobic notions and behaviours to go unchallenged, often with grim repercussions for LGBTI-identifying students.

We thus contend that the pervasive nature, like in other contexts, is hard-hitting at the student level. For example, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2015) found that stigmatising and discriminatory acts had a negative impact on the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of gender non-conforming students; with some of these students refusing to attend some classes in order to avoid humiliation. We therefore advocate for interventions that seek to challenge homophobia among students. There is a need for participatory interventions that, unlike the conventional flow of knowledge from the academy to the student, will be student-inclusive in bringing about social justice within higher education. For example, the kind of transformation we are pursuing with our work requires the unlearning of some basic attitudes and practices, while most higher education teaching assumes an additive approach – building on the foundations of what is already learnt.

As a space that is charged with shaping post-apartheid knowledge and identities, the higher education environment should be a worthy conduit for exploring more inclusive and transformative pedagogies (Bennett 2011). Our work concentrates on students from one TVET college. While these colleges focus on preparing students for the workplace by putting emphasis on technical skills (Robertson 2015); little work has been done on equipping these students with social skills.

Our exchange with the participants about their respective curricula revealed a prioritisation of vocational and technical training, with no mention of the self and other issues such as race, class, gender and sexuality. The main problem with this is that students leave a heteronormative tertiary environment and go into heteronormative workplaces where they become complicit in reinforcing the paradigm and the inherent discriminatory practices. While

there is evidence of homophobia in higher education, most of the research in South Africa has focused on traditional universities (Nzimande 2015). With our intervention, we therefore bridge this gap in the literature by highlighting the need for research in TVET colleges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Film and transformative pedagogy

Education has long been perceived as a central socialising arena for preparing students to become active citizens (Graman 1988; Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003). In this regard, we draw on the framework of transformative pedagogy to analyse the intervention and its potential role in challenging heteronormativity. We must add that we feel the term ‘destabilising heteronormativity’ should be further problematised. We submit that conceptually the term gives the impression that heteronormativity is stable and inadvertently casts any other alternative as less stable. Consequently, the term establishes heterosexuality as the standard that other sexual or gender categories have to measure up to. However, we attempt to address this perception by proposing a move towards ‘challenging heteronormativity’.

For the intervention we used film (instead of prescribed literature) to create a dialogic space as a method of identifying, addressing and responding to homophobia. We heed Bennett’s (2011) suggestion about radical epistemological shifts when teaching sexualities. Film affords the opportunity for individuals to personalise their experiences with people of different sexuality or gender identity as well as to develop deeper understanding of their experiences (Walters and Rehma 2013). In using film to teach about transgender, Walters and Rehma (2013) found that this intervention yielded positive change in knowledge of the concept of ‘transgender’. We thus seek to challenge homophobia through embedding discussions of gender identity within the TVET college’s academic curricula by bringing film into it (Walters and Rehma 2013).

The use of film offers different ways of seeing and evaluating one’s position in relation to gender non-conforming people. It further provides power to deliver a social message by means of a visual discourse that engages and subverts narrow constructions of gender through documenting the experiences of queer people (Tyali 2014). We draw on transformative pedagogy’s notion of the ‘liberatory’ potential of social dialogue and its mediation in the social sphere.

The framework of transformative pedagogy ‘refers to teaching that fosters collaborative learning and empowers students to think creatively and critically’ (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman

2010, 77). It is a student-centred pedagogy that emphasises the mutual learning between educator and student (Elenes 2001; Meyers 2008; Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman 2010). Likewise, transformative pedagogy ‘engages students as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners, and envisions of alternative possibilities’ (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003, 167).

Rooted in the work of Freire (1970), transformative pedagogy endeavours to liberate individual thinking and facilitate a process of unlearning previous beliefs and ideologies. Freire described a transformation that has both an action dimension and a reflection dimension (Weiler 1991). The latter dimension can be nurtured through educational processes (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003). In relation to Freire’s work, Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman (2010, 81) argue that:

Students should have influence over their own education because that influence empowers them and enables them to be their own example in the struggle for redemption. This process is characterised by the personal and social transformation of all members of the learning community that results from dialogue and reflection. In the transformative context, learning is a shared process that touches each student in a personal way.

As advocates of transformative teaching we acknowledged that learning is also influenced by students’ individual beliefs, ideas and experiences. Thus, the same has affected our teaching method. Meyers (2008) argues that transformative learning assists the student with examining their experiences in consideration of social issues and then take action to effect wider change. To encourage transformative learning, we used the students own understanding of stigma and discrimination, particularly the instances they might have encountered in their own communities.

The intervention was preoccupied with helping the students to constantly question and re-evaluate long standing norms and beliefs in relation to homophobia. Such a topic as heteronormativity has the power to elicit emotion (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman 2010). This type of emotion leads to a more passionate and involved engagement of the learning material (in this case, film) (Morton 2005).

Also, the use of transformative pedagogy in our intervention was influenced by the belief that this approach helps in creating a safe space where students’ contributions are validated (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003). Scholars who value transformational learning encourage the student ‘to grapple with their positions on core issues and help them to become cognisant of the existence and source of their assumptions’ (Meyers 2008, 221). Our pedagogy focused on the elimination of oppressive, harmful and violent hierarchies, and endeavoured to be liberating through raising consciousness (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003; Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman

2010). Of particular interest for this intervention was the value of transformative pedagogy in interrupting the status quo and students' current beliefs and ideologies about non-normative sexual identities. We further sought to allow students to formulate opinions around accepting LGBTI students even if such acceptance did not fit within mainstream expectations.

Transformative pedagogy is at the core of education for 'humanisation' (Graman 1988). While it focuses on developing students' understanding of alternative perspectives and experiences (Meyers 2008), in this study transformative pedagogy further focused on expanding students' awareness of how social forces impact people. Related to the ideas of Freire (1970) we envisioned that through dialogue the participants can start to think critically and envisage different ways of being and acting.

More specifically, through the use of transformative pedagogy – based on two films – our intervention focused on work that emphasised the creation of safe spaces in education for LGBTI students. This, as found in other emerging studies, was aimed at enabling participants' deep reflection on the self, addressing both structure and agency (Ngidi and Moletsane 2015). In this article, using this framework, we reflect on the participants' experiences of the intervention (as well as our own as researchers and implementers) and on the extent and ways in which the intervention and its pedagogy were transformative.

METHODOLOGY

Study setting

Scholarship in the field of social justice education has called for comprehensive interventions to address any form of oppression (Levitt 2008). Recently, researchers and educators began using innovative pedagogies and educational practices to combat oppressive behaviours and attitudes such as homophobia (Francis and Msibi 2011; Ngidi and Moletsane 2015). In order to challenge homophobia, we used participatory methods to influence change among the participants. Francis and Msibi (2011) have used a similar approach in challenging homophobia in a higher education setting. In this regard, we designed our study as an intervention aimed at challenging homophobia among students from a technical and vocationally focused institution. TVET colleges are South African institutions of higher education that offer education services tailored to meet the demands of the labour market, and in particular to access *learnerships* and accredited skills training (Robertson 2015).

The TVET college under study was formed as a result of a merger of its former technical colleges. This was in accordance with the Further Education and Training Act 1998. As a

public, multi-purpose, nationally recognised provider of education, the college is managed and administered in accordance with regulations stipulated by the Further Education and Training Colleges (FETC) Act of 2006 and by the National Education Policy as determined by the Minister of Education. It operates on a number of different campuses that are located within disadvantaged communities around the province and offers programmes in the fields of *learnerships*, business and computer studies, hospitality and tourism, hair-care and cosmetology, engineering, art and design, as well as recreation and community courses. These programmes range from short courses to National Certificates.

In the same vein as that of Francis and Msibi (2011, 158), our objective through this intervention was to allow students to ‘develop a deeper understanding of the critical issues and skills required to create safe [spaces for LGBTI students]’ at their institute. To date, very little work has been done to address heteronormativity in such an environment across South Africa.

The study’s participants

A total number of twenty students and one lecturer from the college participated in the intervention. All the participants, except for one Coloured, were African (black) with an age range between 18 to 30 years. We must add that all the participants were a newly formed group of peer educators in the TVET college’s HIV and AIDS programme – with the participating lecturer coordinating the programme – and were selected through applications and interviews by their college officials. Perhaps because TVET colleges in South Africa attract a number of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (mostly black students) it was hard for the college to recruit peer educators from other race groups. Five of the participants (including the lecturer) were male and the rest were female. The participants came from diverse areas in South Africa – eight were from the rural Eastern Cape, five were from rural KZN, one was from urban KZN and the rest were from townships around the province. Although none of them identified as LGBTI, we were careful not to assume that this meant everyone in the space identified as heterosexual.

The study design

This study was part of a broader project on HIV prevention, peer education, substance abuse, gender-based violence prevention (GBV), and stigma reduction in higher education. For this article we focus on our work on GBV and stigma reduction, and particularly on addressing homophobia. The initiative was commissioned by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) and financed through the Global Fund initiative. In 2014, prior to the

commencement of the project, a proposal was written, submitted and approved by HEAIDS in collaboration with the Global Fund.

Following the recruitment of the participants, the TVET college's management and the participants themselves granted informed consent for participation in the project. An informed consent form and letter of information detailing the project was handed to the TVET college management and the participants. Important issues addressed in these documents included: the protection of all participants, the sensitive nature of issues covered in the project, the possible need for careful debriefing and support for those with questions, care and consultation about inappropriately exposing participants' behaviours and attitudes to the college and authorities, agreement of publishing findings (including participants views), memorandums of agreement and intellectual property with participants, safety of participants and their college's management, and strategies for conflict resolution, where necessary.

For feasibility, and because this was an outside-the-classroom intervention, five sessions of seven hours each were designed for a workshop. The intervention was facilitated over the TVET college's Spring break – a time where the students were not preoccupied with their formal academic programmes – and was in both isiZulu and English. The first session was dedicated to discussing students' personal views, attitudes, and accounts of homophobia. In this session, the participants first (together with the researchers) agreed on a set of values that they would adhere to throughout the workshop. These included confidentiality, non-judgmental attitudes, mutual respect, and the ability to express personal views and experiences around the subject matter. We further used this time to gauge for students' experiences of homophobic violence (either as perpetrators or supporters).

In sessions two and three students watched films and explored the manifestation of homophobia in their immediate environment. The two films were the core that shaped the discussions for the rest of the workshop. In session two, the participants watched a film called *Boys don't cry* and on the third session they watched *Dallas Buyers Club*. In sessions four and five, the participants discussed the films in relation to their own past perpetration and support for homophobia. We further made use of transformative participatory methods such as role play, poetry, drawing, and focus groups discussion throughout the intervention. Moreover, the students discussed their roles and responsibilities as peer educators (and lecturer) in addressing homophobia and providing social justice education at their college. Also, they identified strategies for creating safe spaces for LGBTI students and a more inclusive environment in their institution and communities.

About the two films

As a way of speaking back to, and opposing, homophobic oppression we used film as a tool and medium with which to describe the plight of LGBTI people (Tyali 2014). Likewise, film was an accessible medium of teaching about, and making the students understand the LGBTI community, thereby helping this community to find its voice in the broader society. Walters and Rehman (2013) argue that this can be a positive experience because it humanises what may be challenging content.

The film *Boys don't cry* is based on the real-life story of Brandon Teena, a transgendered man (played by Hillary Swank). Brandon was a victim of homophobic violence when he was beaten, raped and murdered by his male peers after they discovered he was transgender. The film explores the themes of identity, homophobia and freedom. Moreover, it focuses on Brandon's search for identity, self-actualisation, acceptance and love. It follows Brandon's struggle to fit in to a peer group, and her need to conceal her identity because of fear of rejection.

The narrative in *Dallas Buyers Club* revolves around the true-story of Ron Woodroof (played by Matthew McConaughey), who was a HIV-positive patient diagnosed in the mid-1980s when HIV and AIDS were under-researched. This was a time when the disease was not understood, highly stigmatised and associated with homosexuality. Although Ron's deteriorating health status is the central premise, the film introduces Rayon (played by Jared Leto) – a drug addicted, HIV-positive transgender woman – who meets Ron in hospital. At first, Ron was hostile towards Rayon, however as the film unfolded the pair became business partners and eventually struck up a very supportive friendship.

RESULTS

Participants views before the films

In line with other research (see Francis and Msibi 2011), we found evidence that students at the TVET college held homophobic attitudes toward LGBTI people. A common theme among the participants was that non-normative sexualities challenged their religious and cultural beliefs. The participants demonstrated difficulty in reconciling their religious or cultural principles with homosexuality and thus disregarded same-sex practices as a human right. This was reflected in what one of the male participants said as a response at our first session:

Why are gay rights becoming more superior than other rights? It looks like I'm expected to compromise my beliefs for gay rights. Why are gay rights infringing on my religious rights? I live by the bible, and the constitution works against my beliefs. (Sourced from the facilitators' notes).

Religion was used to justify and even defend homophobia. It further dictated the type of lifestyles LGBTI people should follow. 'Gay rights' were also seen as denigrating religion by demanding respect for LGBTI persons. The quote above further highlights how, when it comes to safeguarding heteronormativity, even the highest law of the country is challenged. What the above quote further illustrates is the selective manner in which the Constitution and its provisions are observed. Msibi (2009) argues that South Africa is a very patriarchal society, with deeply entrenched ideas about manhood, particularly the heterosexual male script. As a consequence, the participants felt that LGBTI individuals were betraying the superior status of masculinity.

The participants did not believe that the LGBTI community deserved equal rights and opportunities as heterosexual people. In fact, they suggested that the sexuality clause in the South African Constitution was an infringement to their religious views and 'rights'. The feeling that 'gay rights' were becoming superior, highlights how the participants saw gender non-conforming individuals as a threat to the superiority of heteronormativity. Furthermore, the participants lamented on how they felt LGBTI concerns were being imposed on them. As the quote below, by one female participant suggests, the idea that resonated among the participants was that homosexuality was becoming a 'fashion'. This further indicated an assumption of choice – regarding non-conforming sexualities – and a poor understanding of sexuality.

The participants drew further from a popular South African television drama called *Generations* to make their argument. Through analysing this drama, the students indicated that the two married male characters (namely Senzo and Jason), depicted in the TV drama, were promoting non-normative sexual identities and lifestyles. This, they felt, was not a 'normal' lifestyle that merits promotion. Francis and Msibi (2011) noted that students in their classroom described homosexuality as a disease and an un-African behaviour. Moreover, they believed that educators were 'brainwashing' them when teaching about homosexuality. In our study, the participants also felt that *Generations* was brainwashing them by showing and normalising same-sex relationships. We argue that the depiction of a same-sex married couple is a form of 'speaking out' against the silencing of same-sex loving people.

It's like this gay thing is being imposed on us. Even on *Generations* there is Senzo and Jason. We are forced to watch two men in a marriage. This thing has become a fashion, and we are expected to just accept it. (Sourced from a transcript of the workshop).

Among the participants, homophobic oppression and attitudes were perceived as a norm and there were no expectation of challenging such. In line with other studies (see Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2014), the participants further used stereotypical and derogatory words and statements

to refer to LGBTI people. For example, when asked to anonymously write their thoughts about LGBTI individuals, the participants presented negative views that bordered on insults, as the extracts below highlight:

Those people have mixed feelings. They need a prayer.

They are confused people. They date people of the same sex because they are confused.

They were sexually abused and they sleep around with multiple partners.

[Lesbians] are full of themselves and they think they are guys.

I hate it when they make a move on me.

I have gay friends, but I don't have a lesbian friend. I don't understand lesbians. It feels like they try too much to be men.

They [probably] got hurt on their previous relationship with [an opposite sex].

They seek attention and are confused. They also over do things and they are good actors. Very dramatic.

Those people are lost and don't know their identity.

(All views were sourced from the participants' anonymous reviews).

The participants felt satisfied and validated in using negative labels to describe LGBTI. For them, gender non-conforming people were perceived as confused, immoral individuals who required some form of 'correcting' or therapy (particularly through religious rituals) to bring them to order. What is more, the participants were justified in being moralistic voices that speak against so-called deviant sexualities. Tyali (2014) warns about the danger of not critically analysing the neo-traditional and patriarchal voices that speak as the 'moralistic' voice for society. Throughout the introductory session, it became evident that a different approach of teaching about sexuality, and non-normative sexualities in particular, was needed. At this tone setting moment we relied on film to curb the participant's steadfast beliefs and for destabilising their homophobic attitudes.

After reflecting on their experiences and beliefs, the participants acknowledged that their attitudes had the potential of causing major psychological and physical harm to LGBTI students at their college. For them as peer educators, the reflection process helped in identifying and shifting individual points of view, and created a common goal of educating the school community about homophobia and its implications. Informed by this understanding, we set to work on a method of challenging heteronormativity.

Participants' reflections after the films

Overall, feedback from all the participants about the intervention, and its teaching and learning

style in particular, was positive. Tyali (2014) noted that in the context of the violation of the rights of LGBTI people, there is a need to rupture the silence on homophobic oppression that is imposed on non-heteronormative identities. By using film as a tool, we found evidence that students' views shifted towards acceptance and empathy for LGBTI people. This was captured vividly by one male participant, whom, after watching *Boys don't cry* mentioned that,

I have never cared about [LGBTI] before that movie, I didn't understand them and I actually found them repulsive. But that movie changed my perception. This was the first time I felt sorry for a lesbian. It was painful to see what she went through just because she fell in love with another girl. Nobody deserves to be treated like that. (Sourced from the facilitators' notes)

The participants reported a positive shift in their views and attitudes regarding gender non-conforming people; suggesting that they would no longer participate in or encourage homophobia. Furthermore, they were encouraged and committed to teaching their college peers about homophobia and its perilous consequences. There was also a commitment to address homophobic oppression in their homes and communities. Once again, *Generations*, the television drama, was brought up, however in a different light.

The participants spoke about how the spaces from which they viewed the drama were almost immediately dismissive of the same-sex couple. In these spaces, there was never an opportunity to apply a different lens with which to view the same-sex couple. The participants noted the need to express disapproval as a way of distancing themselves and to establish their moral standing to present company. For other participants, while they had felt no pressure to disapprove, there was often silence on the matter.

The films further helped in putting a human face to homophobia. Through the abuse of LGBTI characters, the participants felt a sense of pity and connection with the human suffering and started imagining themselves or loved-ones in a similar predicament. Importantly, they started recognising diversity in their own immediate environment, including among themselves as students. This is captured in the words of one female participant:

I don't understand why she (the transgender character) was treated like that. Now I understand the pain and hardship we put other people through. I mean we are all different. Even people in this room (the participants) are different. We have different backgrounds and beliefs. I am Shembe (a faith group), but it doesn't mean I have to be punished because I am not Christian or another religion. Everyone is different, and we must start accepting each other the way we are. (Sourced from the facilitators' notes).

The film, *Dallas buyers' club*, helped in dispelling myths about homosexuality. As such, the way in which the students thought of LGBTI was essentially more human than just deviant.

They felt it was good to defend any other person from oppression and exploitation regardless of sexual and gender identity. The students further considered it important to defend sexual and gender minorities from the ignorance of others. They further highlighted the importance of activism, particularly visual activism, in their classrooms and other spaces within their college. The sentiment was that they now better understood the plight of LGBTI persons and they could now better explain this to others. A male participant captured this sentiment well by stating:

I've learned that I can be friends with a gay person. I love how that guy defended his gay friend in the movie and how they supported each other. I will start protecting other [LGBTI] at the college, no matter what people say or think about me. (Sourced from the facilitators' notes).

A conclusion can be drawn that there is value in using film as a sphere that aims to build social awareness to challenge violations of rights of LGBTI people. We found a commitment from the TVET students to be foot soldiers of attitudinal change. In drawing this conclusion, it was helpful to distinguish how transformative pedagogies differed from those that relied primarily on cognitive outcomes or skills in academic literacy. Rather, our intervention achieved the aim of soliciting progressive discourse around sexuality among the TVET students.

DISCUSSION

Our interest and awareness in the predominantly heteronormative landscapes grew out of our work in HIV and gender-based violence prevention within the higher education context. Over time we have realised the absence of interventions that allowed for the interrogation of gender constructions beyond the heterosexist lens and that allowed for collaborative and LGBTI-inclusive interventions. For example, Hames (2007) mentions the importance of lesbian women being seen as part of the wider concerns of women. In our view, so too should gender non-conforming students be featured in the wider ranging concerns and policies within higher education. Our understanding was that in challenging homophobia we could not exclusively target LGBTI-identifying students. Part of this problem was the realisation that higher education institutions were not LGBTI-friendly spaces that allowed or encouraged the expression of gender identities and sexualities that were beyond the heterosexist binary.

Through analysing the participants' reflections, we found evidence that our intervention has, through the use of film and transformative pedagogy, facilitated their critical thinking and self-examination. As transformative educators, we did not teach content that is remarkably different from instrumentally-oriented teachers. However, our content was taught with a different end in view – that of challenging heteronormativity among TVET college students.

The use of film has offered different ways of seeing and evaluating one's position in

relation to gender non-conforming people. As found in other visual-based research, film further provided power to deliver a social message by means of a visual discourse that engaged and subverted narrow constructions of gender through documenting the experiences of queer people (Tyali 2014). We drew on transformative pedagogy's notion of the liberatory potential of social dialogue and its mediation in the social sphere. Dirkx (1998) articulated a theory of transformative pedagogy that is referred to as consciousness-raising. Through this process, students develop the ability to analyse, pose questions and take action on the socio-economic, cultural and political contexts influencing and shaping their lives (ibid). As such, this pilot model is a potentially powerful means of bringing LGBTI people into the spaces of those who oppress them.

Moreover, through weaving film into our transformative pedagogy, the participants learned to reflect on the negative impacts of homophobia and forged a commitment to address it in their immediate spaces. The intervention has created a platform in which gender non-conforming people are not merely hyper-visible, but rather more humanly visible (Walters and Rehman 2013). Film in this regard is not a mere frivolity. Rather, it functions as a 'crucial lubricant that assists in creating a healthy balanced society' (Tyali 2014, 147). By being part of the intervention, the TVET college students have taken on the responsibility for growth by questioning their own positions and beliefs regarding non-normative sexualities (Meyers 2008).

This was possible through the transformative style of learning, and dialogue that we encouraged. Dialogue based on the two films was imperative as it challenged injustice and oppression suffered by LGBTI communities. Transformative pedagogy requires that researchers and educators become active facilitators and co-learners who go beyond simply meeting the expressed needs of the student (Freire 1970; Brown 2004; Meyers 2008). Using this paradigm, we have provided the TVET college and researchers with a useful theoretical perspective to guide their efforts.

The intervention contributes to the literature on transformative pedagogy and the use of film in the classroom, creating and promoting as it does so, a process of transforming the environmental, cognitive, and pedagogical contexts in which teaching and learning about non-normative sexual identities becomes possible. Through engaging students in finding alternative ways of bringing about social justice and gender equity in their daily lives, we found that they became aware of the pervasive presence of heteronormativity.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As researchers our intervention concentrated on using transformative pedagogies to challenge

heteronormative thinking within the learning space. However, the nature of the intervention was such that the sample size and the methodology do not allow for generalisation of the results. Focus was more on the pedagogical considerations, which might also be reflected in the sample chosen for the intervention. The sample comprised of a group of peer educators, which might not be representative of the general population. Although all the peer educators were second language English speakers, we also consider that there could have been certain limitations in accessing the English language.

Moreover, efforts must be made by TVET colleges to include this type of intervention into their curriculum. Active efforts to bring issues of diversity, particularly the inclusion of alternative sexualities, into the classroom are necessary for social cohesion and nation building. In this way, widespread conscious-raising and awareness will occur. Likewise, the intervention made use of only two films. Future interventions must consider the inclusion of a broader and more diverse selection of films.

Efforts must be made to include the South African Bill of Rights in future work that seeks to address homophobia in institutions of higher learning. In addition to this, students should be engaged in finding ways to ensure that such policies are infused into daily life and praxis of the learning space. This speaks to the need for curriculum reform within TVET colleges across the country. Tailor made subjects/courses must be developed as an attempt to introduce social justice education that will address harmful and discriminatory cultures that prevail within the TVET college.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis suggests that, through film and the project's transformative pedagogy, we created a platform for heterosexual students to speak about their experiences of violence and aggressions against fellow gender non-conforming students. Furthermore, the intervention helped them understand how they contributed to the problem, both as perpetrators and/or supporters of discrimination against LGBTI students. The initiative further provided space for heterosexual students to forge new ways of talking about and addressing abuse of LGBTI students; thus enabling an appreciation of the resourcefulness of both students – as knowledge providers – and film in addressing uncomfortable social issues. The films were also instrumental in highlighting precipitating discussions about the cause and effects of the various forms of homophobic discrimination, thus enabling reflection and review of individual positions on homophobia. Ultimately, this study reveals that the TVET environment remains silent on issues of homophobia and other forms of discrimination relating to non-normative

sexuality and gender identity. Furthermore, the intervention has highlighted the significance of creating such spaces for engagement with students outside of the formal curriculum. Overall, this article highlights the potential value of film, and in particular transformative pedagogies, in addressing homophobia and destabilising heteronormativity among students in a TVET college.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Jane. 2011. Rejecting roses: Introductory notes on pedagogies and sexualities. *Agenda* 67 (June 2015): 37–41.
- Bennett, Jane and Vasu Reddy. 2015. ‘African positionings’: South African relationships with continental questions of LGBTI justice and rights. *Agenda* 29(1): 37–41.
- Brown, Kathleen, M. 2004. Leadership for social justice and equity: Weaving a transformative framework and pedagogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 40(1): 77–108.
- Dirkx, John, M. 1998. Transformative learning theory in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 7: 1–14.
- Elenes, C. Alejandra. 2001. Transformando Fronteras: Chicana feminist transformative pedagogies. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14(5): 689–702.
- Francis, Dennis and Thabo Msibi. 2011. Teaching about heterosexism: Challenging homophobia in South Africa. *Journal of LGBT Youth* 8(2): 157–73.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30th Anniv. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Graman, Tomas. 1988. Education for humanization: Applying Paulo Freire’s pedagogy to learning a second language. *Harvard Educational Review* 58(4): 433.
- Hames, Mary. 2007. Sexual identity and transformation at a South African university. *Social Dynamics* 33(1): 52–77.
- Hames, Mary. 2012. Embodying the learning space: Is it okay if I bring my sexuality to class? *Feminist Africa* 17: 62–81.
- Harrell-Levy, M. K. and J. L. Kerpelman. 2010. Identity process and transformative pedagogy: Teachers as agents of identity formation. *Identity* 10(2): 76–91.
- Henderson, Neil. 2015. The persistence of homophobic discourses: Narratives of a group of gay men in Cape, South Africa. *Agenda* 29(1): 37–41.
- Jagessar, Valenshia and Thabo Msibi. 2015. ‘It’s not that bad’: Homophobia in the residences of a university in KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. *Agenda* 29(1): 37–41.
- Levitt, Roberta. 2008. Freedom and empowerment: A transformative pedagogy of educational reform. *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 44(1): 47–61.
- Mavhandu-Mudzusi, Azwihangwisi, Helen. 2014. Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students regarding sports participation in a South African rural based university. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance* 20(June): 710–20.
- Mavhandu-Mudzusi, Azwihangwisi Helen and Peter, Thomas, Sandy. 2015. Religion-related stigma and discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students at a South African rural-based university. *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* 1(June): 1–8.
- Meyers, Steven, A. 2008. Using transformative pedagogy when teaching online. *College Teaching* 56(4): 219–24.
- Mkhize, Nonhlanhla, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane. 2010. *The country we want*

- to live in: Hate crimes and homophobia in the lives of black lesbian South Africans*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Morton, Mary Lou. 2005. Practicing praxis: Mentoring teachers in a low-income school through collaborative action research and transformative pedagogy. *Mentoring and Tutoring* 13(1): 53–72.
- Msibi, Thabo. 2009. Not crossing the line: Masculinities and homophobic violence in South Africa. *Agenda* 23(80): 37–41.
- Msibi, Thabo. 2012a. *Angeke Ngibe Isitabane*: The perceived relationship between dress and sexuality among young African men at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In *Was it something I wore? Dress; identity; materiality*, ed. Relebohile Moletsane and Claudia Mitchell, 242–58. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Msibi, Thabo. 2012b. ‘I’m used to it now’: Experiences of homophobia among queer youth in South African township schools. *Gender and Education* 24(5): 515–33.
- Msibi, Thabo. 2013. Queering transformation in higher education. *Perspectives in Education* 31(2): 65–73.
- Nagda, Biren (Ratnesh) A., Patricia Gurin and Gretchen E. Lopez. 2003. Transformative pedagogy for democracy and social justice. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 6(2): 165–91.
- Ngidi, Ndumiso Daluxolo and Relebohile Moletsane. 2015. Using transformative pedagogies for the prevention of gender-based violence: Reflections from a secondary school-based intervention. *Agenda* 29(3): 66–78.
- Nzimande, Nomkhosi. 2015. Teaching pre-service teachers about LGBTI issues: Transforming the self. *Agenda* 29(1): 37–41.
- Reddy, Vasu. 2006. Decriminalisation of homosexuality in post-apartheid South Africa: A brief legal case history review from sodomy to marriage. *Agenda* 20(67): 146–57.
- Robertson, Anne C. 2015. *Leadership development for technical and vocational education and training college leaders in South Africa: A post-graduate curriculum framework*. Stellenbosch University.
- Sanger, Nadia and Lindsay Clowes. 2006. Marginalised and demonised: Lesbians and equality – Perceptions of people in a local Western Cape community. *Agenda* 67(20): 37–41.
- Sigamoney, Veronica and Marc Epprecht. 2013. Meanings of homosexuality, same-sex sexuality, and Africanness in two South African townships: An evidence-based approach for rethinking same-sex prejudice. *African Studies Review* 43: 83–107.
- Tyali, Siyasanga M. 2014. Art, media and gender based activism: A critical reflection on the University of South Africa (UNISA) Colloquium on Zanele Muholi. *Agenda* 28(4): 37–41.
- Walters, Andrew S. and Kae Rehma. 2013. Avenue T: Using film as *entrée* in teaching about transgender. *Sex Education* 13(3): 336–48.
- Weiler, Kathleen. 1991. Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review* 61(4): 449–75.
- Wells, Helen and Louise Polders. 2006. Anti-gay hate crimes in South Africa: Prevalence, reporting practices, and experiences of the police. *Agenda* 20: 37–41.