

# Exploring how Parents can Promote Gender Diversity in South African High Schools

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## Abstract

*By examining the voices of parents regarding the extent to which South African high schools maintain a cisnormative culture, this paper aims to explore how parents' understanding of gender can play a role in promoting gender diversity. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in the Free State Province of South Africa and framed by both Queer Theory and the African philosophy of Ubuntu. A focus group interview was employed to interview nine parents. Consistent with many international studies on the experiences of parents regarding gender diversity in high schools, this paper found that most of the parents' views were influenced by cultural and religious backgrounds. The results reveal that parents' understanding of gender can play a role in promoting gender diversity in South African high schools. Results further reveal an emerging understanding that gender diversity is real, not mythical. This paper calls for more research to examine how parents can help others to embrace gender diversity through various school platforms to accelerate parental support of trans learners. Lastly, the Department of Basic Education can formulate a policy that will assist schools in engaging parents to support schools in promoting gender diversity.*

**Keywords:** *Parental Understanding, Gender Diversity, South African High Schools, Queering, Cisnormativity.*

## Introduction

Despite the constitution of South Africa and the significant progress that has been made in terms of protecting transgender (trans) people, many trans learners still experience severe discrimination, stigma, misgendering, and inequality in schools (Bottoman, 2021; Francis & Monakali, 2021). The term transgender includes all gender identities that may differ from the sex assigned to a person at birth (Rioux et al., 2022). Both in South Africa and internationally, cisnormative schooling cultures create an unfriendly environment for most trans learners. Cisnormativity (and cisingender) are terms used to describe social norms regarding gender identity – that a person's gender identity should align with the sex assigned to them at birth (Suárez et al., 2022). Internationally, parents have recently taken an affirmative stance on protecting transgender learners (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021). This seems to be despite the non-affirming approach (or rejection) often taken when a trans child initially reveals their transgender identity to their parents (Matsuno et al., 2022). Most of the international literature, however, reports mainly on the voices of parents of transgender children instead of all parents (Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Brill & Pepper, 2022). Much of the literature reviewed in this paper, for example, reports on the parents of trans learners and their understanding of gender diversity (GD). Emerging South African literature shows that parents have recently started to support trans children and reject gender discrimination (Clark, 2021; Nichols et al., 2019). Our focus in this paper is on the rural South African context. While South African scholars stipulate that government schools must protect and promote GD (Nichols, 2023; Thani, 2016), there is no specific reference to addressing the needs of trans learners or how transgenderism is presented in South African high schools. Given that cisingenderism is largely promoted in high schools, there is a need for an approach that accommodates transgenderism (Bragg et al., 2020; Brown & Rogers, 2020). As shown in the discussion above, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on parents' understanding of cisingenderism and transgenderism at the school level in the South African context in regard to how GD can be promoted (Francis et al., 2019). This is the gap that this study seeks to fill by exploring how parental understandings of gender can promote gender diversity at high schools in South Africa.

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This paper is organised as follows: First, we discuss the literature review and follow by the theoretical underpinning of the research. Next, we describe the methodology used to conduct the study. After this, we discuss our results. Specifically, we discuss how parents are willing to queer culture and religion to protect trans learners from mental health issues. We also discuss the realities that young trans learners face at school and consider how parents can challenge any resistance to gender diversity in high school. To conclude, we argue that parents are indeed willing to question institutionalised cisnormativity within high schools.

## Literature Review

### *Status quo of gender diversity in South African Schools*

Parents of trans learners have reported that their children are often subject to high levels of bullying by their cisgender peers due to a lack of anti-bullying policies regarding GD learners (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). This international trend of bullying is common in Southern African schools (Francis et al., 2019; Moyano & del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020; Ubisi, 2021). Despite attempts to improve GD in schools, some principals contest and avoid conversations relating to transgender learners and parents (Nichols, 2023). A prominent scholar of gender and sexuality in South Africa, Bhana (2022), has argued that religious codification has produced contempt for transgenderism and that customary indigenous practices have fueled religious classifications of gender. Furthermore, our immediate social, cultural, and religious worlds are constructed in ways that leave trans learners vulnerable to stigmas perpetuated by their cis peers and even teachers (Francis & McEwen, 2024; Kean, 2021). Research reveals that studies focusing on transgenderism at the school level are reporting the voice of teachers and learners more than those of parents (Bhana, 2022; Nichols & Brown, 2021; Sathyanand, 2021; Ubisi, 2021). Much of the recent international research shows that some parents are starting to reconceptualise their understanding of gender and are beginning to promote gender diversity at schools (Belmont et al., 2024; Charter et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2020). Internationally, as shown above, parents are recently questioning or queering cisnormative schooling culture with the idea that trans learners are interconnected beings to schooling culture as well (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Martino et al., 2022).

### *Signs of Willingness to Promote Gender Diversity in Schools*

The available studies that focus directly on parents and gender diversity do not report on the parents' understanding of parents to promote gender diversity in high schools (McQuillan & Leininger, 2023; Ullman et al., 2022). Yet, research has shown that taking an affirming stance on transgenderism and trans learners improves their academic performance at school (Mangin, 2020; Martino et al., 2022). This affirmative stance of parents suggests a willingness to challenge established binary systems at schools because of the humanness (Ubuntu) they have for trans learners. The opposite – the rejection of a trans learner's gender identity – results in trans learners experiencing gender dysphoria and even suicide ideation (Dangor, 2023; Willis, 2021). Gender dysphoria is the distress experienced by trans learners due to incongruence between their assigned gender and their gender identity (Bloom et al., 2021). The mentioned distress comes as result of feeling not interconnected to the entire schooling system as well as the society. Despite these challenges faced by trans learners, however, most schools are not doing enough to protect trans learners from gender discrimination and from the proliferation of stigmas about their gender identity (Sørlie, 2020; Ubisi, 2021). The question that should be put forward, then, is whether schools are doing enough to support trans learners, and if not, whether parents can do anything to promote gender diversity at schools. This is particularly important considering the research that has shown that parental involvement in schools helps to improve how schools protect learners from any discrimination from their peers (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). However, as mentioned earlier, parents' understanding of promoting gender diversity has not been fully explored, particularly with the aim of promoting inclusivity at high schools.

### *Theoretical Frameworks: Queer Theory and the African Philosophy of Ubuntu*

The Queer theory questions the idea that gender is a synonym of sex and argues that it is socially constructed (Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1991; Seidman, 1993). Through the Queer theory lens, parents were

able to question the assumption that all learners should be cisgender. We used queer theory to question and challenge parents' understanding of whether they can promote gender diversity in South African High schools. Using Butler (1990) idea of gender as performative, empowered parents to concentrate on gender-diverse school learners and suggest ways to enhance an inclusive and safe learning environment for trans learners. It was possible because they were able to consider gender as what learners perform instead of their sex. Research has shown resistance towards gender diversity in most Southern African High schools (Francis et al., 2019), and to mitigate this, the African approach intersected with Queer theory.

Additionally, in the African context, gender diversity is commonly considered an idea of the West (Olali, 2022). To support parents in promoting gender diversity and avoiding all mistreatments directed to trans learners, the African philosophy of Ubuntu was employed. The notion of Ubuntu is based on the premise that "I am because we are" (Chigangaidze et al., 2023). It promotes interconnectedness among trans learners, their parents, and parents at large by enhancing the idea that trans learners are interconnected to school environment as well as community. As a result, Ubuntu fosters acceptance among parents of high school learners regarding gender diversity, as promoted by Queer Theory. Furthermore, it "advocates for collective responsibility, sharing, humility and love for humanity – over selfish individualism" (Chimbi & Jita, 2022, p. 137). These two theories foster humanness among parents while questioning the established binary operations at schools to promote gender diversity

## Methodology

### *Research Paradigm, Approach, and Design*

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016), a qualitative approach exploring parents' lived experiences regarding the promotion of GD in High Schools. The interpretive paradigm is adopted because it allowed us to focus on parents' meaning about how schooling environment can be inclusive of GD learners. This study uses phenomenology to focus on the meanings parents attach to phenomena (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The phenomenon being explored in this paper is how parents can promote an inclusive schooling environment for trans learners.

### *Sampling Procedure and Ethics Consideration*

This study involved nine parents (seven parents of cisgender learners and two parents of transgender learners attending high school). Snowballing sampling was employed to recruit both parents of cis and trans learners. Snowballing assisted in finding parents who are willing to discuss these issues, especially parents of trans learners. The University of the Free State's General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) approved the study (UFS-HSD2023/2494), and all stipulated ethical considerations were met. Confidentiality was assured, and parents knew they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Participant s	Gender of parents	Educational background	No. of children in High School	Gender and grade of a child by the parent
Parent 1	Cisgender Female	Degree	1	Trans girl, grade 11
Parent 2	Cisgender Male	Honours degree	1	Cis girl, grade 8
Parent 3	Cisgender Female	Degree	2	Cis girl, grade 11, and cis girl, grade 8
Parent 4	Cisgender Female	Diploma	2	Cis boy, grade 12, and cis girl, grade 10
Parent 5	Cisgender Male	Diploma	1	Cis boy, grade 11.
Parent 6	Cisgender Male	Diploma	2	Cis boy, grade 11, and cis girl, grade 11

Parent 7	Cisgender Male	Matric	1	Cis boy, grade 8
Parent 8	Cisgender Female	Honours Degree	1	Cis girl, grade 12
Parent 9	Cisgender Male	Masters Degree	1	Trans girl, grade 12

**Table 1. Demographics of Participants**

*Context of the study, data collection tools, and procedure*

Data were drawn from focus group interviews with nine parents, conducted in the community library of Mahlatswetsa in rural Free State, South Africa. The location has three schools: a primary school, a high school, and a combined school. The high school was intended to be the research site because it is situated next to the main road, making it accessible using any mode of transport. However, the school proposed that the researchers approach the community library for a more quiet and easily accessible space for the parents.

*Data Analysis*

During the interview, most parents were comfortable conversing in the region's vernacular (Sesotho). We used thematic analysis to make sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the parents' responses were analysed through stepwise process. Some parents expressed their views with most of their vernacular; the first author was fluent in Sesotho. He was thus able to conduct the interviews and ask follow-up questions. The data were read and reread, and the patterns identified within the data helped produce the themes that we will discuss in the next session.

## Results and Discussion

This research confirms that parents' cisnormative understanding of gender and the commonly held assumption that everyone identifies with the sex assigned to them at birth do influence parents' attitudes to transgenderism. However, the themes discussed in the next section suggest that parents can cross the boundaries of religion and culture to start promoting gender diversity. This seems to support the idea that parents are beginning to reconceptualise their understanding of gender and that transgenderism is the reality, not a myth. As a result, parents are in a position to challenge any resistance to transgenderism or transgender learners in high schools.

*Theme 1: Queering religious and cultural views to promote gender diversity*

Most of the parents in this study have come to an understanding of gender and gender diversity through their religious and cultural backgrounds. Previous data collected from other research studies show that parents' understanding of gender fuels the assumption that all learners must identify with gender assigned at birth (Francis, 2017), proposing that learners should be cisgender. The analysis of the data from this study suggests that most parents believe that trans learners have chosen to be transgender and deviate from the gender that was assigned to them at birth. The parent participants, furthermore, considered gender diversity as an experience or stage that learners go through, like adolescence, and is therefore not permanent. Parent 5, for example, when asked about his views regarding gender diversity, gave the impression that gender diversity is a stage of growth which some learners go through.

*"those who grew up with me, knew that as boys we experienced this. We could go to hiding place as boys and enjoy each and come back".* Parent 5

Interestingly, most of the parents laughed at this response as it came from a parent who was a minister of a religious denomination. To elaborate, this response suggests that parents view transgenderism as something that children explore; it is not something that is natural or real.

The parent participants from religious backgrounds also linked transgenderism to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Linking transgenderism to this story from the bible may have a negative impact on trans learners' schooling experience, as the study by Mayeza (2021) has shown. Mayeza (2021) writes about one of his research participants, Lebo, a transgender learner who found that their religious upbringing was challenging since his parents were judgemental of transgender people; they believed that gender diversity is not in accordance with the bible. Lebo further reported that their parents said, "I would chase you out of my house, I cannot raise a demon" (Mayeza, 2021, p. 299).

A similar sentiment was detected from one parent who was asked whether he would accept his child if he was transgender. This parent did not provide lengthy response but briefly said, "*for me, it is a big NO*". Basing one's understanding of gender and gender diversity on religious beliefs was reiterated by the reaction of Parent 6, who demonstrated an affirming attitude to gender diversity at the start of the interview. Parent 6, however, changed seats during the focus group because he wanted to be close to other members after arriving late. After moving from behind other participants and went to sit next to Parent 5, and subsequently altered his views. Parent 6 said, "*Bible, biblically, gender diversity is not stated. It only said, male and female. Maybe, people will say I have been influenced because I am sitting next to participant 5*". This response from Parent 6 showed that religion is influential in how parents perceive gender (Oyagiri et al., 2024). These religious perspectives were further supported by cultural perspectives from Parent 8, who said, "*I mentioned earlier that as an African parent, I said I classify gender as a male and female so from being a male and a female*". Parents' inconsistent responses made it difficult to conclude themes, and this inconsistency will be a subtheme in the next section. However, it affirmed the willingness to question the established cisnormative schooling culture because of a feeling of humanness for GD learners.

The influence of religious and cultural views on gender and gender diversity creates the misconception that gender diversity and having a gender identity that is not in keeping with cisnormative culture are wrong. These opinions correspond with the views reported in the study of Francis (2017) that trans learners need to be directed back to their original gender. Furthermore, these parental opinions may contribute to a school's inability to promote gender diversity. Additionally, most of the parent participants in this study viewed gender diversity as something that is adopted and not something that is natural. This understanding of parents may encourage teachers to gender discriminate against trans learners (Bottoman, 2021; Nichols & Brown, 2021) since parents themselves are not standing up against gender discrimination. This parental perception suggests that they may try to restore the state of cisnormativity, as suggested in the following quote: "*In Africa, I don't think we have such words (gender diversity), as far as we know, what is meant to us, a person whose sex is female is a woman and person whose sex is male is a man*" echoed by Parent 7. This sentiment suggests that if being cisgender is normal and natural, then being transgender is abnormal and unnatural (Francis, 2023; Victor et al., 2014). To add to this sentiment, Parent 3 felt that "*gender is about the male and the female*". However, there was some inconsistency in the parents' responses, as state earlier. The quote from Parent 5, for example, highlights this inconsistency: "*That is what I am saying, that I don't have a problem, when my child is out there, can live the life he wants*". This statement suggests that even though some of the parents did not want to be seen as allowing their children to queer established cultural and religious norms (Pillay, 2023; Sithole, 2019; Siwela et al., 2018), they still felt that gender diversity is acceptable.

Parent 4 made comment directed at Parent 5. Parent 4 said, "*I like how parent is talking, he is talking from biblical point of view, blah, blah, blah. It is a sin, it is fine. We know that, but what I like is when he said, me, to my child, I can kick a person, now he forgets everything*". This specific comment was made when one parent in the focus group asked the rest of the parents what they would do if they had a transgender child, and some community members took that child to a room and forced the child to undress so that they could see if their sex aligned with their gender identity. The question was a valid one since a similar incident occurred in Limpopo. A principal encouraged learners to harass and provoke a trans learner in the toilets by grabbing her crotch to ascertain whether her genitalia was that of a male or female (Ubisi, 2021). An event (and question) such as this is in keeping with the findings of Francis (2017) who found that South African schools operate largely from the assumption that all learners and staff are or should be cis. This assumption, however, leads to trans learners receiving unequal treatment from their cis peers.

### *Subtheme: Inconsistent Religious and Cultural Views of Parents*

In this study, the data show that parents' views of GD, which are informed by their religious and cultural backgrounds, are inconsistent with the constitution and democracy of South Africa. Yet, some of the parent participants' views contradicted this idea. For example, Parent 7 stated that, *"Bible is a book with questionable stories. We cannot use that book to describe how we should live, I think South Africa is a secular society"*. This parent clearly disregard the use of bible as way to describe gender but upheld the sentiments echoed by the bible against transgenderism. Costa and Shenkman (2020) argue that parental understandings of gender diversity, when prejudicial or discriminatory, are shaped by many factors, such as their social background, which explains why some parents rely on their cultural views of what gender is. In other words, parents may use religion and culture as gatekeepers to GD and as a way to police GD (Brown, 2018). Indeed, some parents in the past have believed it is right to block trans learners from attending schools (Francis & McEwen, 2024). In turn, teachers at schools are not doing enough to promote GD because they know that parents are resistant to it.

To add to this point, we draw on Stobie (2011, p. 160) who raised a question common among some South African parents: *"Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us: What if these great and glorious men of the past are now reborn in female – and lesbian or transgendered – bodies?"*. This question, which seems to be on the minds of many, as posed in the study by Stobie, suggests that GD may lead to the discontinuation of a family's lineage. This proposes that if a cis boy becomes a trans girl will not be able to impregnate a girl at marriage of which is regarded as family continuation. Indeed, Stobie's question and the fear it alludes to was reflected by a parent from this study who has a trans daughter (assigned male at birth): *"I don't want to speak lie, you can phone my trans child, I have accept who he is. I love her so much. She clean curtains and helping her mother with household things. Yesterday, I asked him saying, are you going to bring me a male daughter in law (ngwetsi). And then he said to me, papa leave that topic. I have accepted that I have a boy who is a girl"* echoed by Parent 9 who is having a trans daughter. Global literature has found that most parents find it hard to fully accept the gender identities of transgender children, even if they are supportive. This is because of a deeply ingrained understanding of gender as binary (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2022), which hinders the smooth promotion of GD in high schools.

The parents also felt that they could promote gender diversity but did not want to say it directly. Parent 7, for example, admitted that being absent in the life of transgender child as a parent could negatively affect them, which led this parent to encourage other parents to support their trans children even if they don't agree with their gender identity. Parent 7 said, *"I may say I don't agree with the way they behave, but, for example there are many things that our parents don't agree with with us. However, I personally end up saying, what will I do, you end up understanding. As parent, you must be there for your child because being absent as a parent can led the transchild to live a life which is not good because of the tension between them and parents"*. This parent's view suggests that parents can promote GD at high schools, but because of cultural and religious boundaries, they openly resist GD even though they personally promote it. Although majority of parents had cis learners, despite parents who showed willingness to promote GD, parents of trans learners had a more positive approach towards transgenderism, and this will be demonstrated in the coming themes.

Based on the results above, we argue that the perceptions of parents seem to be largely based on religious and cultural beliefs, which contribute negatively to schools' ability to promote GD. Despite the boundaries created by these religious and cultural beliefs, however, parents still seem to feel that they can play a role in promoting GD; however, schools still need to develop equitable school cultures, policies and procedures in relation to trans learners.

### *Theme 2: Gender Diversity: Myth or Reality?*

At the initial stage of the interview, nearly all the parent participants expressed the idea that gender diversity is not real and is rather a myth. However, some of the parents contradicted themselves; they believed that times have changed, and this alludes to their acceptance that transgenderism is a real phenomenon. The following quote from Parent 6 captured this view well: *"Our problem is that we have many myths in our heads which we must address. Unfortunately, we are living in world of today not yesterday"*. This quote demonstrates a willingness

to promote GD, while maintaining an understanding of GD as something that is not real. Moreover, Mbugua (2020) raised the argument that some parents consider promoting transgenderism as synonymous with finding flaws in God's creation since God created two sexes. But, the two quotes below show how the parent participants' understanding of gender can promote GD through queering cisnormativity. Parent of trans daughter was having a more positive approach as compared to parents of cis learners.

*"This thing of transgender is real, if ever being as parent, we don't accept it, we will die because of heart related diseases".*  
Parent 1 (parent of trans learner)

*"It is all about genes. It is true, as Africans, we are not supposed to condone, but we are living in a society where there is a lot of depression, if we don't support, they are going to end up being depressed, they will commit suicide, am I supposed to lose a child, based on, simple my African beliefs? I cannot take such risk; I just support to save life".* Parent 4

The abovementioned extracts show that parents' understanding of gender and the contribution they can make to promoting transgenderism are equated to saving a life, whereas upholding cultural views against transgenderism is equated to viewing transgenderism as a mental health issue. Although all parents of trans learners were having positive approach, there is also an emerging trend of positive approach towards transgenderism among parents of cis learners as echoed by parent 4 above. Furthermore, cultural and religious views sustain the idea that transgenderism is a myth, which remains one of the major challenges faced by trans learners and can lead to depression and suicidal ideation (Arli et al., 2020; Letsoalo et al., 2020). However, research has discredited this myth by showing that transgenderism is natural (Plaskow, 2019; Witten et al., 2003). Nearly all parents in this study maintained the view that transgenderism must be protected; this was captured well by Parent 2: *"there is no way that we'll be against that, we need to support and to protect their gender identity and dignities again."* Despite all the different views expressed by the parent participants, all seemed to understand that GD learners must be protected from gender discrimination in high schools. This strengthens the argument that religion and culture are barriers to promoting gender diversity, and parents are willing to break those barriers.

### *Theme 3: Parents Challenging Resistance to GD in High Schools*

This study further reveals that parents acknowledge the barriers to promoting GD in South African high schools. However, they have various understandings of gender and how GD can be promoted. Brill and Pepper (2022) found that parents acknowledge that knowledge is required for a person to accept transgenderism. Knowledge contributes to queering resistance to GD in high schools. Parents who do not promote GD in high schools base their understanding of gender on the assumption that it must align with the sex assigned to a person at birth. Contrary, Parent 4 assert that parents should acknowledge and accept GD despite their understanding of gender as binary because trans learners will always find a way to be who they are: *"You like it or not. When they are out there, they just get out of the closet"*. This contribution from Parent 4 was a response to Parent 5, who indicated that if his child is trans, they will only be allowed to display their gender identity outside his house. Some studies showed that parents become worried when their children come out as trans due to the assumption that they are deviating from their true identity (Kidd et al., 2021; Mayeza, 2021). We argue that high schools should create a platform for parents to discuss GD issues to promote an inclusive schooling environment for GD learners.

During the interview, parents could generate nouns that could be used to refer to trans learners to avoid misgendering them. Trans boys who were assigned female at birth were referred to as "SheHe", and those assigned male at birth were referred to as "HeShe". Misgendering plays a role in enhancing a cisnormative schooling culture, and this was confirmed by one parent's comment, *"calling them names is a serious misconduct"* Parent 3. Literature has shown that calling trans learners names or using the wrong pronouns have a negative effect on their social interaction as well as academic performance (Francis, 2024; Nichols & Brown, 2021). Parent 4 (parent of cis learners), who was influential in encouraging parents to promote transgenderism, stressed that supporting trans learners can help save lives (Miller et al., 2024). This was alluded by Parent 9 who is a father of trans learners (assigned male gender at birth) when he said he is fine with how his trans child do things as he loves her so much.

The philosophy of Ubuntu was visible in the interviews and mostly expressed by the parents' understanding that if social norms need to be compromised to promote GD, then so be it (Smuts et al., 2024). The contributions of the parents from this study suggest that they will not openly promote GD, but do acknowledge the importance of promoting it. Parent 3 stressed the importance of promoting gender diversity by commenting about the ways in which trans learners are not supported: "*if they are not supported, it is then they won't finish school which is their dream or they commit suicide*" (Kelley et al., 2022; Willis, 2021). The parents in this study were also asked whether any of them willing to promote GD or protect trans learners in High Schools. All the parent participants said they can protect trans learners in high schools.

One parent, however, did not want to openly acknowledge that all schools should promote gender diversity. This parent made a distinction between public schools, which are obliged to promote gender diversity, and private schools, which are at liberty to amend their admission policies. This view is similar to those of the early 1990s, as shown by Francis (2023). Francis shows how, in the early 1990s, public schools admitted all learners, but model C schools did not admit learners based on race. Besides classifying the different kinds of schools, however, all parents maintained that trans learners must be treated equally to their cis peers. This was reflected in the contribution of Parent 8, who said "*When we see boy or we see a girl at school, we see a learner, it doesn't matter is a girl learner or a boy learner*". This comment suggests that challenging resistance to GD can be done by using the term "learner" to refer to all learners, no matter their gender identity. This is a way of troubling a cisnormative schooling culture. Furthermore, queering resistance to GD requires parents to understand that being transgender is beyond using an individual's genitals to classify them as male or female, but rather someone's genes influence their gender. As Parent 4 stated, "*Is not about how am I feeling tomorrow, or whatever. We are talking about the gender, neh? We are talking about the genes, not person's sex*" (Ristori et al., 2020). This comment refers to transgenderism as being something that comes from a person's genes –something that a trans learner cannot change.

The queering of resistance to GD can also be done by understanding it as something that is performative. One parent, for example, argued that boys who grow up among girls will urinate seated if not constantly reminded to stand. This suggests that society is responsible for how gender is performed (Butler, 2004). Parent 2 mentioned that performativity is a behaviour: "*So the behaviour will display that particular, this kind is a he or this one is a she*". Parent 2 also mentioned that from the age of 8 years, a child's behaviour is a clue as to whether they are transgender or cisgender. This behaviour may be noticeable before they reveal their gender identity and come out. This study thus advocates for parents to help transform schools and be inclusive of GD; a person is a person through other people (Mlondo, 2022). Parents with a reconceptualised understanding of gender know that gender is a social construct and not synonymous with a person's sex (Schnebly, 2022). Parents with a reconceptualised understanding of gender can challenge any resistance to supporting GD.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

This study has some strengths as well as limitations. The strength of this study lies in the fact that parents' understanding of their role in promoting gender diversity in South African high schools was the focus. Another strength is the contribution to dearth of literature on this topic in the South African context. However, because this study used a phenomenological design, its sample size was small, thus restricting our ability to generalise the results or apply the findings to all parents of South African high school learners. Furthermore, the participants were all black from one area and had a common social background. It would have been beneficial to explore parents' understanding of gender on a larger scale. This means that some parents' understanding of gender and their role in promoting gender diversity in South African high schools is missing.

### *Implications of the Study*

The primary aim of this study was to explore parental understanding of gender and whether parents can promote gender diversity in South African high schools. To do this, the willingness of parents to promote gender diversity, irrespective of their understanding of gender, which is regularly grounded in culture and religion, was documented. This has implications for other parents and how they may be supportive of



schools in promoting gender diversity and protecting trans learners from gender discrimination. Informing parents about the reality of transgenderism will likely reduce cisnormative school cultures and create a more inclusive culture that embraces gender diversity.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Francis (2024) highlighted that schools in South Africa are failing to acknowledge and protect trans learners since they are largely cisnormative spaces. This lack of acknowledgment exists despite a progressive constitution that advocates for the protection of transgender learners. This study discovered that despite the country's progressive constitution, parents are in an influential position to help or hinder South African high schools in promoting GD. The findings of this study also highlighted the fact that some parents are keen to support cisnormative schooling cultures, which are based on cultural and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, all the parents who took part in the study, regardless of their cultural and religious background, agreed that they could play a role in helping South African high schools promote gender diversity.

The results of this study also reveal that although a parent's acknowledgement of GD can help to promote GD in schools, many acknowledge gender diversity solely to protect trans learners from mental health issues such as depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal attempts. This study shows that parents seem to be gradually reconceptualising their understanding of gender diversity from viewing it as a myth to viewing it as reality. Furthermore, this study has shown how parents are prepared to challenge the resistance to gender diversity and transgenderism, despite their cisnormative understanding of gender. Given the findings of this study, research in the future should examine how parents can help others to embrace gender diversity through various school platforms, such as parent meetings, to accelerate parental support of trans learners. This study involved only black parents from one area; therefore, a study that includes parents from other races and different areas is recommended. Additionally, policies that create a platform for parents to support schools in promoting GD learners must be created at the national level as a measure to promote inclusivity of gender. Lastly, we strongly recommend that high schools should affirm and normalise gender diversity as a measure to trouble the gender discrimination of trans learners.

## Availability of Data and Materials

Data and materials are available as evidence of integrity of this work

## Conflict of interest statement

The authors indicated that there is no conflict of interest

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## Authors' contributions

The authors of this paper equally contributed. There was a collaboration in developing the study design, data collected, and how data was analysed and interpreted. Furthermore, both authors worked together in drafting, revising, and finalizing the manuscript for publication.

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