Socio-Educational Inclusion of Diverse Sexual Orientations in South African Schools

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Abstract: This desk research examines the socio-educational inclusion of gender identity and diverse sexual orientations in South African schools, within the broader framework of human rights, social justice, and inclusive education. The South African Constitution guarantees equality, dignity, equity, access, and democratic participation under the law, principles reflected in education legislation and policies intended to safeguard all learners. Despite these progressive constitutional and policy commitments, the lived realities of many learners with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) continue to reflect exclusion, discrimination, victimisation, and systemic marginalisation within school environments. This study adopted a proposition-based theory-synthesis methodology within a qualitative desk research design. A systematic review and synthesis of scholarly literature, legislation, education policies, advocacy documents, and institutional frameworks on the inclusion of SOGIESC in South African schools was conducted. The study drew on human rights, socio-ecological, inclusive education, and queer theories to analyse the extent to which educational environments enable or constrain the socio-educational inclusion of SOGIESC-diverse learners. The findings reveal that although South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutional and legislative frameworks globally on equality and sexual diversity, significant implementation gaps persist at the school level. Schools frequently lack coherent whole-school strategies to address heteronormativity, stigma, bullying, exclusionary disciplinary practices, and insufficient psychosocial support for SOGIESC-diverse learners. Teacher preparedness, curriculum representation, and leadership commitment were identified as critical shortcomings that undermine inclusive schooling practices. The study recommends comprehensive teacher education and professional development programmes focused on sensitisation, diversity literacy, inclusive pedagogies, and psychosocial support. It further advocates whole-school inclusive frameworks, strengthened anti-bullying interventions, learner-centred support structures, and curriculum transformation that incorporates diverse identities, histories, narratives, and role models. The study concludes that socio-educational inclusion requires systemic, collaborative, and contextually responsive approaches that move beyond policy compliance to create affirming, safe, and socially just educational spaces for all learners.

Keywords: Socio-Educational Inclusion, Gender Identities, Sexual Orientation, Non-Heteronormative, Systemic Marginalisation

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a key means of advancing social justice, equality, democratic participation, and human development. Beyond academic learning, schools play a crucial role in shaping identity, belonging, citizenship, and social participation. Consequently, contemporary education systems are increasingly expected to create environments that recognise learner diversity and promote equitable participation and success for all learners, regardless of their social, cultural, religious, linguistic, gender, or sexual identities (UNESCO, 2020). In this context, the socio-educational inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) has become an important educational and human rights concern globally.

South Africa provides a significant context for examining SOGIESC inclusion. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) guarantees equality, dignity, freedom, and protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. These commitments are reinforced by legislation and policies, including the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (DBE, 2001), the National School Safety Framework (DBE, 2018), and the Draft Guidelines for the Socio-Educational Inclusion of Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression and Sex Characteristics in Schools (DBE, 2023). Collectively, these frameworks aim to promote safe, equitable, and inclusive educational environments.

Despite these protections, evidence indicates that many schools continue to perpetuate heteronormative assumptions, discrimination, bullying, and exclusion (Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2012). Learners whose identities diverge from dominant social norms often face victimisation, social isolation, psychological distress, absenteeism, and reduced educational engagement (Francis, 2022; UNESCO, 2016). These realities reveal a persistent gap between constitutional guarantees and learners' lived experiences.

Although South African scholarship has examined homophobic bullying, sexuality education, and learner experiences, limited research has synthesised the legislative, policy, theoretical, and institutional dimensions of

socio-educational inclusion. To address this gap, this study adopts a proposition-based theory synthesis approach informed by human rights, socio-ecological, inclusive education, queer, minority stress, capability, and intersectionality theories (Crenshaw, 1991; Meyer, 2003; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). The study argues that meaningful inclusion requires a whole-school approach that integrates governance, curriculum, pedagogy, school climate, psychosocial support, and community engagement to create equitable and socially just educational environments.

2. Conceptual Analysis and Literature Review

Socio-educational inclusion extends beyond access to schooling, encompassing learners' ability to participate meaningfully, feel a sense of belonging, exercise agency, and achieve educational success in supportive learning environments. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises inclusion not as the accommodation of difference but as the transformation of educational structures, cultures, and practices that produce exclusion (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Within this framework, the inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) is not merely a matter of tolerance but of educational justice and democratic participation. Socio-educational inclusion, therefore, refers to the extent to which school policies, pedagogical practices, institutional cultures, social relationships, and support systems affirm learners' identities and enable their full participation in academic and social life.

This conceptualisation is particularly significant in South Africa, where progressive constitutional protections coexist with persistent educational inequalities. Although the Constitution guarantees equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation, evidence suggests that many schools continue to reproduce cisheteronormative assumptions through formal and informal practices (Francis, 2022; Msibi, 2012). Consequently, legal recognition of rights creates conditions for inclusion but does not guarantee that learners can meaningfully exercise those rights in everyday school contexts.

The Capability Approach offers an important lens for understanding this gap. Sen (1999) argues that institutions should be evaluated by their capacity to expand individuals' freedoms and opportunities to achieve valued ways of being and doing. Similarly, Nussbaum (2011) contends that education should promote dignity, affiliation, participation, and agency. Applied to SOGIESC inclusion, these perspectives suggest that educational justice cannot be measured solely by the presence of policies or by access to school. Rather, schools must create conditions that enable learners to participate authentically, develop positive identities, and flourish academically and socially. Thus, the challenge facing South African schools is not only the implementation of rights but also the expansion of learners' capabilities to exercise those rights meaningfully.

International scholarship increasingly places SOGIESC inclusion within broader debates about human rights and social justice. UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusion should be understood as a systemic process that ensures participation, belonging, and achievement for all learners. Importantly, equality of opportunity does not necessarily lead to equality of outcomes. Learners who experience marginalisation often require targeted support to achieve equitable educational outcomes. International evidence indicates that exclusionary school climates are associated with poorer educational attainment, reduced school connectedness, and increased psychosocial vulnerability, whereas affirming school environments and inclusive curricula are linked to improved engagement and academic success (UNESCO, 2020). However, Ainscow (2020) cautions against viewing inclusion as a straightforward policy outcome, arguing that educational exclusion is embedded in historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. This observation is particularly relevant in South Africa, where constitutional commitments frequently intersect with deeply rooted social, cultural, and religious norms.

Research consistently identifies school culture as a critical determinant of learners' experiences. Francis (2022) argues that educational institutions often normalise cisheteronormative assumptions through curriculum content, language practices, disciplinary procedures, and institutional silence on sexual and gender diversity. Exclusion, therefore, frequently operates through subtle institutional mechanisms rather than overt discrimination alone. Minority Stress Theory further strengthens this argument. Meyer (2003) proposes that sexual and gender minorities experience chronic stress arising from stigma, discrimination, prejudice, and expectations of rejection. Within schools, these stressors may manifest as bullying, social exclusion, identity concealment, and reduced belonging. UNESCO (2016) similarly reports that learners exposed to discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity experience increased absenteeism, disengagement, and poorer educational outcomes. These findings suggest that school climate functions as a structural determinant of well-being and educational participation rather than a mere contextual factor.

Recent South African scholarship further demonstrates that school culture can either exclude or support resilience. Francis (2024) argues that schools often struggle to challenge entrenched inequalities without support from families, communities, and civil society organisations. Conversely, Brown (2025) found that positive educational experiences among LGBT learners were associated with supportive relationships with educators, inclusive school initiatives, affirming curricula, and opportunities to participate. Inclusion, therefore, emerges not as the absence of discrimination but as the active cultivation of educational environments that foster recognition, belonging, and agency.

The literature also highlights the pivotal role of educators and the curriculum. Teachers are often positioned as key agents of inclusion, yet many report uncertainty about how to engage with issues of sexual and gender diversity (DePalma & Francis, 2014). Rossouw (2024) found that tensions often arise when educators negotiate personal religious beliefs alongside professional responsibilities in inclusive sexuality education. These findings challenge the assumption that resistance to inclusion stems solely from prejudice and instead highlight the need for enhanced professional preparation and support. Curriculum representation is an equally important site of inclusion. Queer theorists argue that exclusion is produced not only by discriminatory practices but also by the omission of diverse identities from legitimate knowledge systems (Butler, 1990; Francis, 2022). From a capability perspective, such omissions constrain learners' opportunities for recognition, participation, and identity development (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). However, curriculum transformation remains relatively underexplored within South African scholarship on SOGIESC inclusion.

Finally, emerging scholarship increasingly advocates whole-school and socio-ecological approaches to inclusion. Socio-ecological theory recognises that educational experiences are shaped by interactions among policies, leadership, school climate, curriculum, peer relationships, family contexts, and community norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective is strengthened by intersectionality theory, which holds that marginalisation is shaped by the interplay of multiple identities, including race, class, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1991). Consequently, SOGIESC-diverse learners cannot be treated as a homogeneous group because broader social inequalities within South African society mediate their experiences.

The literature reveals three consistent themes. First, legislative and policy protections are necessary but insufficient for socio-educational inclusion. Second, school culture, teacher agency, curriculum representation, and psychosocial support significantly shape learners' experiences. Third, inclusion is best understood as a systemic and ecological process that requires coordinated action across multiple institutional levels. Despite these insights, scholarship remains fragmented, often examining bullying, teacher attitudes, sexuality education, or learners' experiences in isolation. There remains limited theoretical integration to explain how these factors interact within broader systems of inclusion and exclusion. This study addresses that gap through theory synthesis and proposition development, advancing the argument that meaningful socio-educational inclusion emerges from the dynamic interaction of governance structures, school culture, curriculum practices, educator agency, psychosocial support systems, and community engagement. Such an integrated understanding provides a foundation for developing more inclusive and socially just educational environments.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative desktop research design, using theory synthesis and proposition development as its primary methodological approach. Theory synthesis is particularly appropriate when knowledge of a phenomenon is dispersed across multiple theoretical, policy, and empirical domains and needs to be integrated into a coherent explanatory framework (Jaakkola, 2020; Walker & Avant, 2019). Rather than generating new empirical data, theory synthesis analyses, compares, and integrates concepts, theories, policies, and research findings to develop new conceptual understandings and theoretical propositions regarding a particular phenomenon.

The study focused on the socio-educational inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in South African schools. Given the complexity of inclusion and the multiple legal, social, cultural, educational, and institutional factors shaping learners' experiences, theory synthesis offered an appropriate means of integrating existing knowledge to explain the processes that facilitate or hinder inclusion. The study was underpinned by a proposition-based approach, which seeks to develop theoretically informed statements that explain relationships between concepts and social phenomena (Lynham, 2002). Unlike hypotheses, which are empirically tested, propositions emerge through critical engagement with existing knowledge and are intended to advance conceptual understanding and guide future research (Jaakkola, 2020).

The analysis drew on four complementary theoretical perspectives. Human Rights Theory positions education as a fundamental right and emphasises equality, dignity, participation, and non-discrimination (Republic of South Africa, 1996; United Nations, 1948). Inclusive Education Theory conceptualises inclusion as the removal of barriers to participation and achievement for all learners (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Socio-Ecological Theory recognises that learner experiences are shaped by interacting systems, including families, schools, communities, policies, and broader social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, Queer Theory interrogates heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions embedded in educational institutions and highlights how power relations influence the inclusion or exclusion of diverse identities (Butler, 1990; Francis, 2022). Together, these perspectives enabled a multidimensional understanding of socio-educational inclusion.

A comprehensive review of academic and policy literature was conducted to identify sources relevant to the inclusion of SOGIESC in South African education. Sources were included if they focused on sexual orientation, gender identity, LGBTQIA+, SOGIESC, or sexual and gender diversity in educational contexts; addressed schooling, teacher education, or youth educational experiences; and examined inclusion, exclusion, school climate, bullying, curriculum, policy implementation, or learner well-being. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, legislation, government policies, reports from recognised organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF, and credible advocacy documents were included. The review focused primarily on English-language sources published between 2010 and 2025, with seminal theoretical works included where necessary. The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents, legislation, policy frameworks, and scholarly literature. No human participants were involved, and no personal or confidential information was collected. Consequently, the study presented minimal ethical risk. Nevertheless, the principles of academic integrity were upheld through accurate citation, faithful representation of sources, and the avoidance of plagiarism.

The study employed a systematic conceptual and thematic analysis consistent with theory synthesis methodology (Jaakkola, 2020). Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, key concepts relating to inclusion, exclusion, school climate, curriculum, teacher agency, leadership, and learner support were identified across the literature. Second, concepts were compared across theoretical and empirical sources to identify patterns, relationships, and explanatory themes. Third, propositions were developed through iterative synthesis of recurring findings and causal explanations.

Four propositions emerged from this process. The first proposes that inclusive legislation alone is insufficient to achieve socio-educational inclusion unless supported by coherent whole-school implementation strategies. The second proposes that school climate mediates the relationship between policy intentions and learner experiences. The third suggests that teacher preparedness and curriculum representation are critical mechanisms through which inclusion is enacted. The fourth proposes that meaningful inclusion requires interconnected support systems operating across multiple ecological levels. Together, these propositions informed the development of the study's conceptual framework.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied exclusively on secondary data and therefore did not directly capture the lived experiences of learners, educators, or school leaders. Second, theory synthesis is inherently interpretive, and the propositions developed reflect the researchers' synthesis of available evidence. Finally, the study focused on South African schooling contexts, which may limit the transferability of findings to other educational systems. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust foundation for conceptual development and future empirical investigation into socio-educational inclusion.

4. Findings

This study examined the socio-educational inclusion of learners with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in South African schools, using a theory synthesis and proposition-based approach. The findings do not draw on empirical observations from a specific school population but instead emerge from the synthesis of legislation, policy documents, theoretical literature, and contemporary research. The discussion is organised around the four propositions developed through the conceptual analysis. Collectively, the findings suggest that although South Africa has a robust constitutional and legislative framework supporting equality and non-discrimination, meaningful socio-educational inclusion remains constrained by implementation deficits, institutional cultures, inadequate teacher preparation, and fragmented support systems.

4.1 Proposition 1

Inclusive legislation alone is insufficient to achieve socio-educational inclusion without whole-school implementation strategies. The literature consistently shows that South Africa's legislative and policy environment provides a strong foundation for protecting the rights of SOGIESC-diverse learners. The Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, while White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) advocates removing barriers to learning and participation. More recently, the Draft Guidelines for the Socio-Educational Inclusion of Diverse SOGIESC in Schools (DBE, 2023) aim to provide schools with practical guidance for creating inclusive learning environments.

However, the existence of progressive legislation does not automatically translate into inclusive educational experiences. UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusion is not achieved through policy adoption alone but through the extent to which educational institutions operationalise policy commitments within their organisational cultures and practices. This distinction is particularly significant in the South African context, where legal protections often coexist with exclusionary school experiences. Francis (2024) contends that, despite progressive legal protections, many schools continue to reproduce heteronormative assumptions through institutional practices that privilege certain identities while marginalising others. Similarly, Brown (2025) found considerable variation across schools, with some creating affirming environments while others remained characterised by silence, stigma, and exclusion. These findings suggest that legislation functions primarily as an enabling framework rather than a guarantee of inclusion.

The literature, therefore, challenges the linear assumption that policy reform inevitably produces educational transformation. Instead, meaningful inclusion appears to depend on whole-school implementation strategies that entail leadership commitment, curriculum transformation, educator development, learner participation, and support services. Consequently, the central problem is not the absence of legislation but the limited capacity of schools to translate policy principles into sustained institutional practice. This finding aligns with Ainscow's (2020) argument that inclusive education requires systemic change rather than isolated policy interventions. From this perspective, inclusion is best understood as an organisational process rather than a legal outcome.

4.2 Proposition 2

School climate mediates the relationship between policy intentions and learners' experiences of inclusion. A second significant finding from the literature is that school climate is a critical mediator between formal policy commitments and learners' experiences. While policies set expectations for inclusion, learners encounter these expectations through everyday interactions with educators, peers, administrators, and institutional structures. Research increasingly shows that school climate strongly influences educational participation and well-being. UNESCO (2016) found that learners exposed to discrimination, bullying, harassment, and violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity experience higher absenteeism, lower academic engagement, poorer mental health outcomes, and increased school dropout. These findings suggest that educational exclusion extends beyond academic access and encompasses learners' ability to participate safely and meaningfully in school life.

South African studies similarly indicate that exclusion often arises from subtle, normalised practices rather than overt discrimination alone. Francis (2022) argues that cisheteronormativity is embedded in many school cultures through language practices, disciplinary procedures, peer interactions, and curriculum silences. These practices foster environments in which SOGIESC-diverse learners may experience invisibility, social isolation, or pressure to conceal aspects of their identities. Importantly, recent scholarship challenges deficit-oriented narratives that portray schools solely as sites of victimisation. Brown (2025) found that positive learner outcomes were associated with supportive educator relationships, affirming peer networks, inclusive policies, and opportunities for learner voice and participation. These findings suggest that school climate can function both as a mechanism of exclusion and as a protective factor that promotes resilience and belonging.

The significance of this finding lies in its implication that policy effectiveness is mediated by institutional culture. Consequently, interventions focused solely on policy compliance may have limited impact unless they also address the social and relational dimensions of schooling. This supports the proposition that school climate is a critical intermediary mechanism through which inclusion is realised or undermined.

4.3 Proposition 3

Teacher preparedness and curriculum representation are critical mechanisms through which socio-educational inclusion is enacted. A recurring theme in the literature is the central role of educators in facilitating or constraining inclusion. Although policy frameworks frequently identify teachers as key agents of educational transformation, research suggests that many educators feel inadequately prepared to engage with issues of gender and sexual diversity.

DePalma and Francis (2014) found that educators often experience uncertainty about how to address diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in classrooms. More recent studies indicate that teachers frequently navigate tensions among professional responsibilities, personal beliefs, religious values, and community expectations (Rossouw, 2024). These tensions do not necessarily reflect intentional resistance but highlight the complexity of implementing inclusive educational practices in socially contested environments. The literature suggests that inadequate preparation leads to curriculum avoidance, limited discussion of diversity, and uncertainty about appropriate support strategies for learners. Such findings challenge the assumption that policy directives alone can produce inclusive teaching practices. Rather, inclusion requires deliberate investment in professional learning, diversity literacy, and pedagogical competence.

Curriculum representation is an equally important dimension of inclusion. Queer theory scholars argue that exclusion occurs not only through discriminatory practices but also through curricular omissions that render certain identities invisible (Butler, 1990; Francis, 2022). When diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are absent from learning materials, historical narratives, literature, and classroom discussions, learners may receive implicit messages about whose experiences are considered legitimate and valued. UNESCO (2024) likewise emphasises that inclusive sexuality education contributes to safer school environments and improved learner wellbeing. However, the South African literature suggests that curriculum transformation remains inconsistent and often depends on individual educator initiative rather than systemic support.

The evidence, therefore, supports the proposition that socio-educational inclusion is largely enacted through the interaction between educator agency and curriculum representation. Legislative protections may establish rights, but teachers and curricula ultimately shape how learners experience those rights in classrooms.

4.4 Proposition 4

Meaningful inclusion requires interconnected support systems operating across multiple ecological levels. The final proposition emerged from literature emphasising the need to understand inclusion as a systemic and ecological process. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective suggests that learner experiences are shaped by interactions across multiple levels, including family, peer groups, schools, communities, policy environments, and broader societal norms.

The reviewed literature strongly supports this proposition. Studies consistently show that educational inclusion cannot be reduced to individual learner characteristics or teacher actions alone. Rather, learner experiences are shaped by the combined effects of leadership practices, school policies, peer relationships, family attitudes, community norms, and access to support services (Francis, 2024; UNESCO, 2020). Recent research on LGBTQ+ learner resilience further underscores the importance of interconnected support systems. Positive educational outcomes are linked to affirming relationships across multiple contexts, including supportive educators, inclusive school leadership, peer networks, family acceptance, and community advocacy organisations. Conversely, the absence of support across these domains heightens vulnerability to exclusion and psychosocial harm.

This finding is particularly important because it challenges intervention models that focus narrowly on individual behaviour change. Anti-bullying campaigns, teacher workshops, or policy revisions may yield limited outcomes when implemented in isolation. Instead, the literature increasingly advocates whole-school approaches that integrate governance, curriculum, pedagogy, learner support, leadership, and community engagement (UNESCO, 2020). From a socio-ecological perspective, inclusion emerges as a collective institutional responsibility rather than a learner-specific concern. Consequently, sustainable educational transformation requires coordinated action across multiple levels of the educational system.

The synthesis of the literature reveals a consistent pattern: the principal challenge to socio-educational inclusion in South African schools is not the absence of legislative protection but the persistence of institutional conditions that constrain implementation. The findings indicate that educational exclusion arises from complex interactions among policy, school culture, curriculum, educator preparedness, and broader social norms. Importantly, the literature does not support simplistic explanations that attribute exclusion solely to individual prejudice or

inadequate policy. Rather, inclusion and exclusion appear to operate as systemic processes shaped by multiple interacting factors. This finding reinforces contemporary understandings of inclusive education as a transformative rather than an accommodative project (Ainscow, 2020).

5. Recommendations

Schools should adopt comprehensive, whole-school inclusion strategies that integrate SOGIESC considerations across governance, leadership, curriculum, learner support, school safety, and community engagement. Rather than treating SOGIESC inclusion as a standalone issue, schools should embed diversity, dignity, and respect within broader school improvement and inclusive education plans. Research consistently shows that fragmented interventions are less effective than coordinated institutional approaches that address multiple dimensions of school life simultaneously (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Teacher preparedness emerged as a significant factor in inclusion. Initial teacher education programmes and continuing professional development initiatives should include training in gender diversity, sexual orientation, inclusive pedagogies, human rights, anti-discrimination practices, and psychosocial support strategies. Such programmes should move beyond awareness-raising towards developing practical competencies that enable educators to create inclusive classrooms while navigating cultural, religious, and community complexities (DePalma & Francis, 2014; Rossouw, 2024).

Curriculum content should reflect the diversity of contemporary South African society by incorporating a range of identities, histories, perspectives, literature, and role models. Inclusive curriculum representation fosters learner belonging, challenges stereotypes, and promotes critical engagement with diversity and social justice. Curriculum transformation should be age-appropriate, contextually relevant, and aligned with constitutional values of equality and dignity (Francis, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

The socio-ecological nature of inclusion underscores the need for collaboration among schools, families, communities, support services, and civil society organisations. Partnerships with psychologists, social workers, community organisations, and advocacy groups can strengthen schools' capacity to support learners and address barriers to inclusion. Such collaboration can also facilitate dialogue with parents and communities about constitutional values, diversity, and educational inclusion (Francis, 2024).

Further empirical research is needed to test and refine the study's propositions. Future studies should explore learner experiences, educator practices, leadership perspectives, and implementation processes across diverse schooling contexts. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research would be particularly valuable for examining how inclusion initiatives influence learner wellbeing, participation, and educational outcomes over time.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the socio-educational inclusion of gender identity and diverse sexual orientations in South African schools using a proposition-based theory synthesis and conceptual framework. The findings reveal a significant gap between South Africa's progressive constitutional and policy commitments and the lived experiences of many SOGIESC-diverse learners. Inclusion is not achieved by legislation alone but through the interplay of school climate, leadership, educator preparedness, curriculum representation, learner support structures, and community engagement.

Four key propositions emerged: effective inclusion requires coherent, whole-school policy implementation; school climate mediates learners' experiences; teacher agency and curriculum representation are central mechanisms of inclusion; and meaningful inclusion depends on interconnected support systems across multiple ecological levels. Together, these propositions highlight that socio-educational inclusion is a systemic rather than an individual or policy-driven process.

The study contributes a conceptual framework that positions inclusion as a matter of educational justice. Creating equitable and affirming schools requires transformative practices that go beyond policy compliance to actively challenge exclusionary structures and promote belonging, participation, well-being, and academic success for all learners.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this article, the author used ChatGPT 5.2 from January to June 2026 to generate ideas in response to prompts on socio-educational inclusion; sexual orientation and gender identities in schools;

theories related to sexual orientation and gender identities; South African policies and legislation; and SOGIESC guidelines. Grammarly was used for grammar and language checks.

Ethics Declaration

Since this is a desktop study, the Institution has granted an ethics waiver (Reference Number: CI00081220251).

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