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Analysing Pedagogical Content Knowledge for the Inclusion of Queer Identities: Tertiary Language for Education Lecturers' Perspectives

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Recognising that the voices of lecturers in higher education remain underexplored and that most research focuses on the lived experiences of queer teachers, learners, and students, this study foregrounds lecturers' perspectives, teaching strategies, and the challenges they face in fostering inclusivity. This article explores how tertiary Language for Education lecturers at a South African university conceptualise and apply pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) – the knowledge of how to teach specific content – to include queer identities in the language classroom. The research question was: What perspectives and suggestions do language lecturers from a university have regarding contextually responsive teaching strategies that support the inclusion of queer identities in language classrooms? This study used a qualitative case-study research design, which was grounded in Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Thematic content analysis was the data analysis strategy, and drew on purposive sampling and questionnaire responses. Eight language lecturers completed the questionnaires. The findings revealed three key themes: (1) contextual responsiveness as the foundation of inclusive PCK, (2) transformative learning fostered through literature and classroom dialogue, and (3) the persistence of resistance and missed opportunities for transformation. While participants acknowledged the importance of contextual awareness, their views ranged from proactive inclusion strategies to open resistance. Ultimately, this study contributed to ongoing discussions – by giving a voice to language lecturers – on reforming language curricula to foster inclusivity concerning queer identities.

Keywords: *inclusion; language classroom; language for education; pedagogical content knowledge; queer identities; tertiary education*

Introduction

Egne (2022) states that the role education plays in a country's overall growth, particularly in higher education, becomes clear due to the fact that higher education is thought to be essential for imparting the information needed to guarantee sustained growth. In agreement, Buli-Holmberg and Kamenopoulou (2017) encourage all countries in the world to strive for inclusive education and concentrate on modifying practices and policies, applying a comprehensive approach to education by including differentiated instruction, organisation, and procedures that address the unique needs of learners while fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. The researchers, however, caution that implementing inclusive education into practice is difficult; it remains feasible, because addressing any disparities that might exist within the educational system is a necessary part of social justice education, as supported by

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Munongi (2023). Therefore, there is a global idea of inclusive education with a focus on queer identity inclusion in language teacher education.

I conducted a recent search on tertiary lecturers' perspectives on and contributions to the inclusion and teaching of queer identities[1], whether it be language or non-language education, in the South African context. According to the studies consulted, many focused on the learning experiences of queer students (Francis, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Ganga-Limando, 2014; Nduna et al., 2017; Sithole, 2015; Tanga et al., 2019) and what had been done to create awareness of and engagement with queer identities (Brown, 2020; Jones, 2019; Msibi, 2013), but there was a research gap concerning tertiary education lecturers' perspectives on pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of queer-themed education.

Lees (2017) and Nzimande (2017) provided responsibilities of educators[2] and teaching methods for training and educating students about sexual diversity within the classroom; Msibi (2018) focused on Black teachers' professional and sexual identities to accommodate and resist structural dictates to be inclusive of queer learners; Brown (2020) explored Life Orientation student teachers' perceptions towards queer individuals and focused on the creation of intergroup dialogue meetings to provide a secure environment to discuss topics related to queering teacher education; Tanga et al. (2019) focused on homosexual students' experiences in a higher education institution in South Africa and commended that social workers and other involved parties have an obligation to inform and train various groups within the population about the diverse characteristics of South African society; and Francis (2017) reviewed 27 studies and indicated that educational institutions – from the perspectives of learners, students, and teachers – promote compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity. However, it is noted from the given studies that tertiary lecturers' voices remain absent or unheard (Nduna et al., 2017) – the focus is generally on tertiary education students and secondary education teachers and learners, but not inclusive of tertiary education lecturers.

Lecturers in tertiary education teach pre-service students (who eventually transition to in-service teachers in secondary education). Accordingly, what students are taught at university will be taught to their learners at schools – it is, therefore, the responsibility of lecturers to transfer the necessary PCK to their students to include and engage with queer identities. Krause-Wichmann et al. (2025) affirm that a solid foundation of PCK can then be applied to a variety of pedagogical issues or challenges, which is crucial for student teachers. Brown (2020, 19) states that "teachers need skills to facilitate a learning environment of continuous negotiation and mutual influence". Francis (2017, 15) concurs that "[i]n-service and preservice teacher education […] remains pivotal for the teaching and learning of same-sex desires and sexualities in schools". Fittingly, opportunities can be created for researchers,

[1]Queer identities in this study refer to a culmination of sexual orientations (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual) and gender identities (e.g., transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid).

[2]"Lecturers", "teachers", "students", and "learners" were used within different contexts concerning this study. "Lecturers" and "students" were used in the context of tertiary education, whereas "teachers" and "learners" for secondary education. However, to ease reading, when referring both to "lecturers" and "teachers", "educators" was used; when referring both to "students" and "learners", "students" was used.

lecturers, teachers, learners, and students to partake in dialogues of queer-themed literacy and language: the language classroom as a context is a suitable initial point.

As a result, the research gap is that only the experiences of queer-inclusive education of secondary and tertiary teachers, learners, and students are available, but the experiences and PCK of lecturers, who teach students and teachers, who ultimately teach learners, need to be explored. When lecturers' voices are heard and included, the teaching and learning of queer inclusive education (i.e., PCK) could be enhanced.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following research question: *What perspectives and suggestions do language lecturers from a university have regarding contextually responsive teaching strategies that support the inclusion of queer identities in language classrooms?* I engaged with tertiary-education language lecturers from a South African university, who teach Language for Education (Afrikaans, English, Setswana, or Sesotho for Education)[3], to provide insight towards the PCK of queer identities[4]. The study followed a qualitative case-study design within Mezirow's transformative learning theory to contribute to the development and change of language in South Africa. Purposive sampling and questionnaires as data-generating methods and content analysis as a data analysis strategy were also utilised to contribute towards the discussions on queer-themed developments in aspects of language education.

The next section focuses on Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Mezirow (2003, 58) defines transformative learning as "the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change". O'Sullivan (2003) and Motsisi (2023) further elaborate that transformative learning entails experiencing a profound and fundamental change in the core assumptions regarding thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. This consciousness shifts significantly and permanently transforms one's existence in the world. Such a transformation encompasses one's self-understanding and self-identity, connections with other individuals and the natural environment, comprehension of power dynamics within the interconnected structures of gender and class, bodily awareness, visions for alternate lifestyles, and a sense of potential for peace, personal happiness, and social justice. Fleming (2018) also explains that this process can occur in a deliberate, inadvertent, or subconscious manner, and that each scenario offers a nuanced framework of available interpretations. At times, or during various phases of life or in reaction to significant events, a feeling of discomfort or a realisation that things are misaligned can emerge, indicating a need to

[3]Though South Africa has 12 official languages, Afrikaans, English, Setswana, and Sesotho (at the university in question) are the only available languages students can specialise in when completing their B.Ed. undergraduate degree.

[4]This study was only a subdivision of a larger study – additional information was provided for context when needed.

reconsider how one interprets meaning. Such experiences catalyse transformative learning by encouraging one to examine what one previously accepted as given truths.

Hence, the objective of transformative learning is to assist one in altering the assumptions one currently holds – it can be accomplished when one, for example, gains the ability to view things from a different perspective by employing metacognitive reasoning (Christie et al., 2015; Dirkx et al., 2018; Mezirow, 2003; Motsisi, 2023; Rojo et al., 2022). The body of work surrounding transformative learning, thus, provides an opportunity for a more profound, yet logical and intellectual, understanding of self-awareness.

Considering this self-awareness, transformative learning encompasses both the expressive and instrumental aspects of the mind, emphasising the need to adapt to the demands of reality while also strengthening relationships with others and with oneself. The awareness of the several selves that make up one's identity, both as an individual and as a member of a group, is indicated by the self-understanding that results from this coherent approach. One can start to appreciate the complexity of the identities that shape who one is and who one is becoming when imaginative engagement and critical self-reflection are seen as two crucial elements of a wider integrated process of self-understanding (Dirkx et al., 2018).

Regarding education, Fleming (2018) explains that communicative action, which involves social transformation through forms of open democratic dialogue, represents the necessary conditions for transformative learning. Considering educators, transformative learning focuses on the educator's direct involvement in nurturing the skills, insights, and attitudes needed for critical contemplation of assumptions and active engagement in critical-dialectical dialogue. Adult education is crucial for creating the conditions and skills needed for successful adult cognitive processes, as well as the mindset required for transformative learning. Educators, accordingly, become cultural advocates and critical-thinking facilitators who improve the social and political contexts necessary for more widespread, unrestricted participation in thoughtful democratic settings.

However, Taylor (1997) cautions that, despite considerable support for Mezirow's transformative learning, the process of changing one's perspective requires reevaluation. A learning process must acknowledge the importance of context, the diverse nature of the process' catalyst, the diminishment of critical reflection and the augmentation of other modes of knowing and relationships, as well as general expansion of the definitional outcome of a change in perspective. More research is needed, particularly in the areas of cultural diversity, the nature of critical reflection and its connection to other modes of knowing, and promoting transformative learning in the classroom.

As a result, Mezirow's transformative learning theory is a suitable theoretical framework for this study, as Language for Education educators partook in a communicative dialogue to reflect on the inclusion and teaching of queer identities in the language classroom, critically contemplating and being self-aware of the topic in question to promote social justice in the South African context. By offering a prism through which to view how lecturers critically consider and challenge their pre-existing assumptions, attitudes, and practices, transformative learning assists in informing the understanding of their responses. It draws attention to instances in

which lecturers exhibit changes in viewpoint, signifying a greater understanding of oneself, of other individuals, and the larger social environment of education. By using transformative learning, the analysis can find evidence of both professional and personal change that supports inclusive pedagogy and social justice objectives.

Additionally, the conceptual framework for this study was PCK.

Conceptual Framework

Shulman (1987:8) defines pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) as "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction". Thus, there is a "special amalgam of content and pedagogy". Shing et al. (2015) agree that PCK is described as the blending or integrating of content and pedagogy, which essentially addresses "the 'what' and 'how' of teaching".

Sarkar et al. (2024) elaborate that PCK can be used to comprehend how educators create educational activities and modify their subject matter to make it relevant, understandable, and developmentally appropriate for students. Thus, PCK creates a strong knowledge base for developing superior teaching competency by connecting teaching and learning knowledge.

Abell (2008) confers and suggests that PCK remains a valuable idea since it can allow educators to engage with the teaching process and produce viable instructional strategies. Moreover, Berry et al. (2008) emphasise that although PCK as teacher professional knowledge is challenging to define, classify, communicate, and document, it is becoming more crucial to do so because it is educators' professional knowledge. Furthermore, the compilation of the effective instruction of knowledgeable and experienced educators from studies on topic-specific PCK can serve as resources in teacher education programmes as well as guidance to improve instruction.

Next, the research design, methodology and methods, and ethical considerations of this study are explained.

Research Design, Methodology and Methods, and Ethical Considerations

Qualitative Case-Study Research

Case study is one of the most employed research designs in qualitative methodological research (Priya, 2021). Cresswell (2014), Ary et al. (2002), and Kekeya (2021) explain that case studies represent a qualitative design – which should not be considered merely as a method for data generation (Yin, 2009) – but be employed to analyse a social unit in which the researcher investigates one or more events, programmes, processes, or activities in depth. Priya (2021) and Kekeya (2021) agree that case-study research involves a thorough examination of the chosen case or cases of analysis within their natural contexts, with single case studies being the most frequently encountered.

In a descriptive case study, the objective is to depict a phenomenon in detail within its real-world context (Kekeya, 2021; Priya, 2021). "Descriptive" refers to the result or outcome of a case study since thick descriptions signify that comprehensive and authentic data are provided from participants, allowing meanings to be drawn based on that data. However, it should be noted that the qualitative case-study research design is often critiqued for the belief that generalising from a detailed study of a single case is not feasible (Priya, 2021) and that its findings may be overstated or misrepresent the specific phenomenon being examined (Kekeya, 2021). As a result, incorporating queer-themed content in the language classroom in South Africa, along with tertiary language educators' views, constitutes the single qualitative case study for this study.

Purposive Sampling

Stratton (2024) explains that purposive sampling is a method of population sampling whereby a researcher chooses research participants according to their experiences, traits, or membership in a group of interest. Palinkas et al. (2015) concur that purposive sampling is frequently employed in qualitative research to find and choose cases that are rich in information on the topic of interest.

For this study, participants needed to be language educators at this specific university in South Africa who teach within the Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase[5]. There were 15 participants in total: 12 were language lecturers and three pre-service teachers. However, only eight language lecturers answered the relevant part of the questionnaire. Additionally, the pre-service teachers' responses were excluded rather to give a voice to the language lecturers' experience and viewpoints.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires, as a means of a data-generating method, can be employed in qualitative case-study research (Priya, 2021). Tombs and Strange (2024) briefly explain that the questionnaire method asks participants to self-administer and submit their answers on their own, as opposed to requiring direct engagement with the researcher.

Data for this study were gathered through online open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. The instrument was designed to capture lecturers' experiences, attitudes, and strategies related to teaching and learning about queer identities. Participants were invited to reflect on:

- the importance of contextual awareness in inclusive education;
- ways to introduce queer identities appropriately and respectfully in language classrooms; and

[5]Though not discussed in this study due to its limited scope, these criteria were justified since the language lecturers received sample lessons tailored for the Senior Phase (Grades 7–9, ages 13–15) and FET Phase (Grades 10–12, ages 16–18).

- strategies for addressing queer-related topics in contexts where explicit inclusion may be restricted.

Thematic Content Analysis and Coding

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define content analysis as a data analysing strategy that uses a systematic categorisation process of coding and theme pattern identification to analyse the content of text data subjectively. Coding, furthermore, involves identifying key elements within the data and subsequently defining and labelling them according to what the data represent – researchers create codes as they engage with and analyse their data (Priya, 2021).

Table 1 outlines an example of thematic content analysis and coding, and its application to this study.

Table 1. *Example of Thematic Content Analysis and Coding*

Name	Response	Coding
Charlie	"We should really trot lightly. One can use newspaper articles for activities, but forcing a curriculum will not, in my opinion, always have the effect we want it to have."	Rejection – no suggestions provided. Uncertainty – no suggestions provided. Positive – suggestions provided. Hesitation – link to uncertainty.
Dakota	"It should not be included."	
Quinn	"I really have no idea."	
Jackey	"I am not sure, especially in a language classroom."	
René	"I do not think it should be included."	
Tatum	"Prescribed literature may incorporate some of these topics, even though they may not be dealt with explicitly. Additionally, additional reading or exposure can be provided to learners who wish to explore such topics."	
Hunter	"I do not think teachers teach only what they like. Be a creative teacher in any situation you find yourself in. History is taught even though some people do not like some topics."	
Jordan	(No answer was provided.)	

Source: Uys 2023.

The codes "Rejection – no suggestions provided", "Uncertainty – no suggestions provided", "Positive – suggestions provided", and "Hesitation – link to uncertainty" emanated from the data. When referring to Table 1, red indicates that two participants rejected the inclusion of queer identities in the language classroom. Yellow shows that two participants were unsure how to include queer identities, and one participant did not provide an answer (possibly due to uncertainty, disinterest, or overlooking the question). Green signifies a positive response and includes examples of including

queer identities into the language classroom, while purple indicates some degree of uncertainty in the response.

By being reflexive and critically analysing my own presumptions, biases, and influence on data interpretation, I was able to ensure researcher validation. To guarantee the accuracy and representativeness of the participant's viewpoints, member checking (i.e., my promoters) confirmed my interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it was recommended that the recruitment process be conducted online since the country was still in lockdown. It was also advised by the scientific and research ethics committees of the university in question that anonymity be ensured due to the sensitive nature of the study. Therefore, a public platform needed to be used for recruitment instead of directly reaching out to potential participants. This public platform was essential to maintain transparency, fairness, and anonymity in the process.

The platform chosen was the university's Learning Management System (LMS) with the assistance of an independent person. The participants could access the instructions for the Google Form questionnaires along with the informed consent form by clicking on the provided link in the advertisement. The informed consent also indicated the awareness of sociocultural risks in researching queer issues in South Africa, and that the participants could leave the study and/or choose not to provide an answer at any time. To accommodate potential religious and cultural sensitivity of the topic, the university's emergency helpline was provided to the participants should they experience any distress or uneasiness.

A total of eight Language for Education tertiary lecturers (who specialise in Afrikaans, English, Setswana, or Sesotho for Education) completed the questionnaires, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities – though the population sample is small, rich data were still gathered, providing me with the opportunity to engage in-depth with the data. Flyvbjerg (2006, 241) explains that "[t]he advantage of large samples is breadth, whereas their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse". Thus, for this study, the sample is small (i.e., limited breadth), but it has an advantage in data depth.

Approval for the study was granted by the appropriate research ethics committee, with ethics number 01053-21-A2, as well as gatekeeper permission, reference GK-21-081.

The following section focuses on the analysis of the data received.

Analysis of Responses

Acknowledging the Importance of Context

The first question of this subdivision study was: *Why is it essential for educators to understand their context – time constraints, learners' abilities and language skills, available resources, and prior knowledge – when planning and delivering lessons?*

> Charlie shared that it "is the only way that you will be able to meet students and learners where they are and work from there. Without understanding the context, one could include aspects and content that will only hold teaching and learning back. You can only really teach when you understand whom you are teaching".
>
> Jordan stated that the context "influences what and how you will teach learners".
>
> Dakota asserted: "To make work applicable".
>
> Quinn revealed: "So that the appropriate teaching method can be determined to accommodate diverse learning styles of learners".
>
> Jackey reported: "[To] accommodate the linguistic, cognitive, and social needs of students. Also, it acts as a guide for what to teach and how to teach".
>
> René said that "it is important to keep the context in mind when teaching so that the correct real-life applications can be made to the learners or students they are teaching".
>
> Tatum's response to the question was: "It is important to ensure that the lesson is relevant to the learners' personal lives. When content is interesting and meaningful to the learners, they are more engaged and excited to learn".
>
> Hunter said that "language changes with time. People in different places speak and behave differently. So, teaching in rural areas will force you to change as a teacher to accommodate your learners; you consider all these factors when choosing books for learners. The main objective is to see language skills develop: reading, speaking, listening and writing. You teach all the skills in different relevant themes".

Charlie and Jordan highlighted how important it is for a language lecturer to understand their context because it will be hard for them to teach effectively if they do not know who their learners or students are – references are thus made to PCK: "how" to teach "what" (Shulman, 1987:8; Shing et al., 2015). Additionally, Charlie pointed out the prior knowledge that students bring to the language classroom. A language lecturer will be better prepared to expand on their students' existing knowledge if they can determine what they already know about, for example, queer individuals, sexual orientations, gender identities, heteronormative societies, and queerphobia. The language lecturer can, therefore, determine where to begin teaching when students know very little or nothing about these topics. Thus, it is advised that teachings on queer identities are included in pre-service education, as these teachers will teach what they were taught (Francis, 2017). Charlie also mentioned that if one were unaware of the context,

teaching and learning may be hindered. For example, queer-themed topics are frequently seen as controversial and may face strong opposition from religious communities, families, friends, and the general public – Munongi (2023) and Buli-Holmberg and Kamenopoulou (2017) mention that although inclusive education implementation could be challenging, it remains achievable to address existing disparities. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of teaching and learning will be improved if a language lecturer is certain that queer-themed content can be incorporated into their institution's curricula (by alerting the relevant parties), particularly in contrast to circumstances where there is opposition to the content – as a result, there needs to be a strong PCK foundation (Krause-Wicmann et al., 2025).

Dakota employed the term "applicable". This adjective can be connected to the lower-cognitive verb "applying" in Bloom's taxonomy. Educators should consistently inform their students about the relevance of what they are being taught – students must engage with how the material relates to their daily lives, as opposed to focusing solely on abstract thinking – there should be sustained growth (Egne, 2022).

Quinn emphasised several factors that should be considered when it comes to teaching in a particular context: suitability, teaching approach, adjustments, and varied styles of learning. Concerning this study, it is essential to utilise an appropriate (and effective) teaching approach – such as Backward design to lesson planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Uys et al., 2021) – along with selecting suitable queer-themed resources. The chosen texts (e.g., literature, scenarios, and case studies) should not reinforce any hesitations or insecurities that educators and students may have towards queer-themed content. If they perceive a text as suitable for their age (for instance, one that does not include inappropriate language or explicit scenes), they will be more inclined to engage in teaching and learning about the topic. In this context, Quinn also highlighted the importance of diverse learning styles. Diverse learning styles suggest Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). The educator can target all the students' primary intelligences by using the Backward design, as this allows them to create instructional strategies and learning activities (such as written or verbal scaffolding activities with or without the use of technology) that aid in reaching the lesson's aims and objectives. Sarkar et al. (2024) and Shulman (1987) agree that PCK assists educators to modify their teaching and learning for it to be relevant, understandable, and appropriate in diverse contexts.

Jackey placed a strong emphasis on teaching the "what", the "how" (Shing et al., 2015), and the "accommodation". They also referred to the needs of the students. For many students, developing queer literacy is essential, regardless of whether they identify as heterosexual or queer, religious or unreligious, and/or part of a certain culture. Developing queer literacy can aid individuals in self-discovery, queerphobia prevention and treatment, and supporting marginalised groups in heteronormative settings.

Though not discussed in this study, René[6] expressed a strong disagreement grounded in personal beliefs. In their response, René referred to "correct real-life applications". Since queerness deviates from Christian[7] principles and the heteronormative norm, they might consider it to be immoral. Rejecting or merely tolerating queer individuals

[6]The reader may consult Uys et al. (2023) and Uys et al. (2025) for additional information on René.
[7]René identified as a Christian.

could be viewed, from René's point of view, as the "correct real-life application" to follow, rather than urging students to accept or celebrate variation in queer identities. However, like Dakota, René linked the experiences of students in the classroom with those outside of it, and they ought to learn things that apply to their everyday lives.

Tatum highlighted the significance of connecting with the students themselves, emphasising that the material presented should hold relevance, interest, meaning, and engagement in their lives. In essence, lessons should have a purpose, such as educating students about queer identities and strategies to combat queerphobia. Buli-Holmberg and Kamenopoulou (2017) reiterate that practices and policies need to be modified to address students' unique needs. Tatum also used "excitement": certain individuals (like queer individuals and their allies) may be more enthusiastic than others (like heterosexual individuals) to learn about queer identities. However, if the educator can creatively introduce queer-themed content to their students, many of them can develop an interest in learning more about queer identities that challenge traditional heteronormative perspectives. Tatum's response aligns with Abell (2008), who states that PCK is valuable, as educators produce sustainable instructional strategies by engaging with the teaching process.

Hunter's insight emphasised the evolution of language. For example, we currently use Late Modern English. Early Modern English, Middle English, and Old English were spoken several centuries ago. Although the future of English remains uncertain, it is obvious that language is changing quickly. Similarly, queer topics were and are still taboo for many individuals, but there have been notable developments in the opposite direction over time (i.e., a change in perspective due to transformative learning – Mezirow, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2003; Motsisi, 2023; Fleming, 2018). Perceptions change along with language, and even if one disagrees with a shift, it is important to recognise it. The saying "knowledge is power" stands in stark contrast to the saying "ignorance is bliss", since knowledge enables people to make decisions that are advantageous to society as a whole. Hunter also highlighted diversity, pointing out that many individuals were unique because of their identities, races, faiths, civilisations, societies, languages, and more. This uniqueness implies that Hunter wanted to emphasise that individuals should not be forced to fit into society and conform to heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Francis, 2017). There will be individuals who oppose change and generate strife should they be forced to be someone they are not. Rather, inclusiveness depends on fostering variety.

Hunter also skillfully highlighted the difficulties in rural regions. It can be more challenging to include or teach queer-themed topics in rural areas as opposed to semi-rural or urban ones. Hunter seemed to imply that rural communities are typically smaller and less diverse. Although this might be true, Sharp and Lee (2017) observe that diversity levels are steadily rising in rural areas, but this may be the case when compared to urban areas. Hunter, therefore, thought that if a language lecturer wanted to include queer-themed topics in their lessons, it was advised that they modify their strategy to suit the needs of their students. This modification is in line with Mezirow's "perspective transformation", which is a change in perspective that affects not just the language lecturer, but also the students, parents, guardians, and the community at large.

Like Quinn, Hunter addressed the appropriateness of queer-themed topics, emphasising that knowing the context would help language lecturers to choose relevant resources for their classrooms – Taylor (1997) emphasises that students' contexts must be acknowledged in the learning process. Hunter also mentioned the importance of language in developing speaking, writing, reading, and listening abilities. To accomplish this development, a variety of themes may be used to meet the goals related to language education. To accomplish educational goals successfully, it is advised that language lecturers consider the wider implications (such as preparing students for the reality and its future challenges) regarding language education and the complementary materials accessible.

Introducing Queer Identities Suitably and Respectably

The second question was: *How can queer identities be introduced respectfully to students with limited knowledge of the topic?*

> Charlie answered that "this [a literature or context approach] is an approach across disciplines. In Life Skills, learners and students are learning about these identities. If they still do not know anything, I think that it is important to do it from the literature that you are working with. Talking about these identities without the text's context will seem like a lesson, but discussing it from the particular characters opens the door to exploring it with the students. Talk about what 'Jim' is feeling. However, I do not think that we should give a sex lesson within the language classroom. I would approach the issue from the characters in the text just like I would do with all social issues".
>
> Tatum answered as follows: "I think providing them with objective definitions of queer identities is the best start, as media and other resources provide subjective views, which may not be the best approach for such controversial topics".
>
> Jackey stated, "I think one can approach this [queer-themed content] through open dialogue. There may also be suitable and age-appropriate videos, films, or texts to share with the learners".
>
> Quinn suggested that "one can use colours to orientate learners about the reasons which were used for gender association".
>
> Hunter stated: "Start by letting them tell you what they already know from their homes and families".
>
> Dakota stated that "this [the teaching and learning of queer identities] should happen at home and not at school".
>
> René corresponded that "this is a personal matter that must be taught by parents in a personal setting at home".

Charlie noted that students who lack or ignore knowledge of particular topics are present in many fields of education, not only language studies. Nevertheless, language lecturers can use literature and its literary elements to teach queer-themed topics to

students who do not know enough about them. Charlie also highlighted that when a subject was related to a literary work and its characters, students may get more interested in it. Classrooms can encourage active participation through conversations rather than a teacher-centred approach. Charlie's suggestion of implementing open dialogue links to Fleming's (2018) communicative action (i.e., open democratic dialogue), resulting in transformative learning. Charlie further emphasised that teaching students about sex itself should not take place in a language classroom. Sexual issues are directly addressed in subjects like Life Sciences and Life Orientation. For example, a needs assessment called comprehensive sexuality education is conducted in Life Orientation to help students clear up any misunderstandings they may have about sex, sexual orientation, and gender identities (Department of Basic Education, 2021); another example is creating intergroup dialogue meetings to provide safe spaces to engage with queer-related topics (Brown, 2020). Structured lesson plans are also provided to service teachers to assist them in navigating this sensitive topic. Lees (2017) and Nzimande (2017) additionally provide educators with responsibilities when teaching sexual diversity in the classroom.

Tatum distinguished between objectivity and subjectivity, arguing that impartiality and fairness should be prioritised over potentially biased or prejudiced viewpoints when discussing contentious issues. Combining dictionary meanings with queer identities developed through scholarly study to provide definitions that are understandable for students is one method of reaching the recommended objectivity Accordingly, Tatum has used her PCK as a resource to improve instruction in teacher education programmes (Berry et al., 2008). Importantly, Tatum additionally alerted educators about subjective materials and media – incorrect, vague, or discriminatory information could be shared and absorbed, which could challenge or hinder a transformative mindset.

Hunter emphasised how crucial it was to comprehend students' prior knowledge. To determine the students' current understanding of queer identities and to create a strategy for the future, the language lecturer can give a baseline assessment (such as multiple-choice or short-answer questions). Language lecturers can, therefore, determine – by evaluating prior knowledge – whether students have received queer identity instruction at home, whether there is a knowledge gap, and, if pertinent, whether their viewpoints are objective or subjective. Educators can utilise Backward Design to Lesson Planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Uys et al., 2021, which follows a constructivist approach, addressing the importance of students' prior knowledge.

Jackey discussed the importance of open conversations involving educators and students (i.e., Fleming's (2018) communicative action). In addition to these discussions, sample lessons can serve as models for educators when creating their queer-themed lessons (see Uys, 2023). Like Tatum, Jackey highlighted the use of multimedia as a resource. However, caution was advised when it came to videos, films, and texts that could be found online. If someone searches for content incorrectly, they might unintentionally land on a pornographic site or sources that contain explicit content, which could expose students to inappropriate material that is also illegal for individuals under 18 years old.

Quinn favoured a creative approach to presenting queer identities to students. Quinn proposed using colours to educate about different queer identities – many

individuals confuse sex with gender and sexual orientations with gender identities, or vice versa, believing these terms can be used synonymously. Additionally, concerning the definitions of queer identities, colour will aid students, particularly the spatial-visual intelligence (Gardner, 2011), in distinguishing among these identities. Thus, Quinn's PCK could also aid her in creating her own resource to improve inclusive instruction in teacher education programmes (Berry et al., 2008).

Dakota and René concurred that queer education should not be part of school curricula but should instead be imparted by parents and guardians at home. One cannot help but question whether this information will be communicated correctly in an open and unbiased manner and in a way that disparages any divergence from heteronormativity (if shared at all). Moreover, while an educator's role is to educate, parents also have a teaching role (e.g., informal daily activities such as dental hygiene and instilling respect), but their lessons differ from an educator's content-specific trained teachings (like English, Mathematics, and Life Orientation). Additionally, it is the right of every parent or guardian to express their perspectives – whether positive or negative – on varying queer identities. However, to stop violence against those who are viewed as different, parents or guardians have an obligation to society to instil in their children a sense of tolerance, acceptance, or celebration from a young age. It is advised that people's identities accommodate queer individuals and resist structural dictates (Msibi, 2018).

As a result, prescribed literature (e.g., videos, films, texts), open dialogue, self-directed scholarly study, scaffolding and assessments, to name a few, are illustrated as inclusive practices by the participants.

Including Queer Identities in the Language Classroom with Obstacles in Mind

The third question was: *How can queer-related topics be meaningfully integrated into the curriculum when an educator is unable or prohibited from explicitly introducing queer-themed lessons in the classroom?*

> Charlie thought that "we should really trot lightly. One can use newspaper articles for activities, but forcing a curriculum will not, in my opinion, always have the effect we want it to have".
>
> Tatum thought that "prescribed literature may incorporate some of these topics, even though they may not be dealt with explicitly. Additionally, additional reading or exposure can be provided to learners who wish to explore such topics".
>
> Hunter said: "I do not think teachers teach only what they like. Be a creative teacher in any situation you find yourself in. History is taught even though some people do not like some topics".
>
> Quinn said: "I really have no idea".
>
> Jackey said, "I am not sure, especially in a language classroom".
>
> René, contrastingly, said, "I do not think it should be included".
>
> Dakota agreed that "[i]t should not be included".

Instead of evaluating students on queer-themed topics directly, Charlie might be approaching the problem indirectly (that is, through the lens of the hidden curriculum – Rossouw, 2024). For example, there might be an authentic newspaper article about violence or discrimination against queer individuals, or even about a pride event. A literary text with an explicit queer-themed topic may elicit strong reactions from parents, guardians, or society at large, but an article or two with queer-themed topics may elicit other responses. Charlie argued against imposing a particular curriculum because there was the possibility that the outcomes would not meet one's expectations. Regarding the current study, queer-themed topics ought to be seen as an enrichment of the current curriculum rather than as a compulsory inclusion. However, a language lecturer should handle queer-themed issues carefully if there is any resistance.

Tatum advocated for the indirect teaching of queer-themed content – Geer and Brown (2023) affirm that direct instruction-based methodologies can be limiting to student interaction and, therefore, propose an indirect approach. These topics are not confronted directly but approached from a subtle perspective. Tatum also recommended that students interested in delving into queer-themed content should be given supplementary reading materials to facilitate their exploration. This suggestion indicates a choice available to those who want to teach or learn more about queer identities. However, it should be noted that there is some uncertainty from Tatum's side, as they do not want to teach the content explicitly[8].

Hunter addressed language educators. Given the breadth of the curriculum, it is logical to assume that not all topics will be approached with the same zeal; educators' comfort levels with queer-themed matters are crucial. For example, because of South Africa's history of apartheid, white South African language lecturers and students may feel uncomfortable when racism is discussed in the language classroom; similarly, men may feel uncomfortable when feminism-related themes arise. These topics are still covered in the teaching and learning process, though. Thus, language lecturers and students may not be enthusiastic about studying queer-themed topics, but these issues remain pertinent to modern society and need to be addressed to solve the persistent problem of queerphobia. Supporting Graff's (1992) suggestion that "the conflicts" be taught, Kissack (2001) argues that if there is a commitment to social justice that aims to stop discriminatory acts in the future, then texts that convey pessimistic, sexist, or racist viewpoints should not be disregarded.

Quinn's reply could be viewed from various angles. It could be seen as a hesitation to propose an idea, an indication that the concept is too strange to contemplate, or a lack of the requisite PCK to think about incorporating queer-themed content. Jackey, like Quinn, was also uncertain about how queer-themed content could be incorporated into the language classroom. One might wonder whether they mean that queer-themed content should rather be addressed in alternative subjects (e.g., Life Sciences or Life Orientation), or if they have simply not considered the possibility of including such content. The role of Language for Education educators in language classrooms often entails promoting the expression

[8]Though not discussed in this study, Tatum had a tolerable view towards queer identities, as the most prominent obstacle was their Christian beliefs and values.

of diverse perspectives, challenging widely accepted views, and encouraging strong personal reactions. Tanga et al. (2019) agree that all involved parties have the obligation to teach and learn about South African diversity; Francis (2017) additionally mentions that the promotion or enforcement of compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexuality should be further avoided. This was why Jackey's statement seems limited, as the language classroom can provide multiple opportunities for different topics and themes to be explored and discussed.

It is alarming, though, that Quinn and Jackey were unsure about queer-themed content, not being able to offer any recommendations for its inclusion in the language classroom – this can be considered a sign of inexperience and a failure to imagine the possible integration of queer-themed content. This insecurity could also be the result of insufficient professional development in undergraduate inclusive pedagogy. Thus, Brown (2020) expresses that educators need skills (i.e., PCK) to facilitate a learning environment and to negotiate a mutual influence.

Rene and Dakota differed slightly from each other. Although both participants had negative opinions, Dakota seemed to be more determined to reject the inclusion of queer-themed content, while René was hesitant and implied doubt. Nevertheless, neither participant made recommendations on how to include queer-themed content in environments that do not accept them. Unfortunately, René and Dakota were against queer-themed content being taught in educational institutions – this rejection could be an indication that they believe their viewpoints are unquestionable and correct.

Findings and Discussion

There were three categories in the analysis section: (1) *Acknowledging the Importance of Context*, (2) *Introducing Queer Identities Suitably and Respectably*, and (3) *Including Queer Identities in the Language Classroom with Obstacles in Mind*. The findings collectively highlight the crucial role of contextual awareness, pedagogical sensitivity, and educator preparedness in fostering inclusive language education that addresses queer identities.

The theme *Acknowledging the Importance of Context* illustrates that an educator must be aware of their context to determine the requisite PCK accurately to fulfil the lesson's aims and objectives. Additionally, this awareness is essential for real-world applications beyond the classroom to support or enhance social justice. The acknowledgement that teaching and learning ought to be "meaningful", "relevant", and "applicable" is prominent in the participants' responses. Additionally, the participants mentioned that understanding one's context will improve one's capacity to accommodate the various intelligences of all learners or students, thereby mitigating constraints and crafting existing knowledge among educators and students, promoting a deeper understanding of a language and its associated skills.

In *Introducing Queer Identities Suitably and Respectably*, outside some participants who hold the view that discussions about queer identities should begin at home, the other participants suggested utilising queer-identity definitions, multimedia resources

and forms of literature, existing knowledge, open conversations, and gender-related contexts that suitably tackle the subject matter for its introduction.

In *Including Queer Identities in the Language Classroom with Obstacles in Mind*, it does not go unnoticed that only three Language for Education lecturers were able to provide suggestions for including queer-themed content in the language classroom. As previously mentioned, lecturers teach pre-service students in tertiary education who eventually become in-service teachers who teach learners in secondary education. Consequently, when the lecturers themselves have limited or no experience, pre-service students will not be educated on queer identities, which influences learners being educated on queer-themed content. Many programmes seek to increase knowledge of queer identities and queer concerns (e.g., sexuality and gender-focused programmes that provide advisory services, professional training, and a supportive environment within communities confronting discrimination, stereotypes, and queerphobia). Even though these initiatives are admirable and could successfully raise awareness of the difficulties encountered by students with alternative queer identities, learning about queer characters in the language classroom, who experience rejection and marginalisation in texts, offers a more relatable and intimate viewpoint on these topics than conventional teaching techniques in alternative subjects. Accordingly, language lecturers and service teachers need training regarding queer identities to have the necessary PCK for the language classroom; otherwise, queer-themed content could remain absent, neglected, or avoided.

The analysis of the responses revealed three major points of connection: (1) contextual responsiveness as a foundation for inclusive PCK, (2) transformative learning through literature and dialogue, and (3) the reality of resistance and missed transformative opportunities.

Contextual Responsiveness as a Foundation for Inclusive PCK

Mezirow's (2003) emphasis on self-awareness and meaning-making is reflected in how lecturers (Charie, Jordan, Quinn, and Hunter) stress the importance of understanding the teaching context (including learners' backgrounds, readiness, and sensitivities) before introducing queer themes. This affirms Mezirow's claim that transformation begins when educators reflect on their frames of reference, an act many participants perform by acknowledging religious, cultural, and rural constraints that shape teaching decisions. This claim corresponds with the assertion that inclusive pedagogy cannot be implemented meaningfully without adapting to contextual realities.

Transformative Learning Through Literature and Dialogue

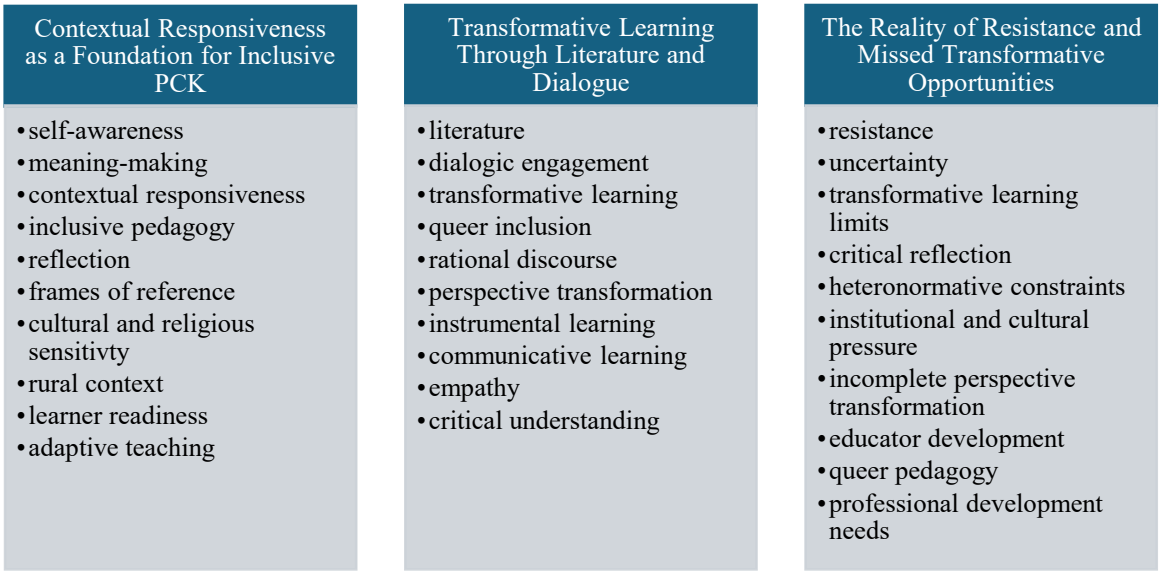
The literature review posits literature and dialogic engagement as gateways to transformative learning. Charlie and Jackey mirror this by advocating for the use of literary texts and open conversations as indirect yet effective means to introduce queer identities. Tatum adds by proposing objective, knowledge-based approaches to counteract biased or misinformed views, aligning with Mezirow's (2003) idea of rational discourse and perspective transformation. These lecturers exemplify instrumental and communicative learning as they seek to equip learners with both conceptual knowledge and empathic understanding.

The Reality of Resistance and Missed Transformative Opportunities

Where the literature review envisions the educator as a critical facilitator of social change, some lecturers (René, Dakota, Quinn, and Jackey) reveal that they do not yet demonstrate full engagement with the transformative processes. Their responses show either explicit resistance or uncertainty in integrating queer-themed topics, especially under institutional or cultural pressure. These moments illustrate the limits of transformative learning in practice when educators themselves have not undergone sufficient reflection or development to teach beyond dominant heteronormative ideologies. Mezirow (2003) warns that without critical reflection, habits of mind remain unchanged. Here, resistance or silence suggests a failure to engage with such reflection, highlighting the urgent need for lecturer professional development on queer pedagogies.

The three major points of connection are summarised in Figure 1:

Figure 1. *Summarised Major Points of Connection*



It is possible to directly connect the lecturers' differing levels of contextual responsiveness, participation in transformational discourse, and resistance manifestations to Mezirow's (2003) key dimensions of transformative learning. Lecturers' awareness of confusing quandaries when they cope with conflicts between inclusive pedagogical principles and contextual limitations (e.g., religious, cultural, or rural sensitivities) is reflected in contextual responsiveness. Reflection on ingrained presumptions and frames of reference is prompted by this realisation. The process of logical discourse through which lecturers and students analyse and negotiate meaning is embodied by transformative conversation, which is supported by literary texts and open classroom discussions. These transformative discussions promote deeper reflection and possible understanding shifts. Alternatively, resistance identifies times when discomfort or institutional pressure preclude critical thinking, causing the transformative process to

pause before real perspective change takes place. When considered as a whole, these dimensions show how transformative learning proceeds unevenly: resistance indicates the limits of transformation, dialogue facilitates reflection, and contextual awareness causes dissonance. Accordingly, the necessity of ongoing reflective and dialogic practices is emphasised to support inclusive pedagogical change.

The discussion confirms that while some lecturers embody the potential for transformation, others remain constrained by personal beliefs, inadequate training, or institutional silence. Therefore, it is necessary to construct inclusive, justice-orientated language classrooms through intentional, theory-informed professional development to equip educators with the tools, confidence, and critical awareness to engage with queer identities meaningfully.

Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations that stem from this study were the small number of Language for Education lecturers who participated in this study and the limited answers that were provided at times – thus, I acknowledge that the use of questionnaires (without interviews) limited interpretive depth. Thus, a future recommendation would be to triangulate data by having face-to-face discussions, group discussions, or interviews to ask for elaborations and the provision of more opportunities for tertiary educators to voice their opinions about teaching and learning queer-themed content.

Conclusion

The introduction and theoretical framework of this study established the necessity of addressing queer inclusion in tertiary language education by foregrounding a research gap: the lack of focus on lecturers' perspectives regarding PCK for queer-themed education. It positions language lecturers as key agents in shaping future in-service teachers' readiness to engage with queer identities in South African schools. Drawing on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the study proposes that lecturers who engage critically with their assumptions and pedagogical strategies can promote broader social justice and inclusivity. The analysis of responses operationalised this conceptual foundation by demonstrating how lecturers' reflections align with, or resist, transformative learning and contextually responsive PCK.

The participants' insights established a lens for introducing queer identities suitably and respectably to students, outlining what could be covered, the reasons for addressing it, and the methods of exploration. As a result, the perspectives from the university language lecturers contained insightful suggestions about context-aware teaching strategies that support the inclusive and respectful integration of queer themes in language classrooms, policy, and practice – thus, there is a need for updating courses for teachers of all levels. Though not always positive, this study still gave a voice to tertiary language lecturers about including queer curricula and transforming the language classroom.

It is crucial to recognise that, despite this paper's setting in South African tertiary language education, the concepts it emphasises (i.e., contextual responsiveness, transformative engagement, and careful consideration of learners' preparedness) have wider applicability when considering the ethical and cultural transferability of these findings. Ethically, the focus on considerate, knowledgeable, and tactful methods of teacher queer-themed curricula highlights universal concerns about equity, inclusivity, and preventing harm when introducing potentially sensitive material. Culturally, what is seen as appropriate or successful in one environment might need to be adapted in another to take into consideration local conventions, societal attitudes, and institutional limits. A useful model for educators worldwide, who seek to incorporate queer-inclusive content while navigating various cultural and ethical landscapes, this paper, nevertheless, provides transferable insights into how lecturers' reflective practices and pedagogical strategies can foster inclusive learning environments.

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