

## Article

# But We Do Not Know Anything, We Were Born in This Predicament: Experiences of Learners Facing Xenophobia in South Africa

Bekithemba Dube <sup>1,\*</sup> and Wendy Setlalentoa <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Centre for Diversity in Higher Education, Central University of Technology, Welkom 9460, South Africa<sup>2</sup> Office of the Dean, Central University of Technology, Welkom 9460, South Africa; wsetlale@cut.ac.za

\* Correspondence: bdube@cut.ac.za

**Abstract:** In this article, we discuss the experiences of learners who face xenophobia in South Africa. While extensive research has been conducted on xenophobia, few studies have specifically examined its impact on school-going children, whose presence at school is not by design in South Africa. We explore their lived experiences within the curriculum, thus exposing various trajectories that hinder effective teaching and learning. To theorise our findings, we tap into Whitehouse and Lanman's notion of social cohesion. For data collection, we used a participatory action research approach. Through a series of interviews and group discussions, we engaged with a diverse group of 13 participants, which consisted of 10 migrant learners and 3 teachers. The study found that xenophobia is a significant social pathology in South Africa which found its way into the classroom walls, thereby affecting the performance of migrant learners. It affects the victim's identity and has profound consequences for the perpetrators. Ultimately, the effects of xenophobia contribute to a cycle of school violence. We assert the imperative of addressing the distressing impact of xenophobia on children within classrooms. Based on our findings, we argue that initial teacher education programmes are key in fostering a non-violent society through promoting cohesion and cultural responsiveness.



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## 1. Introduction

Xenophobia is one of the common historical social ills that are derailing social cohesion in South Africa. It comprises of "...attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude, and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity" [1] (p. 5). Physical and systematic xenophobia contribute to migrants' appalling experiences in South Africa. It often is exacerbated by politicians' discourses, which use xenophobia as an escape mechanism from addressing several challenges that are faced by South Africa, such as unemployment and high crime rates. This argument is supported by Neocosmos ([2] p. 1320) who asserts that "...xenophobia is never in the interest of the vast majority but only in those of a tiny minority whose forms of politics and state rule require the dimension of the working people".

Many studies have understood xenophobia to mainly affect migrants in various ways. However, this article focuses on school-going learners who experience xenophobia within their classrooms. While classrooms are typically associated with teaching and learning, immigrant children often encounter violence and exclusion, which affect their academic performance. As we begin this article, we acknowledge the considerable research that has condemned and advance a discourse to eliminate xenophobia, fostering + harmonious coexistence among diverse communities. Despite various efforts, xenophobia in schools remains persistent and it manifests itself as a form of school violence.

While we are cognisant of the persistent challenges that are associated with xenophobia, our point of departure is that children who are exposed to any form of violence tend to exhibit various psychiatric problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety [3,4]. Given the inherent nature of humans that makes them bound to move from one place to another, it becomes imperative and critical that every society establish create safe havens for both immigrants and citizens. Moreover, it is crucial for educational institutions to take on the challenge of addressing xenophobia. This is based on the observation that national government leaders often do not prioritize fighting xenophobic policies and practices through effective legislation and enforcement. Instead, most of them operate against their purpose [5]. In the context of the lack of the political will to address xenophobia, we assert that initial teacher education (ITE) plays a critical role in educating teachers on social cohesion and creating culturally responsive schools.

Our study contributes to the existing body of literature on xenophobia, conducted locally and internationally. For instance, Meda conducted a study using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory among unaccompanied children in South Africa [6]. The study found that there is a wide-spread trend of xenophobia-related abuse of refugee children living in designated refugee facilities in South Africa. Additionally, a study that was conducted by Gopal explored the experiences of learners who were exposed to publicised xenophobic violence [7]. Gopal found that there is a general tendency of some South African parents to avoid responsibility for their children's behaviours [7]. They shift the blame to migrants, thereby fuelling xenophobia.

Another study was conducted by Young and Jearey-Graham in the Eastern Cape in South [8]. Their study demonstrated how psychoanalysis may be employed to interrogate xenophobia using a contemporary attachment theory framework. The study offered a psychosocial understanding of how and why prejudice escalates. While we acknowledge the contribution by these studies in the realm of the curriculum and safe schools, our paper uniquely contributes to this literature. We advocate for the redesign of initial teacher education (ITE) modules at the undergraduate level to incorporate cohesion and cultural responsiveness in schools. This would allow trained teachers to manage xenophobia in schools among other life-threatening incidents within schools. The paper is also unique because it discusses and links xenophobia with rampant school violence discussions in South Africa. We argue that promoting xenophobia against migrants has a direct social impact on citizens. When individuals internalise violence against migrants, they develop the potential to inflict harm on any member of society based on factors such as tribe and race. Therefore, research on school violence is minimalistic when it ignores xenophobia. In addition, there is a need to make learners and teachers understand the global dynamics of the 21st century, where there is the mass migration of people. Moreover, South African individuals are not exempted from migrating; for example, some are taking up teaching jobs in China and South Korea. Hence, understanding the dynamics and experiences faced by migrants in South Africa equips learners and teachers to reconsider how they treat individuals perceived as different based on factors such as nationality, colour, and language. In the following section, we discuss the theoretical framework of this article.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Theory of Human Social Cohesion

The persistent xenophobia and racism concerning children in schools motivated us to reconsider the concepts of social cohesion and culturally responsive schools. Our aim is to foster the co-existence of people from diverse societal ties. We are cognisant that there are many other theories which could couch the study, and we firm believe that for this article the social cohesion theory of Whitehouse and Lanman is relevant [9], as will be discussed. The theory of "social cohesion" is one that "...suggests that people can become attached to each other so as to think and act as a group" ([9] p. 675). The theory is rooted in the works of Emily Durkheim on structural functionalism and human social cohesion, which are based on two divergent modes of ritual practice and their associated psychological and sociopolitical effects [9].

Mechanical and organic solidarity provide the psychological glue that binds together the members of a society as the conscience collect if, which is reproduced and strengthened through the performance of collective rituals [10]. Whitehouse and Lanman assert that this psychological and sociological glue includes ritual practices that represent “attractor positions” [9], which are underpinned through the cultural evolution of religion and human sociality. In this context, religious and cultural activities play a vital role in fostering social cohesion and should be encouraged to stabilise the community towards a collective that lives together. This psychological and sociological glue fosters tolerance and the ability to accommodate difference among individuals, which enable them to live together while being cognisant of diverse views and cultural orientations.

The theory of social cohesion “. . .implies proximity, coordination, and stability of relationships between members of a group, which serve some benefit to the group as a whole” ([11] p. 1). However, we acknowledge that achieving social cohesion is not easy even if it is desirable. It involves various technicalities which may result in pain, friction, and eventually acceptance. In fact, when individuals undergo painful or frightening experiences, they often remember them as life-shaping episodes [12], which are referred to as “self-defining memories” [13] and can contribute to the creation of a sustained cooperative society. Pettigrew and Tropp suggest that sustained cooperative contact with unfamiliar or dissimilar others tends to reduce the prevalence and intensity of out-group discrimination and prejudicial attitudes [14].

The theory of social cohesion is relevant to this study because it advocates for building social cohesion as a key solution to the problems that are faced by humanity, thus promoting the betterment of the society [15]. Consequently, we argue that ITE is crucial in addressing xenophobia wherever it exists. This can be achieved by remodelling the curriculum to emphasise the importance of living together regardless of the different labels that may separate humanity. Therefore, considering xenophobic attacks, we believe that teachers have a role in mitigating the challenge through the promotion of social cohesion within the curriculum. This should be a deliberate effort to “. . .foster social cohesion by facilitating an increased understanding of others’ interests and motivations, by reducing uncertainty and anxiety, and by increasing individuals’ motivation to take the perspective of the other” ([16] p. 237).

### 3. Methodology

This article is grounded in the transformative paradigm, which employed participatory action research among learners who were displaced by default as their parents sought greener pastures amidst xenophobic conditions. We employed the transformative paradigm with the aim of transforming social connections within the school in order to enhance cohesion. Moreover, the transformative paradigm deals “. . .with unequal distributions of power and the resultant oppression of subjugated groups, a pre-set goal of the research is to empower participants to transform the status quo and emancipate themselves from ongoing oppression” ([17] p. 131).

In addition, as stipulated by Mertens ([18] p. 216): “. . .TP holds that reality is socially constructed, but it does so with a conscious awareness that certain individuals occupy a position of greater power and that individuals with other characteristics may be associated with a higher likelihood of exclusion from decisions about the definition of the research focus, questions, and other methodological aspects of the inquiry”.

We have situated this article within the transformative paradigm because it “. . .encourages practitioners of pedagogies to critically analyse the existing social conditions within and beyond classrooms and critique the dominant arrangements of power and the creation of platforms to enable the participation of marginalised students” ([19] p. 113). As we study learners who are facing xenophobia, we perceive the transformative paradigm as an opportunity “. . .to develop collaborative processes that prioritize the voices and actions of those marginalized from power and resources in educational, advocacy, and

organizing activities that contribute to knowledge construction and material social change and/or transformation” [20] (p. 24).

In implementing the transformative paradigm, we employed participatory action research (PAR). We conducted group discussions with 10 learners (6 male and 4 females) and three teachers (two females and one male) from different countries. All the participants were experiencing xenophobia and displacement. The learners were aged 12–16 years, and they were all currently studying in South African high schools. The learners had been in South Africa for a period of more than 5 years. They lived with their parents or guardians who were working in low-paying jobs such as those on farms, shops, or as domestic workers.

It was crucial to interview learners in a group discussion to create a comfortable environment, which enabled them to relate their lived experiences and explore alternatives for safety. We hope these experiences can contribute to curriculum changes, particularly in enhancing cohesion within initial teacher education programmes. Cognisant of this, we agree that PAR, as argued by Crane and O'Regan [21] (p. 15), makes “...latent contributions, participate in communication, explain, reframe, seek common ground and language, which facilitates and encourages collaborative dialogue in research”. Employing PAR for data collection, we discussed the topic with learners and teachers. We met five times, with each session being an hour, to understand their experiences as victims of xenophobia and displacement. Two guiding questions underpinned this article as follows: (1) what are the experiences of learners facing xenophobia and how can ITE be configured to enhance cohesion in South African schools? (2) The research took place in high-density suburbs in the Free State, and we adhered to ethical considerations. During and after data collection, we used pseudonyms to ensure the protection of learners' identities. We also allowed for voluntary withdrawal from the research if they felt uncomfortable to continue.

### *Data Analysis*

For data analysis, we employed the model by Laws et al. [22], which involved the following seven steps:

- Step 1: Reading and rereading all the collected data. The data from the interviews and focus group discussion were read and reread to obtain the essence of the experiences of learners in relation to xenophobia.
- Step 2: Drawing up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data. Major issues and themes were identified and arranged according to the research question of the study.
- Step 3: Rereading the data. By rereading the data, we checked if the themes we had identified corresponded with what the participants said and with the research questions.
- Step 4: Linking the themes to quotations and notes. The themes emerging from the data were linked to various scholarly views.
- Step 5: Perusing the categories of the themes to interpret them. During the interpretation of the data, we remained cognisant of the research question.
- Step 6: Designing a tool to help us to discern patterns in the data. Through this, we were able to determine patterns during data analysis.
- Step 7: Interpreting the data and deriving meaning. We identified the themes which then became the subheadings.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, we conducted member checking, which involved the presentation of gleaned themes to participants. This step aimed to verify if the identified themes resonated with the discussion held on the topic ([23] p. 1802). Member checking was crucial for guaranteeing that the data was not misrepresented, thereby aligning with the best practices in research. In the following section, we present the findings of the study.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The first section of the findings delves into the experiences of learners who had encountered xenophobia, while the second section explores how ITE can be reconfigured to promote social cohesion and create culturally responsive schools within the South African context.

##### 4.1. Experiences of Learners Facing Xenophobia in South African Schools

While xenophobia has been widely discussed at the national level, schools emerge as critical space where xenophobic sentiments can be cultivated. In this section, we explore various experiences that were shared by migrant learners. The first observation highlighted in the findings is that migrant learners are often treated as outcasts.

##### 4.2. Treated as Outcast within the Classroom

Although schools are expected to cultivate co-existence among learners from diverse backgrounds, xenophobia compromises this. In numerous instances, manifestations of xenophobia may not escalate to violence but may cause psychological damage to the victims and perpetrators. During the study, it became evident that one prevalent experience among migrant learners is that of feeling that they were being treated as outcasts. This is a common feature in many countries that host migrants. To illustrate this point, learner 1 noted the following:

*“...often, I am made to feel that I do not belong to South Africa. When my country is referred to during the lesson, I am laughed at and that always makes me feel useless and an outcast. It painful to be reminded every day that you do not belong here”.*

The persistent treatment of learners as outcasts has a profound impact, often compelling them to involuntary relocate to other countries. To shed more light on being treated as an outcast in South African schools, learner 2 highlighted the following:

*“...once your classmates know you are either from Zimbabwe or Nigeria, they treat you as an outcast. The interactions become very minimal unless they know you can help them with some subject content. Beside that you are treated with suspicion by some of the classmates”.*

This sentiment indicates that migrants are outcast and can only be respected if they can offer exceptional skills. These skills often serve as a gateway for migrants to be accepted by a society. Yet, when a migrant's positive contributions are unknown, there is a high likelihood of being treated as an outcast. In many instances, being treated as an outcast is always not too visible and is subtle, complicated, and silent, yet it causes psychological damage to learners. As such, it is crucial that pedagogical spaces create a conducive environment where learners can feel accommodated, recognising the involuntary nature of their migration status. This is in line with the observation by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (CESI) that classrooms should be “...an inclusive society ... characterised by striving for reduced inequality, a balance between individuals' rights and duties, and increased social cohesion” ([24] p. 10).

Apart from being outcasts, migrant learners highlighted that they were treated as suspects. Studies assert that such a mentality is acquired and cultivated through social media and some parents. Therefore, Young and Jearey-Graham ([8] p. 10) summarised perceptions about migrants with the statement that “They're [immigrant people] gonna come and corrupt our children”. Despite lacking scientific evidence, there is an erroneous perception that foreign nationals are inherently prone to engaging in corrupt practices, a stereotype that society has accepted. As such, the foregoing assumption penetrates the classroom walls, thereby making it difficult to combat xenophobia. Cognisant of this, we believe that there is still hope within schools to cultivate coexistence through the integration of social cohesion strategies.



### 4.3. Body Shaming

Xenophobia needs to be critically examined because it contributes to body shaming based on one's non-citizen status when left unaddressed. This study found that migrant children often experience body shaming. This includes comments about their skin colour or physical features, such as being too dark or having a big head. Learner 3 illustrated that "I was told am too black that usual and such I got a nickname crocodile skin which meant that there was something wrong with my skin colour although am black like the rest of the classmates".

Body shaming is one of the psychologically damaging approaches to those perceived as being out of the ordinary. The sentiment was also expressed by learner 4 who lamented that "...dark people at school are often associated with people coming outside South Africa. This affects learners coming from a province like Limpopo who are assumed are too dark for being South Africans. This for me is very painful and I feel less human and what make matters worse is that I did not choose to be in South Africa, I was brought here by my parents working in the farms. All I want is to learn and change my life but every time I do so, I am reminded that I am not from here and often my skin according to them sells me out". The sentiments of the learners above show that body shaming is a form of violence which negatively impacts migrant learners and non-migrants. For example, in 2021, one learner called Lufuno Mavhunga from Limpopo Province in South Africa committed suicide after experiencing body shaming and violence in school [25]. Even though Lufuno was a South African citizen, she was not exempted from body shaming, which led to the loss of a precious and bright life. Therefore, any society should refrain from normalising body shaming no matter who is victimised. This is because body shaming has the potential to foster a violent society that does not value human diversity. Through this study, we buttress the observation by Prats, Deusdad, and Cabre ([26] p. 108) that "...the degree of xenophobia [manifested as body shaming] itself reflects the classroom climate, and the racial tension liable to emerge from a negative and stigmatised representation of the other". To achieve this, ITE plays a critical role in shaping narratives that promote social cohesion.

### 4.4. Humiliating Name-Calling

This study found that another prevalent experience among migrant learners is that of the degrading practice of name-calling. Despite that there are extensive discussions on this the problem persists. Name-calling constitutes a form of bullying that can significantly contribute to an unstable school or society. To shed light on this, learner 5 lamented that derogatory names were used to refer to them. This makes migrant learners uncomfortable at school. She reported the following:

*"My friend told me that I have a nickname which they use to refer me. Its 'Mkeres moo' meaning an intruder is here. This pains me since I am just a child wanting to learn and move to any other country where I can be valued as a human being. To be honest here we are treated as if we are not human for the crime of being with our parents here". In addition, learner 6 commented on name-calling as follows: "I was referred as an alien. When I asked why she was calling me an aliens, she said that it was because it is a term used for foreign nationals in South Africa especially on X twitter platform. I remember what an alien is and that really broke me down and wonder sin did I make by being in this school and being born foreign". Considering the learners' experiences, we agree with the OECD's ([27] p. 6) argument that "The psychological wellbeing of immigrant students is affected not only by differences between their country of origin and country of destination, but also by how well the schools and local communities in their country of destination help them to overcome the myriad obstacles they face in succeeding at school and building a new life".*

Therefore, to deliberately overlook the challenges that are faced by migrant children solely because they are foreigners would be a minimalistic approach to addressing school instability, which has become a hallmark of most South African schools. Currently, in most schools, there has been an increase in xenophobic incidents, bullying, school violence, and social exclusion, thereby indicating that society runs the risk of intolerance and prejudice ([28] p. 90). Hence, there should be strategies on how learners embrace social cohesion as they learn different classroom contents. In conclusion of this theme, addressing name-calling may be difficult due to the influence of social media. While learners did not mention social media as one of the major causes of xenophobia, we observed that it has an influence on how learners negatively relate to migrants and other learners. Therefore, schools should proactively address name-calling and find strategies to help learners to responsibly use social media as a strategy to reduce name-calling and other social trajectories. Failure to address this issue can contribute to increased violence within schools and society as a whole.

#### 4.5. Hard Work as an Act of Desperations

In addition to name-calling, migrant learners expressed that their hard work was solely being interpreted in the context of their struggle and the desire for acceptance in a foreign land. To elaborate this, learner 7 noted that “I was told am trying to impress teachers with hard work and that is a sign of desperation and a way to improve my self-esteem. Funny enough some if one does not work hard, he reminded even by teachers that your country is not doing well because of such lazy characters. At the end of the day, my hard work is always interpreted as a desperation”. From learner 7’s quotation above, it emerged that migrant learners are often confused about what their approach to schooling should be. They face a dilemma because when they work hard, they are reminded that they should carry this out in their home country; however, if they do not work hard, they are also reminded that this is the reason that their home countries are not performing well. In any case, a prosperous nation is a result of people working hard. Hence, any efforts to discourage learners from working hard are self-defeating. The situation is worsened when teachers contribute to such narratives. As argued by Roy and Roxas, some teachers tend to view migrant students with adversity through a deficit perspective. In the following section, we discuss other experiences that were faced by migrant learners in this study [29].

#### 4.6. Exclusion from Funding and Educational Support

While acknowledging the global recession and the focus on catering to the needs of citizens, it is important to recognise that this should not be used as an excuse to violate the rights of displaced children or involuntary migrants. We argue that even if migrants are excluded, this should be carried out in a manner that does not compromise their ontology or identity. Moreover, considering that South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Bill of Rights for children, it is crucial to strive towards minimising exclusionary practices as much as possible. In the discussion, learner 8 reported the following:

*“...as a foreigner, I struggle financial and always when there is help available, I am excluded and told this help is only for local students. Sometimes I stay weeks away from school because of the lack of money to pay my fees”.*

Given this scenario, xenophobia is not explicit. Hence, Achiume ([30] p. 326) argues that there is structural xenophobic discrimination, which refers to the “...harm to refugees and other foreigners that results from the disparate effects of various measures on these groups even in the absence of explicit prejudice. Crucially, these effects are the product of interactions among these measures with each other and with the typical circumstances confronting these groups”. To address the challenges faced by migrant learners, it is crucial to scrutinise the systems that impede progress, such as structural xenophobia and discrimination. Structural xenophobia and discrimination affect migrant learners and society. Recognising that people constantly migrate is imperative for learners to understand the importance of treating others with respect, love, and care. In essence, this

study indicates the frequent exclusion of migrant learners from available opportunities. In the following section, we provide suggestions for fostering social cohesion in schools. Our bone of contention is that an ITE space can significantly contribute to changing the negative experiences of migrant children within schools. As discussed below, ITE is positioned to shape narratives that promote harmonious coexistence, thereby creating a safe society for all.

## 5. Reconfiguring the Initial Teacher Education towards the Elimination of Xenophobia in South Africa

In this section, we underscore the need for teachers to promote diversity in schools, which in turn feeds into society. We appreciate the measures that have been taken to address xenophobic attacks in South Africa. However, this article argues that efforts to address xenophobia cannot only be the responsibility of politicians' (who often push a political agenda when they engage in xenophobic discourses). Teachers play an important role in mitigating emotions, segregations, and prejudices, which can spiral into xenophobic attacks, particularly within schools. Hence, they should be prepared. This is further supported by Manzoni and Rolfe's ([31] p. 9) observation that teachers require a specific set of skills to support migrant pupils. Additionally, these skills are not necessarily easy to acquire through formal training.

### 5.1. Infusing of Social Inclusivity Modules in Teacher Training

Decentralised ITE in South Africa offers the opportunity for social cohesion. However, for this opportunity to be utilised, there should be a deliberate move towards recurriculisation, which infuses social cohesion for all learners. Over the years, South African schools have been unsafe sites for learners and teachers. Therefore, there is a need to find collective ways to enhance social cohesion. Hence, this paper argues that social cohesion should start with ITE, with a special emphasis on tolerance and the acceptance of diversity. The study's participants indicated that there is often an expectation from the community and school management that teachers should address challenges that affect social cohesion. However, this assumption overlooks that being a teacher does not necessarily grant an individual the capability to effectively contribute to social cohesion. Recognising this, it becomes imperative to suggest that ITE should incorporate more deliberate efforts to address issues such as xenophobia, and school violence, among various other social challenges.

Starting with ITE, we firmly believe that a new generation of teachers will emerge, who will be characterised by an approach to teaching and learning that actively fosters social cohesion. In presenting this argument, we do not intend to imply that current teachers are not making efforts towards social cohesion. The key point that we emphasise is that all teachers should undergo specific training to enhance social cohesion. The absence of such training has, in many cases, contributed to various trajectories within the school system, such as fatality, suicide, bullying, and xenophobia, as discussed in this article. To contextualise this point within the focus of the paper, we align ourselves with Naude's ([32] p. 113) view that "...educators [should emancipate learners to deal with] feelings of helplessness, confusion and guilt that accompany these learners". For this to be achieved, there should be an infusion of social cohesion modules in ITE. Therefore, our submission is that modules should be developed with an intention to mitigate "...intergroup anxiety, negative stereotyping, realistic threats and symbolic threats' with a deliberate aim to reduce stereotypes and negative attitude towards migrants and migrant learners" ([33] p. iii). One of the anticipated outcomes of these modules would be that of encouraging discussions among learners and teachers from diverse backgrounds. Questions provided for both learners and teachers to consider, as suggested by Hale, et.al. [5], aim to foster an environment conducive to living and learning together.



### 5.2. Provision of Specialised Psycho-Social Supports Strategies to Teacher Education

Previous studies also indicate that teacher education is crucial for recentring social cohesion in schools through equipping teachers with the psycho-social support for both the victims and perpetrators of social pathologies, such as xenophobia and school violence. This study's participants expressed a desire to support affected learners, but they are often confronted with a lack of the psycho-support skills needed to assist learners. Hence, there is a need for a reconsideration of ITE towards developing modules or pedagogical strategies that empower learners to address xenophobic attacks and effectively support affected learners. The primary aim for such an approach is to create schools which are culturally responsive. The preceding points are reinforced by Jones [34], who contends that educating and training teachers and administrators on how to enact culturally relevant and inclusive practices is a crucial step towards eliminating racism in schools. In addition, Prats et al. ([26] p. 108) argue that "...the greater the cultural diversity, the less the xenophobia". By arguing this, we envisage schools ensure that "learners are safe, not wounded, maimed, or even killed" ([9] p. 676). Hence, we conclude this point by affirming the observation by Ndlovu-Gatsheni ([35] p. 10) that "What Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalising and universalising coloniality [xenophobia] as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies".

## 6. Conclusions

This article discussed the experiences of migrant learners who face xenophobia in South African schools. Xenophobia has become a global discourse, which warrants research towards teasing peaceful coexistence narratives. Although there are various studies on xenophobia, this study's unique aspect lies in its argument that addressing xenophobia should begin with ITE, thereby advocating for the inclusion of modules that foster social cohesion. Failure to carry this out would mean that schools in South Africa would remain unsafe sites, so it is critical that thinking about social cohesion should take into account interpersonal interactions as a counter hegemony strategy against xenophobia, which does not only affect migrant learners but all learners. The study recommends that teacher education programmes go beyond subject content and incorporate modules which promote social cohesion cognisant of how different people living together harmoniously is a hallmark of any democratic and prosperous society. Furthermore, the study emphasises the need for ITE programmes to integrate psychosocial support concepts into their training. This addition aims to equip teachers with the skills to address and mitigate psychosocial damages resulting from xenophobia, racism, and other forms of school violence that are prevalent in most South African schools.

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