


The Namibian inclusive education policy's response to gender nonconforming learners

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The provision of education to children is a human right that most countries including Namibia are trying to achieve. Hence, through educational inclusion, educators strive for removal of barriers within education systems for all children to learn. The purpose of this study was to explore how the Namibian inclusive education (IE) policy responds to gender non-conforming learners. Drawing upon the Social Identity Perspective (SIP) and interviews with four education officers and employing a transformative case study, this study revealed that the Namibian IE policy does not clearly pronounce itself on inclusion of gender non-conforming learners. The study further discovered culture, religious beliefs, lack of training and lack of information on gender non-conformity as factors preventing teachers to interpret the IE policy statement in relation to gender non-conformity. The study recommends for the IE policy to have a clear statement and guidelines on handling of gender non-conformity issues in schools. The study further recommends for the programmes for in-service teacher training to integrate the content on sexuality and gender diversity. Moreover, through in-service teacher training, education officers should provide correct information on gender non-conformity to curb the discrimination towards gender non-conforming learners within the school communities.

Introduction

This paper reports on a section of a doctoral dissertation undertaken at the University of the Western Cape, which looked at how the Namibian inclusive education policy responds to gender non-conforming learners. Schools are required to respond to the needs of all learners so that they can learn, as education is the most important tool for human empowerment and social liberation. Thus, schools should embrace a form of education that provides

learning opportunities and is responsive to all learners' needs. To achieve this form of education, educational inclusion becomes a necessity within the education systems. Accordingly, the Namibian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) has established the IE policy to provide guidelines and strategies for the schools to respond to all learners (MoE, 2014). These strategies are addressing all issues that could prevent learners from learning such as disabilities, learning difficulties and discrimination on basis of gender diversity amongst others (MoEAC, 2016).

The Namibian IE policy guidelines and strategies are very crucial as they advocate for social justice within the Namibian education system. However, Haitembu (2014), in assessing the implementation of inclusive education in Namibian schools, flagged a gap between the educational inclusion aims and inclusion practices. Haitembu discovered lack of understanding of inclusion amongst others as a challenge in implementation of inclusion. Moreover, other authors (*i.e.*, Brown, 2016, 2017; Francis, Reygan, Brown et al., 2017) have discovered a need for focused attention on issues that can negatively affect learners' learning in Namibian schools such as lack of sexuality education. Similarly, Haitembu and Maarman (2022) discovered a need for fully inclusion of gender non-conforming learners in Namibian schools.

There is growing evidence of the challenges faced by gender non-conforming learners in schools (Brown, 2016, 2017; Francis et al., 2017; Haskins, 2014; Van Vollenhoven and Els, 2013). Research (see Brown, 2019; Evans and Chapman, 2014) shows that learners from minority groups such as gender non-conforming learners are harassed, bullied and do face discrimination on a daily basis in schools. Yet, it is not clear how the Namibian IE policy is responding to these learners in schools.

Brown (2016) wrote that heteronormativity seems to function as a default norm within the Namibian curriculum content. As Crenshaw (1989) maintains in the intersectionality theory, when the society embraces heteronormativity, oppression of people with different

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gender and sexual identity occurs. Consequently, the positioning of heteronormativity as a default norm in the Namibian curriculum seems to present a silence within the education settings on gender non-conformity issues. This silence could lead to educators not to respond to the government's call for no discrimination in education and realisation of social justice in education. Hence, against this background, we deemed it necessary to employ a Social Identity Perspective (SIP) within a transformative paradigm to explore how the Namibian IE policy as a guiding document for all educational practices is responding to gender non-conforming learners. Thus, this paper intended to answer the following research question: **In what ways does the Namibian IE policy respond to gender non-conforming learners in Namibian schools?**

The state of inclusive education in Namibia

The shift towards inclusion for all in most of African countries has presented different challenges regarding inclusion practices in schools (Mokalleng and Möwes, 2020; Mpu and Adu, 2021). For instance, the administration of the apartheid education system in Namibia during the colonial regime had presented challenges of inequality and exclusion (Amukugo, 1993; Mart, 2011; Mosweunyane, 2013). Hence, upon Namibian independence in 1990, the policies that existed had no clear policy statements and guidelines on how to practice inclusion in schools (Mangope and Mukhopadhyay, 2015; McKinney and Swartz, 2016). Similarly, Mpu and Adu (2021) cite policy ambiguity as a challenge in the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools.

Educators in different contexts understood inclusive education differently. For instance, Bii and Taylor (2013) indicate that the Kenyan government is making several efforts towards inclusion by focusing mostly on the enrolment of children with disabilities in schools. Similarly, inclusion education in Botswana focuses on children with visual impairment and other physical disabilities (Mangope and Mukhopadhyay, 2015; Molosiwa and Mpofo, 2017). Namibian educators are not an exception in misinterpretation of inclusive education as research (see Chitiyo and Dzenga, 2021; Haitembu, 2014; Mokalleng and Möwes, 2020) discovered that uncertainty of what inclusion is and negative attitudes among teachers led to teachers' inability to include all learners in schools.

The above-mentioned discussions bear implications on the implementation of inclusion practice in schools. Inclusion is not only about including learners with physical disabilities in regular classes. It goes beyond the physical needs of learners to emotional and psychological needs caused by several issues. In most African cultures including Namibia, homosexuality and diverse gender expressions are termed as taboo (Matthews, Clemons, and Avery, 2017). Consequently, in the educational context, there are several reports of exclusion of gender non-

confirming learners in Namibian schools. Research (see Brown, 2017; Brown, 2019) discovered that self-identified homosexual learners in Namibian schools do experience exclusion and homophobic violence from teachers, other learners and school management members. It follows that the large societal attitude towards gender non-conformity discussed above is absorbed into school environments leading to exclusion of some learners.

The provision of education to children in Namibia is a human right. Hence, through educational inclusion, educators strive for removal of barriers within education systems for all children to learn. Appropriately, the framing of the Namibian IE policy discourse is around non-discrimination, social justice, equality, access, equity and democratic participation in education as a right for all Namibian children. Hence, the evidence of discrimination towards gender non-conforming learners outlined above presents a different practical reality of educational inclusion far from the envisioned IE policy's aims. Therefore, it is imperative to explore how the Namibian IE policy is responding to gender non-conforming learners.

The Namibian inclusive education policy

The Namibian IE policy is a legal document that guides the educators on inclusion practices in Namibian schools. Several principles serve as the basis for this policy. Moreover, the policy states specific aims and strategies to attain full inclusion in response to several legal frameworks that Namibia has ratified.

Legal framework of the Namibian inclusive education policy

The constitution of the Republic of Namibia aims to honour and protect all Namibians' rights and dignity. Moreover, as a country Namibia is a signatory element to many notable international agreements and laws that uphold human rights. These are the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the rights of children, the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All and the Salamanca statement amongst others.

The constitution of the Republic of Namibia states that 'all persons shall be equal before law' and 'no persons may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status' (GRN, 1990, pp. 10–11). Hence, Namibia is bound to honour, protect and uphold all people's rights as stipulated in these laws. The Namibian constitution as well as international conventions mentioned above to which Namibia has aligned itself form the basis for the Namibian IE policy.

Aims and strategies of the Namibian inclusive education policy

Exclusion in education does not only have negative effects on learner academic performance. It also has

deeper psychological effects on learners such as depression, suicide, traumatic stress, low self-esteem and self-hate (Mostert, Gordon, and Kriegler, 2015). Inclusion could enable the education system to respond to all learners in terms of support needed either material or emotional to curb these effects of exclusion. Therefore, educators need to practice inclusion to improve learners' academic performance and well-being. In that regard, Namibia adopts the social model and rights discourse of inclusion to ensure a non-discriminatory education system, social justice, equality, access, equity and democratic participation in education for all. Hence, the Namibian IE policy aims for provision of support to all learners with special needs.

Haitembu (2014) argues that education is an important tool to develop individuals' perspectives on life and guides them to build positive opinions about their surrounding world. Hence, engaging in educational initiatives that lead to provision of education to all Namibian children could foster personal growth. Thus, these initiatives are to eliminate barriers to learning and aim for the education system to help children to complete their education for a better future. Appropriately, the Namibian IE policy states that inclusion should aim to end exclusion on basis of learners' socio-economic issues as well as on ethnicity, gender, race, culture, lifestyle or disability (MoE, 2014). The policy responds to the new understanding of the inclusion as a process for all educational institutions and educational systems aiming for good inclusive practices across the board (MoE, 2014).

The establishment of the IE policy proves that the MoEAC recognises that learners have different issues that can prevent them from learning and completing their basic education. Hence, one of the IE policy's strategies to achieve inclusion is to expand access to quality education through provision of support to all learners regardless of their individual abilities and needs (MoE, 2014, p. 15). Most importantly, the IE policy responds to the Namibian constitution and the Namibian Vision 2030 by ensuring respect for human dignity and tolerance within schools. Moreover, the policy ensures creation of a caring nation in which all Namibian citizens are able to realise their full potential in a safe and decent environment (GRN, 2004; MoE, 2014).

The principles of the Namibian inclusive education policy
The above-mentioned aims are to be realised through the employment of different principles based on the Namibian constitution and the Education for All ideology in the Namibian education system. Identification and addressing challenges within the Namibian education system is one of the important principles that guides the IE policy. Further, one of this guiding principle is to respond to diversity through creation of a positive climate in schools (MoE, 2014). This calls for educators to ensure a safe, conducive and enabling learning environment particularly

for learners who are experiencing exclusion in schools such as gender non-conforming learners. Educators are to create this enabling supporting environment in every school for all learners by removing barriers to learning (MoE, 2014). Thus, educators should be open-minded regarding social challenges that learners face such as discrimination against gender non-conforming learners in Namibian schools.

Inferring from the aims, strategies and principles of the Namibian IE policy discussed above, it is clear that the policy formulation aligns with national and international calls for the realisation of equity in education. However, despite this notable effort for social justice, research (e.g., Brown, 2016, 2017; Francis et al., 2017) shows that the Namibian education system is still characterised by some disparities in addressing the needs of all learners especially sexuality issues. Hence, there is a need to establish how the IE policy is responding to gender non-conforming learners given the plethora of evidence on challenges faced by these learners. In line with the above discussions, it follows that discrimination could occur once the educational policies are not clear on addressing issues of gender non-conformity. Consequently, discrimination could lead to exclusion of some learners and prevent them from getting appropriate educational services.

The Namibian inclusive education policy and the application of the social identity perspective

To better explore how the Namibian IE policy responds to gender non-conforming learners in Namibian schools, we employed the Social Identity Perspective (SIP). We draw upon Tajfel's social identity theory of 1979, Stryker's identity theory of 1977 and Spivak's concept of othering of 1985 to coin a social identity perspective. The assumptions of the SIP are that a social identity forms part of the individual's self-concept and self-esteem. Thus, a positive self-identity is crucial for the development of self-esteem and it helps people to understand themselves as they attempt to make sense of their social world (Tajfel, 1979; Stryker, 1977).

Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, a feminist postcolonial thinker first coined othering as a systematic theoretical concept in 1985. Spivak describes how the formation of the 'others' under unequal conditions takes place. She explains how by assigning inferiority status to the 'other' as the colonised gives the coloniser the 'Other' power over the 'other' (Spivak, 1985). The othering is an action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody's mind as 'not one of us' (Spivak, 1985). In relation to inclusive education, the process of othering is described by some authors (Elsrud, 2008; Tanyas, 2016) that it has uplifted and kept the cultural selves into a favourable position. Spivak (1985) states that othering leads to naming and grouping of people according to individual attributes, which could lead to discrimination of different groups of people. According to

Hall (1997), culture gives meaning to things by defining clear differences between them. Thus, differences in cultural expected norms such as gender non-conformity present difficulties for fully social acceptance to take place.

According to literature, Burke and Stets (2009), the assumptions of the identity theory and the social identity theory make the use of these theories side by side in a study important as they complement each other and bring out the important principles of each theory. Moreover, the focus of these theories and the othering process on the nature of self in relation to society makes the use of these theories and othering concept in one study suitable to explain how social categorisation could lead to social injustice for some groups of people.

There are several efforts by the MoEAC to address inclusion issues. These include the incorporation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into the Namibian school curriculum (MoEAC, 2016). The introduction of CSE in the Namibian curriculum calls for the IE policy to provide guidelines on the application of effective teaching methodologies to sexuality education and advocate for understanding of the gender identity and expressions (MoEAC, 2016). However, some stakeholders regard the teaching of topics such as diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions within the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme as taboo and unacceptable (Wangamati, 2020). Other researchers (*i.e.*, Chitiyo and Dzenga, 2021; Haitembu and Maarman, 2022; UNESCO, 2016) further found cultural and moral beliefs and lack of information to be a challenge in inclusion and the teaching of sexual education topics in schools.

In relation to the above efforts by the MoEAC, the SIP highlights the importance of the need to belong to a social group and the effects of such belongingness on the individuals' self-esteem (Dervin, 2012; Spivak, 1985; Stryker, 1977). We acknowledge Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model in relation to the assumptions of the SIP. Bronfenbrenner believes that relationships in social settings such as schools are important to learners as they form part of their social identities. Some authors (*e.g.*, Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer, 2016; Daniels, Struthers, Maleke et al., 2019) discovered that teachers and other learners label and mistreat learners they deem different from the norm in schools. In the context of this study, the SIP and IE policy both highlight the need to embrace and show positive regard to gender non-conforming learners.

We applied SIP to this study to demonstrate that recognition of difference could prevent discrimination in schools. Hence, the schools' level of accommodation and acceptance of differences among learners have an effect on learners' self-concept and self-esteem. Therefore, according learners unconditional positive regard will be instrumental in building their positive self-concept and self-

esteem for better learning. It is important for individuals to recognise differences between the self and other people in a positive manner. Hence, the application of the SIP in this study highlights how the IE policy can foster recognition and acceptance of diversity among learners in Namibian schools.

Methodology

Research paradigm and design

This study engaged a qualitative approach by using a descriptive case study design encased within a transformative paradigm to enable for an in-depth exploration of how the Namibian IE policy responds to gender non-conforming learners in schools (Creswell, 2016). Several theories involving the studies of issues of race, identities and social justice and gender issues inform the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2012).

Through a transformative paradigm, this study revealed the IE policy's response to gender non-conforming learners as per the education officers' constructed realities of gender, cultural and religious beliefs (Mertens, 2012; Taylor, Taylor, and Luitel, 2012). In response to the SIP' assumptions, this paradigm helped to obtain data that is useful to the school community members. Educators can use these data to transform the school communities as well as bring social justice and change through improvement of IE policy in terms of gender non-conforming learners (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Population and sampling of the education officers

The study employed a total population sampling procedure since the education officers who are believed to have rich information in virtue of their roles and experiences as counsellors and responsible for the formulation and evaluation of the IE policy in Namibia were only four (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Okeke and Van Wyk, 2015; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green et al., 2015). Hence, one Deputy Director of Special Programmes and Schools (SPS), one Deputy Director of Diagnostic, Assessment and Training Services (DATs), one Regional School Counsellor as well as one Inclusive Education officer at the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) formed the sample of this study.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through a semi-structured and exploratory interview schedule consisting of open-ended questions with the education officers. The interview gave the education officers a chance to provide in-depth views, thoughts and opinions on the IE policy's responses to gender non-conforming learners (Creswell, 2016; Gay and Mills, 2016). In consistency with Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), we obtained ethical clearance and approval of the methodologies from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the

University of the Western Cape. The nature of the topic required us to arrange access to psychological support for the education officers with the social workers from the Ministry of Health and Social Services as per advice of several authors (e.g., Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2016; Gay and Mills, 2016).

In accordance with the literature (e.g., Best and Kahn, 2014; Check and Schutt, 2012), the education officers were provided with the information sheet that explained the study and what was expected from them. They were also informed of the voluntarily participation and their confidential was assured (Creswell, 2016; Okeke and Van Wyk, 2015; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green et al., 2015).

The data were analysed (see Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) by transcribing and organising the data from the interviews. We further identifying patterns and grouped these patterns into categories and themes. We supported the discussions of the emerged themes with relevant verbatim quotations from the education officers and literature to present a descriptive discussion of the findings.

Findings

The Namibian inclusive education policy's response to gender non-conforming learners

In this section, we outline how the IE policy responds to gender non-conforming learners. The education officers indicated that the Namibian IE policy does not clearly refer to gender non-conforming learners as learners who need extra support but the policy appends gender non-conformity issues to gender clauses. The education officers further indicated that the IE policy is positively responding to gender non-conforming learners indirectly as the policy's aim is to address all learners' needs. They further indicated that even though the policy does not pronounce itself clearly on gender non-conformity, they hoped for the individual teachers to interpret the policy and frameworks around inclusivity and address gender non-conformity as such.

Education officer A for instance indicated:

The policy is not specific on gender nonconformity, but it is inclusive, it is assumed that inclusiveness includes that (sexual orientation) and we hope teachers will interpret the policy as such. Yes, the policy itself does not say anything about these issues, but with the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme, we are trying to address that.

Education officer B said:

Not real, I cannot say the policy talks to gender non-conformity issue but this policy is not only disability

based. It addresses all needs that our children face in schools.

Education officer C was of the same opinion as this verbatim demonstrates:

The policy is not disability based but it is aimed for all learners. It is not specific about sexual orientation, but it does so in general, the policy is based on the constitution and on human rights so indirectly it responds to them.

Education officer D said:

Gender nonconforming learners are not considered in educational policies, no legal framework to protect them and some schools do discriminate them. The IE policy is not specific on the issue of gender nonconformity; this issue is hidden within the gender reference in the policy. However, even though it is not in our laws during trainings with the teacher counsellors we do touch on this issue, the teacher counsellors need to accept all learners even though they (teacher counsellors) do not support the issue. You are a school counsellor and if a learner comes to you being bullied because of their sexual orientation or they are being mistreated at home because of this, you need to support them even though it is against your belief.

These findings confirm literature (Brown, 2017; Mostert, Gordon, and Kriegler, 2015; Oloka-Onyango, 2015; Van Vollenhoven and Els, 2013) by discovering several factors that are hindering the IE policy in terms of its responses to gender non-conforming learners. These are the lack of training for teachers on implementation of the IE policy, lack of information on sexual diversity issues, unavailability of the IE policy to teachers, lack of legal frameworks in support of gender diversity in the country as well as cultural and religious influences on community regarding gender diversity.

Education officer A for instance said:

Cultural norms and personal beliefs about sex is not making it easy for teachers to talk about homosexuality. Even the sexual reproductive health itself is an issue in schools. It is a challenge, for instance the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programme was met with opposing views from the community. We had talks with school principals, heads of departments and we even had to go talk to traditional leaders. You know, teachers need support from the top in order to address these issues and implement the policy. Without the support of all these people it will be difficult for teachers to talk about issues concerning sexuality especially homosexuality.

Education officer B said:

The constitution of Namibia does not pronounce itself on gender nonconformity thus the silence of the IE policy regard this topic. This is a challenge for us as there is no legal framework to support the policy on gender nonconformity. This is not a welcomed practice in Namibia and there are no legal frameworks that are responding to this challenge. Hence, the IE policy did not consider that as an issue. As long as this practice is not welcomed in the community and in absence of legal frameworks that address this issue then individual learners who are gender non-conforming are suffering as they have no legal ground.

Similarly, Education officer C said:

The issue is not specifically addressed, the policy is based on other legal frameworks and gender non-conformity is not catered for in those frameworks, thus the IE policy cannot really pronounce itself on that while the frameworks on which it is based are not explicitly referring to the issue. It becomes a challenge for us and for the teachers in the schools especially with culture which is against this.

In line with literature (Chitiyo and Dzenga, 2021; Haitembu, 2014; Mokaleng and Möwes, 2020), this study revealed that lack of understanding of what inclusion entails is hindering the IE policy's responsiveness to gender non-conforming learners.

Education officer A indicated:

Teachers do not real understand what inclusive means. They think it is just putting learners with disability in front of them. But we can say that things seem to be a little bit fine based on the minimal complains we are receiving from schools in regard to the inclusion practices. So, they are handling these learners with disabilities even though they are not trained in specific disabilities. As I said before gender non-conforming learners are also include in the policy, just not clearly mentioned.

In support of the above opinions, Education officer B said:

In Namibia, inclusive education is misunderstood, teachers look at it around disability rather than inclusive of all issues. The lack of understanding and lack of information about sexual diversity plus culture as well as lack of motivation to be open is making it difficult for the policy to respond to these learners. These learners are not specifically pointed out in the policy but they are included in the policy.

Education officer D has this to say:

Many areas such as how to address certain issues like sexuality still need to be addressed, we also need to distribute the policy to all teachers and visit schools to support and discover if the policy is talking to reality.

Education officer C was of this views:

Is the policy accessible to all for it to be implemented? It is difficult to implement a policy that you do not have. There is no money to distribute the policy to all schools. Yaa, some schools have it but some do not. We do support them to respond to all learners but now not all of them have the policy and they are not trained on how to implement this policy.

Discussions

The mandate of the Namibian IE policy is for educators to enable effective learning by removing all types of barriers to learning from educational settings. However, this study discovered that one of the most controversial problems facing inclusion in Namibian schools is lack of addressing gender diversity issues within the IE policy. The education officers who took part in this study indicated that the Namibian IE policy does not clearly outline social issues such as sexual orientation as possible barriers to learning. These findings concur with Brown (2016) and Francis et al. (2017) on the silence of the educational policies on marginalised identities.

The education officers indicated that even though the IE policy does not refer to gender identity and sexual orientation issues, the policy has appended these issues to gender references. A study by Mpu and Adu (2021) has discovered policy ambiguity to be a challenge in the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools. Similarly, the policy ambiguity discovered in this study contributes to the IE policy not to reflect a clear responsive stance on handling gender non-conformity issues in schools. This unclear stance presents a gap between the IE policy's aims and the practical reality of supporting learners especially gender non-conforming learners (MoE, 2014). Hence, inferring from these findings, the Namibian IE policy formulation failed to address issues of sexual diversity and promotes a silence surrounding diversity within the education system.

Several studies (e.g., Banks, 2017; Brown, Maseko, and Sedibe, 2020) maintain that an inclusive curriculum should consider gender and cultural identity as well as aim at eradicating stereotyping at all levels of the education system. Further, the SIP that frames this study, is premised on assumptions that othering occurs when a certain group of people is assumed to be different from the norm. Gender non-conformity is documented in literature (see Brown, Maseko, and Sedibe, 2020; Ewing, Brown,

Mkhize et al., 2020; Mpuka, 2017) regarded as an unAfrican and taboo practice in some countries including Namibia. Hence, the IE policy's silence on gender non-conformity issues could contribute to negative categorisation of gender non-conforming learners in schools. In line with Hoanglan (2021), we argue that this negative categorisation will hinder the educational efforts for fully inclusion and might contribute to the atmosphere of discrimination in schools. The SIP and literature highlight the negative psychological effects of negatively labelling others (e.g., Dervin, 2012; Mostert, Gordon, and Krieger, 2015; Spivak, 1985). Hence, this study reveals a possibility of some of the Namibian learners to experience psychological problems due to the IE policy's silence on addressing gender non-conformity issues.

In line with literature (i.e., Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021; Mogotsi, 2019; Rasmeni, 2020; UNESCO, 2014; Wangamati, 2020), this study discovered society's cultural and religious views to be a challenge in acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions. The transformative paradigm employed by this study also supports these findings by highlighting culture and religion as determinants of how people perceive legitimacy of versions of realities (Mertens, 2012; Taylor, Taylor, and Luitel, 2012).

In light of the above observations, the education officers' conclusions that teachers should make their own interpretations of the IE policy to include gender non-conformity raise a concern in terms of proper inclusion in Namibian schools. These conclusions bear implications on inclusion as Ewing, Brown, Mkhize et al. (2020) also discovered cultural and religious beliefs as determinants of the society's reaction towards gender non-conformity. Hence, if the teachers are to interpret the policy according to their own religious and cultural beliefs on gender non-conformity, they can either discriminate against or include gender non-conforming learners. Therefore, these findings present a need for a clear policy statement on how to handle issues regarding sexual diversity and gender expressions within the education system.

The findings of this study further concur with literature (i.e., Chitiyo and Dzenga, 2021; Haitembu, 2014; Joubert, Van Wyk, and Rothmann, 2011; Mokaleng and Möwes, 2020; UNESCO, 2016) that lack of training for teachers and lack of information are some of the factors that are preventing fully inclusion in schools. The success of any educational policy and programme depends on its implementation at schools by the teachers. Since the teachers are instrumental in the implementation of the educational policies, it is important to provide training and information regarding the implementation of the IE policy. In light of the gender non-conformity perceived as an unacceptable act by some Namibian community members (Ewing, Brown, Mkhize et al., 2020; Rasmeni, 2020), it is important to provide proper information and training

regarding sexual diversity to teachers. This will help them to recognise the effects that the school climate and social identification as well as the cultural norms and expectations on the behaviour of the learners, has on the learners as research (e.g., Chang, Jetten, Cruwys et al., 2016; Reynolds, Lee, Turner et al., 2017) demonstrated.

Conclusion

In light of the discoveries we made in this study, we draw several practical conclusions regarding the Namibian IE policy's response to gender non-conforming learners. Firstly, it is clear that the Namibian IE policy does not clearly refer to gender non-conformity issues. The indirect references to gender non-conformity by the policy is not adequate. Consequently, the policy formulation promote a silence on issues regarding gender non-conformity that is said to lead to invisibility of gender non-conforming learners in Namibian education system. Given the lack of legal frameworks and negative reactions of the community towards gender non-conformity in Namibia, the IE policy should have clear guidelines on handling of gender non-conformity in schools.

Secondly, lack of training and information as well as cultural and religious beliefs of the teachers at schools could hinder the response of the IE policy to gender non-conforming learners. Hence, the programmes for in-service teacher training should integrate the content on sexuality and gender diversity. Moreover, there is a need to provide correct information on gender non-conformity to curb the discrimination emanating from cultural and religious beliefs on the issues of gender nonconformity among the school communities.

Ethics statement

The study was granted ethical approval by the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape. Ethical clearance reference number: HS18/1/2.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

The procedures used in the research are original and all quoted materials, summarised or whatsoever, have been fully cited in the text and in the list of references.

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