Treatment of Gender-Nonconforming Learners in Namibian Schools[1]

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Abstract

This paper aimed at establishing the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools. The provision of education in Namibia is based on the principles of non-discrimination and equal access to quality education for all as stipulated in the Namibian constitution. Even though there is growing evidence on the mistreatment of gender-nonconforming learners in schools world wide, there is a paucity of literature on the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in the Namibian education context. This paper employed a case study design as a transformative research method informed by the social identity perspective. One hundred and eighty-two teachers were randomly sampled into the study, and one deputy Director of Special Programs and Schools, one deputy Director of Diagnostic, Assessment and Training Services, one regional school counsellor and one inclusive education officer at the National Institute for Educational Development were purposively sampled. The findings revealed that societal, religious, and cultural beliefs in schools were determinants of how gender-nonconforming learners were treated in some schools. A supplementary framework for the implementation of inclusive education policy (SFIIEP) was developed from the findings of this study. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture align the SFIIEP to the inclusive education policy implementation to enable open discussion of sex education topics during life skills lessons, creation of supportive learning environments, and establishment of anti-bullying policies with specific measures on curbing homophobic bullying as well as strengthening the psychological support to learners.

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[1] Ethical clearance number: HS18/1/2

Introduction and Background to the Problem of the Study

This paper reports on a section of a doctoral study undertaken within the department of educational studies, at University of the Western Cape (Haitembu, 2021), which explored the Namibian inclusive education (IE) policy's responses to gender-nonconforming learners. IE is a worldwide ideology that advocated for education systems to respond positively to the educational needs of all learners. IE also focuses on the realisation of human rights in school settings. It recognises that all children, whether living with or without disabilities, face challenges in schools. Therefore, these challenges should be addressed if children are to learn in schools (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2009). IE in the Namibian context assumes the social model and rights discourse of inclusion (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2014) hence, the policy statement of the Namibian IE policy calls for the provision of support to all learners.

Education is seen as an important tool to foster principles of equality and socialism (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). Moreover, education is believed to empower children with necessary life skills that will enable them to function in a changing world (UNESCO, 1960). Thus, learning is believed to help the youth to acquire values, attitudes, and behaviours they will need to live together in a world of diversity and pluralism (UNESCO, 1960). Educators should not underestimate the role of education on individuals' mental liberation and functionality in an industrialised society. Moreover, the need for the provision of educational opportunities for all learners should not be overlooked.

Schoolchildren face different challenges in their school journeys When these challenges are not addressed, they could prevent the children from reaching their full potential in terms of the academic, emotional, and social (UNESCO, 2009). In that regard, IE serves as a guide for responding to diversity within educational settings at all levels (MoE, 2014; UNESCO, 2009). Consequently, it follows that inclusion and recognition of diversity should be the basis for all educational practices in schools. However, research (e.g., Collier et al., 2013; Evans & Chapman, 2014; Msibi, 2012) has shown that globally, gender-nonconforming learners face challenges such as discrimination, and experience homophobic bullying in schools. Similarly, the few studies that could be located on gender-nonconformity in Namibian schools (i.e., Brown, 2016, 2017; Francis et al., 2017) revealed that gender nonconforming learners face homonegative victimisation.

Due to the conspicuous lack of studies on the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools, these learners are invisible in research. Hence, this study was aimed at answering the research question: "How do teachers and other learners treat gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools?"

Treatment of Gender-Nonconforming Learners in Schools and the Effects Thereof

Schools are places where children discover their potential. Further, the introduction of inclusion in education aims for learners to be valued, respected, and accorded chances to be who they are (MoE, 2014; UNESCO, 2009). Therefore, the schools are expected to function as units of social acceptance for all, to be inclusive in all areas, and to accommodate diversity. Thus, it follows that educational policies should aim to protect learners from feeling threatened in schools in order to benefit from the education being provided. Even though schools are expected to promote inclusion for all, research

(e.g., Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Brown, 2016; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014) has documented evidence of mistreatment of gender-nonconforming learners in schools.

Several issues could cause bullying and homophobic treatment of learners in schools. Some authors (e.g., Bilodeau & Renn, 2005) have documented that cultural and religious beliefs toward gender nonconformity led to gender-nonconforming learners being discriminated against and mistreated in schools. Similarly, Naidoo and Mabaso (2014) discovered that many South African young people repressed their sexual orientation due to sociocultural issues and religious principles. Research (e.g., Butler & Astbury 2004; Taylor et al., 2012) further maintained that the fear of rejection by parents and teachers had caused gender-nonconforming learners to suffer homophobic attacks in silence.

Literature (e.g., Ntlama, 2014; Oloka-Onyango, 2015) has indicated that sexual orientation in African culture is regarded and accepted to be a romantic attraction between a man and a woman. Other forms of sexual orientation are regarded as a deviation from the norm hence, they are frowned upon and are not accepted. Lorway (2006) claimed that some Africans have deemed gender-nonconformity unAfrican and an unwelcome Western practice. Thus, society labels individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative binary of gender as socially unfit and treat them as outcasts. Research has also indicated that the media provides evidence of political influence on homophobia (Arndt & de Bruin, 2006). For instance, the media (e.g., Karimi and Thompson, 2014; Muraranganda, 2016) has borne several incidents of gender-nonconformity bashing by some influential African leaders (i.e., Sam Nujoma, Namibia and late Robert Mugambe, Zimbabwe). In Namibia, the Roman-Dutch laws left behind by the apartheid era (Haskins, 2014), and which criminalise sodomy are functioning as the basis for law responses to gender-nonconformity. However, even though sodomy is criminalised under the said law, this law is not enforced in the country. The government refused to amend the law on grounds that the Namibian constitution does not allow any person to be prosecuted on basis of sexual orientation (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011). The influence of these laws, coupled with culture, Christianity, and a strong political influence has led to gender-nonconformity not being openly discussed in the Namibian community.

Literature shows that regardless of in which country gender-nonconforming learners are, they face similar social consequences for transgressing gender norms (Downie, 2014; Taylor et al., 2012). Bronfenbrenner (1994) maintained that a child's interactions and engagements with a given environment over a period of time determine their learning and emotional development. These interactions also determine children's exploration of their world, their ability to understand it, as well as their ability to identify their place in the world. Schools are miniature versions of the society in which they live; hence, they can reflect the large society's sentiments and values toward gender non-conformity regardless of broader educational values and policy statements on diversity and inclusion. Consequently, teachers and other learners could mistreat learners who are not conforming to the gender norms expected by society.

Msibi (2012) discovered that malicious forms of violence and bullying, as well as an unresponsive education system, made some South African schools unsafe places for gender-nonconforming learners. A study by Brikkels (2014) affirmed Msibi's (2012) findings by discovering that gender non-conforming learners in South African schools were ignored and excluded from group discussions by heterosexual learners. Further, Hillard et al. (2014) indicated that teachers and other learners often made jokes and expressions with undertones of homophobia without recognising that these jokes are a form of bullying. Msibi (2012) further asserted that gender nonconforming learners continually experience verbal abuse such as derogatory name-calling. This includes demeaning language used in everyday situations in schools such as "that is gay" for "that is stupid" (Taylor et al., 2012). Given the

above sentiments, it follows that gender-nonconforming learners do face mistreatment in schools, which could affect them in different ways including their psychological well-being.

Homophobic bullying is a form of violence that affects all people involved—just like any other kind of bullying. For instance, Butler and Astbury (2004) and Taylor et al. (2012) maintained that heterosexual learners who had gender-nonconforming friends and family members, and those considered to exhibit gay characteristics, were teased in schools. Individuals who experience homophobia are discovered to suffer from long-term implications that include failure to adjust to family, school, and other social settings (Bowers et al., 2005). Research (e.g., Almeida et al., 2009; Collier et al., 2013; Van Ingen & Phala, 2014) has asserted that some learners have suffered from psychological problems such as depression, suicide, and traumatic stress due to negative and violent experiences in schools coupled with the passiveness of education systems to respond to homophobic bullying. Further, Butler and Astbury (2004) discovered that learners in South African schools had suffered from low self-esteem and self-hate due to homophobic bullying. Several authors such as Brown (2016, 2017), Francis et al. (2017) and Hillard et al. (2014) maintained that discrimination and bullying in schools had led to some gender-nonconforming learners leaving school before they completed Grade 12. Moreover, Blaauw (2012) discovered that homonegative victimisation in schools had caused some gender-nonconforming learners to turn to alcohol, drugs, and prostitution. Therefore, research evidence shows that the impact of violence on learners from sexual minority groups cuts across all domains: psychology, social, and education. Moreover, research evidence shows that homophobic violence harms all learners regardless of their sexual orientation. Hence, there is a need to realise that the stigma associated with gender-nonconformity endangers the social and emotional well-being of all learners. As DePaul and Dam (2009) pointed out, awareness of sexual orientation issues in school would not only benefit gender-nonconforming learners but all learners.

Theoretical Framework

A social identity perspective (SIP) was derived from Tajfel's social identity theory of 1979, Stryker's (1977) identity theory, and Spivak's (1985) concept of othering to explore the treatment of the gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools. Burke and Stets (2009) argued that when a researcher uses identity theory and social identity theory side by side in a study, these theories complement each other and bring out important principles of each theory. Moreover, research has proven that a perspective from the point of othering, social identity, and identity theory is applicable in studying social issues across various fields of study. For instance, Rogers et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between racial and gender identity among Black male teenagers using an identity perspective. Tomori et al. (2016) used the notion of identity to study perceptions on identity formation, identity practices, and identity transitions as well as implications of these identities on HIV prevention among homosexual males. Similarly, the use of the othering concept in research to address different social issues including race, gender, and sexual orientation has yielded empirical evidence for social change. For instance, scholars such as Crenshaw (1989, 1991) have used the concept of othering to explore race and gender dimensions of violence against women of colour. Further, Elsrud (2008) and Tanyas (2016), building on the othering concept, discovered how immigrants in Sweden and Turkey, respectively, were accorded negative cultural and ethnic positions as opposed to natives of those countries. Moreover, Armstrong et al. (2011) recognised that the use of SIP questions the ability of the inclusive process for a truly transformative approach to educational change at both the school and the whole education system levels. Hence, the conception of the SIP as a theoretical lens derived from the three components was deemed appropriate to explore how gender-nonconforming learners are treated in Namibian schools.

Social identity theory assumes that every individual requires a favourable self-identity. A positive status in the group to which the individual belongs is crucial to provide a favourable identity for the

individual (Tajfel, 1979). This theory further assumes that the classification of people into groups of "us" and "them" is an important feature of individuals as they attempt to make sense of their social world (Tajfel, 1979). Similarly, identity theory theorises that identities are a set of meanings that individuals hold for themselves as members of a social group (Burke, 2004; Stryker, 1977). Identity theory further posits that the individual continually seeks to confirm self-views and will aim to maintain the situations and relationships that lead to self-verification. Self-verification is crucial in providing an emotional anchor that helps the individual to cope with unfavourable life events (Burke & Stets, 2009). On the other hand, the othering concept by Spivak (1985) refers to when individuals name and mark people who they deem different from themselves. Research (see e.g., Brons, 2015; Canales, 2000; Dervin, 2012; Powell & Menendian, 2016) has maintained that people construct sameness and differences as well as affirm their identities through othering. Hence, deviation from the society's expectations and norms is considered to be the other of a law-abiding society (Zevallos, 2011). Thus, people who are considered different belong to the out-group which is separate from the in-group henceforth classified as impure, not normal, and not worthy as human beings.

The SIP's assumptions mentioned above are crucial to the realisation of social justice for gender-nonconforming learners in the Namibian context. The use of the SIP in social justice and inclusion research is important because the components of SIP highlight the need for favourable self-identity and the effects of such identification on the self-concept and self-esteem of an individual (Burke, 2004; Dervin, 2012; Hogg, 2001; Tajfel, 1979). The applicability of the SIP to several social issues and environments including schools further demonstrates its uniqueness in studying different issues. Some authors (e.g., Brikkels, 2014; Msibi, 2012) have claimed that gender non-conforming learners are treated in a harmful manner by fellow learners and teachers in schools. In some cases, learners' differences are not recognised and this leads to negative othering and labelling of learners for being different from the norm (Borrero et al., 2012). Stereotyping of people who are deemed different is said to deepen the separation between the individual and those deemed different. This separation leads to exclusion of the other because the self lacks understanding of the other's world (Canales, 2000). Hence, there is a need for individuals to perceive differences between the self and the other in a positive manner. In that regard, the SIP is useful to raise awareness among educators about the emotional effects of othering in schools for better inclusion practices. This perspective has also helped to highlight the importance of belonging to a social group in the development of an individual's self-concept and self-esteem.

The SIP focuses on the worldviews of the transformative paradigm assumptions, which are crucial for providing a methodological framework to this study. This perspective responds to the transformative methods paradigm's assumptions that individuals' views of realities are socially constructed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2012). The SIP responds to the transformative paradigm by acknowledging that culture and society influence the individual's beliefs of what is normal and what is not (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). It further responds to the ontological assumptions of the transformative paradigm by trying to determine which reality can bring an understanding of gender nonconformity and challenge the status quo for social justice (Merriam, 2009). Hence, the SIP fits the methodological transformative stance that this study took to address the research question: "How do teachers and other learners treat gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools?"

It is against the aforementioned that the underlying principles of the SIP are deemed necessary in achieving the transformation of school communities regarding gender non-conformity. Hence, the SIP led to discovering how gender-nonconforming learners are being treated in Namibian schools. It further led to the development of the supplementary framework for the implementation of the IE policy in Namibian schools.

Methodology

The research question and problem of this study were addressed through a transformative method paradigm. A transformative method paradigm is based on assumptions that knowledge is not neutral but is influenced by our interests and reflects the power as well as relations in the societies people construct (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Moreover, Mertens (2012) emphasised that a transformative paradigm is beneficial to a social justice study because it uses methods that require discussions with communities such as interviews. Further, the merit of this paradigm is that it encompasses the assumptions of the SIP that informs the current study given that this theory aims at social emancipation and change through participatory research (Burke, 2004; Spivak, 1985; Stryker, 1977; Tajfel, 1979).

The assumptions of the transformative paradigm that realities are constructed by social, race, gender, cultural, political, and economic values as well as beliefs (i.e., Mertens, 2012; Taylor et al., 2012) made this paradigm suitable for this study. The aim of the research was not merely to discover data but should lead to social change and transformation, as Mertens (2012) pointed out. Hence, the transformative paradigm was deemed the most relevant to determine the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools and lead to better inclusion practices.

The population of this study comprised of the schoolteachers in the Erongo Region, Namibia, the deputy Director of Special Programs and Schools (SPS), the deputy Director of Diagnostic, Assessment and Training Services (DATs), the regional school counsellor, and the inclusive education officer at the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED). A purposive criterion sampling procedure was found to be relevant for the sampling of the education officers and deputy directors because they all met the same criteria (Mertens, 2012) of being the policymakers and responsible for the monitoring of the IE policy implementation. Hence, two regional school counsellors, one deputy director for SPS, one deputy director for DATs and one IE officer at the NIED were purposively sampled in the study sample. Moreover, 182 teachers of Grades 8–12 were randomly sampled into the sample on criterion that the majority of the learners in Grades 8–12 are more mature and at the stage where they are embracing their sexuality than in lower graders. Hence, these teachers were in a position to give relevant information regarding the treatment of learners who do not conform to gender norms in terms of walking, speaking, dressing, and so forth. The deputy directors and the education officer are referred to as education officers (EOs) for reporting purposes.

The data were collected through a questionnaire with open-ended questions answered by the teachers and a face-to-face interview contacted with the EOs. The use of both instruments enabled the collection of data that presented depth and breadth understanding of the research problem (Newby, 2010). The data were analysed as per Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) advice by carefully reading the data on the questionnaires and listening to audio-recorded data from which necessary memos were made, and data were organised thematically to arrive at emerging patterns and themes. Cohen et al. (2018) wrote that the researcher could benefit from the organisation of the qualitative data into themes during analysis. The organisation of the data in this study into themes yielded one theme: Treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools and the effects thereof. The data are discussed with relevant quotes from the teachers and EOs and relevant literature is cited to support the findings of the current study.

Ethical clearance was obtained from University of the Western Cape and further permission to conduct the study was sought from the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC), Namibia. Several authors (e.g., Cohen, et al., 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Gay & Mills, 2016; Newby, 2010) have warned against harming research participants in any way. Hence, due to the nature of the topic, psychological assistance for the teachers and EOs was arranged with the Ministry of Health and Social Services. Voluntary participation was ensured, the responsibilities of the teachers and EOs, as well as

the purpose of the research, were explained through an information sheet. Further, the teachers and EOs were informed that their identities would remain anonymous and their views treated with confidentiality. Hence, their names or any form of identity will not appear anywhere during the time of reporting or publishing the results of the study. The recorded interviews and questionnaires are kept in a lockable drawer until they are destroyed at a later stage. Moreover, the teachers' and EOs' consent was sought in the form of a signed consent form before they took part in the study.

Results

The EOs and teachers had similar perspectives concerning the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools. Some EOs and teachers indicated that gender-nonconforming learners are treated equally in schools, and others indicated that these learners are being bullied due to their sexual orientation. Further, some of the EOs and teachers, in line with the findings by Brikkels (2014), indicated that gender-nonconforming learners are simply ignored by other learners as long as they are not seen as intimidating by the heterosexual learners. The following quotes demonstrate the EOs' and teachers' views on the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners.

> *EO A: Some of the learners who are not conforming to gender norms are treated equally and some are not. So, some of them are bullied and ignored. The measures that the MoEAC advocated for on how to implement policies such as orphans and vulnerable children policy and IE policy seems to be working but one cannot say they are working for all since violence at schools continues.*

> *EO B: The gender-nonconforming learners are not discriminated against in schools. Other learners do respect gender-nonconforming learners if they are not intimidating other learners who are heterosexuals. The school environments are supportive for all learners. However, the teachers are not trained on this policy, only primary school principals and some teachers are trained and they were only introduced to the content in the policy, but these school management members are not the ones that deal with learners. So if we have to ensure that these learners are treated unconditionally, we need to capacitate everyone at school.*

> *EO D: These learners are not open but they are in schools and just ignored, they are not prevented from attending school. Yes, they are there in schools but people do not want to acknowledge these children. They ignore them, yes they get bullied, but others do not exclude them from activities in schools but they do not engage them either. Homosexuality is not illegal but sodomy is illegal in Namibia but then by effect, that makes homosexuality illegal hence people are not comfortable with the issue. The general feeling is, "Do not mess with us, we will not mess with you."*

> *Teacher A: Everyone deserves to be treated equally but in some cases, these learners are bullied. Learners need guidance but not judgment so schools should have laws in place to protect these children.*

> *Teacher Z: No bullying is tolerated at school. Unfortunately, we do not always know what happens among learners as not all learners open up about negative experiences. We often do not know how learners do it amongst each other and whether they are open about it.*

> *Teacher X: People need more awareness on same-sex education. This topic is not spoken of in schools; as teachers, we do see the learners and they are treated equally but some of them are not liked by peers and are discriminated against. This issue could be handled better in schools than what is happening now if teachers are well equipped with the know-*

how at any level in the school setup. This school will help lesbians and gays to boost their confidence and feel accepted in society.

The teachers who participated in this study also felt that the schools are honouring the Namibian constitution's call for equal treatment of all Namibians hence, gender non-conforming learners are treated fairly like all other learners. The following quotes demonstrate these teachers' views:

Teacher C: Gender-nonconforming learners are not treated differently from other learners and they are accepted by the school community. These learners should be encouraged to be free about their sexuality. They are living in a democratic country so they have rights just like they have rights to speech, education and movement.

Teacher E: The school as a community institution is functioning as per the constitution, which is the supreme law. The constitution protects the rights of each individual and the right for every child to education. So these children are protected and they are treated just like all other children in school. They are not discriminated against and learners that tease others are dealt with accordingly.

Literature (e.g., Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Spivak, 1985; Tajfel, 1979) supports these findings given that the teachers and EOs indicated that societal, cultural, and religious beliefs influence how gender-nonconforming learners are treated in schools:

EO A: Schools are a part of the community; learners and teachers are influenced by the bigger society. The country's set-up against gender-nonconformity also influences how gender-nonconforming learners are treated in schools. Learners are imitating what parents are doing in the community so they are treating others who do not conform to gender norms as they see parents doing outside there.

EO B: Gender-nonconforming learners are well accepted by girls but boys tend to hesitate to include other boys that are regarded as gay and call them names instead. The culture and religion of parents are having a big impact on how children treat each other. When parents refuse to accept their children's sexual orientation and treat them badly this escalates into the school community.

EO D: Gender-nonconforming learners are not excluded but they are also not engaged on the topic due to culture. Different communities are responding differently toward gender-nonconformity, for example, schools in urban are fine but in villages, it is worse. People in the villages do not understand this issue and they do not talk about it. You have to hide your sexual identity if you are gay but in town is not a big issue to be gay.

Teacher G: This is a rural area; here, the liberty of gender-nonconforming people's rights is overpowered by religion, culture, and tradition.

Discussion

Treatment of Gender-Nonconforming Learners in Namibian Schools and the Effects Thereof

Several researchers (e.g., MacNeil, et al., 2009; MoE, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2017; Zander, 2011) have established a link between a school environment and learners' academic performance. The relationships in a social setting play a crucial role because they form part of learners' social identities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The current findings show that, in some cases, Namibian schools do ensure a safe environment. The provision of safe environments in schools becomes a necessity to encourage positive social identity for learners to remain in school and complete their education. Moreover, the

Namibian constitution calls for respect of diversity and provision of access to education for all (Republic of Namibia, 1990). Hence, the results of this study demonstrate that some Namibian schools are honouring the Namibian constitution's mandate that all persons have the right to education and to be respected.

The EOs and teachers shared the view that some Namibian schools promote acceptance of sexual diversity. These findings are in line with a study by Brikkels (2014) that discovered that some societies are moving toward gender-nonconformity acceptance, which promotes support for gender-nonconforming learners in schools. Within the SIP framework, inclusion aims to promote recognition and respect of differences as well as encourage positive categorisation for individuals to form positive self-identities. A positive self-identity is believed to affect the emotions of an individual and determine how others will react to the individual (Collins, 2000; Hall, 1997; Hogg, 2001; Spivak, 1985). In that regard, the SIP maintains that self-verification is crucial because it provides an emotional anchor that helps the individual to deal positively with unfavourable life events (Burke & Stets, 2009). Based on these arguments, the current findings demonstrate that some gender-nonconforming learners in Namibian schools are provided with chances to positively self-identify, which could lead to the development of positive self-esteem in these learners and help them to perform better academically.

The findings of this study also confirmed the findings by Downie (2014) and Taylor et al. (2012) that gender-nonconforming learners were treated differently in some schools. The current findings revealed that gender non-conforming learners are not treated equally at all times even though there is acceptance of gender-nonconforming learners in some schools. Literature has highlighted the devastating effects of mistreatment of gender-nonconforming learners on all learners (Bowers et al., 2005). Moreover, the SIP maintains that the way an individual is perceived by others will influence their feelings of self-esteem (Tajfel, 1979). Based on the findings of this study, it could be inferred that not all Namibian schools are functioning as social entities that promote equal treatment and acceptance of differences to curb the long-term effects of homophobia highlighted in this study and to promote self-esteem in learners.

The EOs and teachers had similar views that the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners in schools is influenced by the school settings, culture, and religious beliefs. The schools located in the suburb and towns were more accepting of sexual diversity compared to village-located schools. Authors such as Castells (2004) and Burke (2004) wrote that our positions within the social structures on which identities are tied are defined by culture hence, identity construction is based on the cultural and social perspectives. The SIP and transformative paradigm used in this study are based on assumptions that individuals deal with issues from their own socially constructed views of reality (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2012). Culture and society shape people's views of reality thus influencing their beliefs of what is normal and not (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Therefore, it can be deduced from the current findings that there is more cultural influence in schools located in the villages than in the schools in towns. This could be the result of exposure to different sources of information to people residing in towns and the diverse culture found amongst the township populations. Therefore, it is inferred from this study's findings that the cultural, religious, and societal expectations of the large society influence how gender-nonconforming learners are treated in schools. The SIP assumes that differences in socially expected norms could lead to either negative or positive reactions among people. Moreover, Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) and Merriam (2009) stated that a transformative research design is a procedure to collect and analyse data to bring about social justice and social changes. In that regard, the findings of this study necessitated the establishment of strategies to raise awareness about the emotional effects of othering in schools as well as the realisation of full inclusion in Namibian schools.

Blaauw (2012) and Cianciotto and Cahill (2003) pointed out that by ignoring the issue of gender nonconformity in schools, educators are contributing to the disastrous effects of homophobic harassment regardless of the fact that they may be trying to create a safe environment for all learners. Similarly, the current findings indicate that in some cases, teachers were not aware of homophobia among learners because learners do not report incidents of homophobic harassment. Literature (e.g., Taylor et al., 2012) supports these findings given that it indicates that fear of rejection by parents and teachers has caused learners to suffer homophobic attacks in silence. The current findings bear evidence that in some schools, there are no measures to identify and address homophobic bullying hence, learners have to deal with mistreatment without assistance from educators. The passiveness of the education systems to respond to homophobic bullying has led to depression, suicidal thoughts, and traumatic stress among learners (Collier et al., 2013; Van Ingen & Phala, 2014). It follows that the teachers' ignorance of homophobic bullying reported in this study could contribute to the above-mentioned effects of homophobic bullying among learners.

The methodology positioning of the transformative paradigm for research is to destroy myths and misconceptions to empower societies and lead to social change (Merriam, 2009). Hence, the findings of this study demonstrate a need to use research findings to establish strategies to address the issue of gender nonconformity. In that regard, a supplementary framework for the implementation of the inclusive education policy in Namibian schools has been developed.

The Supplementary Framework for the Implementation of IE Policy (SFIIEP)

Research is said to aim to discover new knowledge that can contribute to the existing body of knowledge and to improve practice (Gay & Mills, 2016; Mertens, 2012). The SIP and the research paradigm employed in this study are transformative in nature. Hence, a better exploration of how gender-nonconforming learners are being treated in Namibian schools was achieved. This exploration necessitated the development of the SFIIEP, which it is recommended, supplements the Namibian IE policy's statement and implementation.

The SFIIEP is aimed at providing guiding strategies regarding the inclusion of gender-nonconforming learners in schools. This framework has been developed for educators, learners, and the education system at large. Hence, its strategies are assumed to bring about better inclusion outcomes. In that regard, the supplementary framework outlines strategies for implementation of the IE policy with the main aims to:

- Promote social inclusion through gender-nonconformity friendly teaching and learning materials for life skills as a subject, inclusive sex education, as well as provision of psychological support.

- Promote social justice through clear policy statements and supportive legal frameworks.

Research (Banks, 2017; Page, 2017) has cautioned that there should be specific instructions for gender nonconformity issues to help with transforming the curriculum and changing the status quo; simply adding materials on the other to the curriculum will not automatically bring about change. Therefore, the SFIIEP presents relevant strategies towards transformation in education that are envisioned to bridge the IE policy's aims towards inclusion practices. The SFIIEP is envisioned to bring about intermediate outcomes (i.e., improved school environment for all learners) which, in turn, are hoped to bring about the final desired outcomes (i.e., recognition of sexual diversities among learners, learner empowerment, improved learner well-being, and better academic performance) for all learners. This framework is available to the schools to be implemented along with the IE policy.

Conclusions and Implications of Results for Inclusion Practices in Namibian Schools

Gender-nonconformity is a sensitive topic in the Namibian context hence, engaging educators in discussions of the topic helped them to view and reevaluate their opinions regarding the issue. This study stimulated the EOs' critical thinking to reconsider the current state of gender-nonconformity in the Namibian education system, as the following quote by EO B demonstrates:

> It is a good thing you thought of researching this issue; it is something that is overlooked when the policy was formulated, the policy is not talking to reality concerning some issues but now you reminded us of this issue, I will make a note to include it in current Namibia's National Safe School Framework that we are busy drafting. These children are in our schools but they are not catered for as some are bullied and discriminated against but the issue is not taken seriously as some people do not want to get involved in homosexuality issues. Thank you for reminding us about this issue.

The teachers shared similar views to those of the EOs, and also demonstrated their willingness to embrace diversity among learners. For instance, Teacher Y wrote:

> Schools should not discriminate towards learners that identify as gay or lesbian nor should they allow learners to bully or tease other learners. The teachers need to adopt a more open-minded attitude and the schools should be more inclusive; every child needs education without discrimination.

The SFIIEP developed in this study can become a tool to guide educators in handling all learners with various needs hence, leading to better inclusion practices. Thus, the researchers recommend that schools should implement the SFIIEP to create a caring, safe, and supportive learning environment for gender-nonconforming learners. This framework will enable the establishment of anti-bullying policies with appropriate measures to curb homophobic bullying. It will also enable teachers to introduce open discussions on sexual diversity in the classrooms through the life skills subject. Open discussions of sexuality topics are relevant for learners to have a better understanding of sexual diversity. Last but not least, the willingness of the teachers and EOs to embrace diversity might help with strengthening the psychological support for all learners in schools to enable them to learn better.

The findings in this study have brought new insights to the researchers regarding teachers' and EOs' views on the treatment of gender-nonconforming learners and the psychological effects of homophobia on these learners. This process has led the researchers to establish strategies to raise awareness among educators regarding issues of diversity.

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