African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning Journal
Issue 2, Volume 9, 2025 Special Issue
ISSN Print: 2521-0262
ISSN Online: 2662-012X
ORIGINAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.70875/v9i2article1

Navigating between curriculum and sociocultural contestation: Teaching sexual diversity in Namibian life skills classrooms

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Abstract

In Namibia, the inclusion of non-heterosexuality and gender diversity in the school curricula remains a challenge. Drawing on critical and poststructuralist theories, this study explores Life Skills educators' experiences and responses to sexual diversity education in their classrooms. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach with a sample of 133 Life Skills teachers. From this population, 111 participants were randomly selected for quantitative data collection, while the remaining 22 provided qualitative data. Two data collection instruments were utilised: questionnaires for the quantitative component and semi-structured interviews for the qualitative component. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. According to the findings, 92% of teachers were aware that gender diversity and non-heterosexuality were covered in the curriculum. Three themes surfaced when this image was examined more closely; cultural barriers and a lack of preparation prevented teachers from discussing these elements freely. The findings offer useful information that policymakers can use to advance diversity and inclusivity.

Keywords: Life skills teachers, inclusivity, non-heterogeneity, sexual and gender diversity, curriculum, diversity, Namibia

Introduction

This article investigates how Life Skills educators in Namibia manage the implementation of sexual and gender diversity education amidst deep-rooted sociopolitical and cultural resistance. Utilising critical theory and poststructuralist concepts of hegemony and power, it explores how educators respond to the tensions between progressive curriculum mandates and prevailing heteronormative discourses, assessing their ability to act as agents of change despite religious, political, and societal constraints. Sexuality education remains a contested terrain in African schools, particularly regarding the inclusion and affirmation of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in the curriculum. Sexuality education in Namibian schools is taught as part of a compulsory Life Skills Learning area that advocates for a safe, enabling and inclusive learning environment for all learners (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MEAC], 2018). The dawn of democracy in 1990, after half a millennium of apartheid South African colonialism, brought about the affirmation of diverse cultures, languages and identities that were previously frowned upon, including diverse sexual orientations (Ministry of Education, 1993). From 1915 until 1990, Namibia—formerly known as South West Africa—was effectively run as a fifth province of South Africa. During that time, it was subject to the same apartheid policies of racial segregation and discrimination, including in the educational system, where African students received subpar "Bantu Education" while white students had access to privileged schooling systems. This legacy still influences social justice initiatives and educational reforms in independent Namibia today.

Life Skills education was introduced to enable young people to navigate the self within a complex, diverse society that accentuates self-awareness, decision making, positive attitudes, personal values, assertive behaviours and

motivation strategies among others (MEAC, 2018). The anticipation of education in a post-apartheid Namibia in a subject like Life Skills would endorse notions from post-structuralist theories that there is no single truth, and celebrate the diverse and complex meanings of knowledge, identities and expressions (Brown, 2022). However, the apparent progressive stance of sexuality education confronts complex tensions between policy aspirations and implementation realities. While the curriculum advocates for affirming diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, teachers navigate conflicting demands between professional obligations and deeply entrenched sociocultural values that often resist such inclusivity. This paradox raises critical questions about how Life Skills educators mediate between transformative educational mandates and persistent heteronormative pressures in Namibian schools and the broader society.

The unfortunate realities are the frequently assumed privileges and abilities that have become commonplace in daily identity, personhood, and manner of being (Kumashiro, 2002). Similarly, Namibia's Life Skills classroom has evolved into a contentious space for sexuality and gender expression, where ideas of mandatory heteronormativity (Cohen et al., 2023; Zhao, 2023) are socially positioned as superior and serve as the benchmark for evaluating everyone else (Brown, 2022). Heteronormativity could be explained as lifestyle norms, which connote that people fall into distinct and complementary genders and sexualities (Kjaran, 2017). The teaching and learning content on sexual orientations and gender identities in Grades 8 and 11 addresses a comprehensive understanding of the plurality of sexual identities and gender expressions from a human rights perspective (MEAC, 2018). This structured inclusion in only the Life Skills learning area across these specific grades represents the sole formal curricular space where sexuality diversity education is mandated, making the role of Life Skills educators particularly crucial in delivering this content.

From this Life Skills curriculum, it appears that diversity is metaphorically understood considering that education affirms diversity but the everyday practices of schooling invisibilise certain identities. The delivery of this inclusive and seemingly progressive curriculum is, however, wrapped in broader conservative religious bigotry and misogynistic political debates about homosexuality (Haitembu et al. 2023; Francis et al., 2019; Francis & Brown, 2017). Dominant identity discourses that police and regulate Namibian sexual and gender choices (Brown, 2022) characterise school youth with non-heterosexual identities as unnatural, problematic and marginalised (Francis & Brown, 2017).

Sexual Diversity in Namibia

Namibia, a southern African state has an estimated population of 3 million and is among the sparsely populated countries in Africa (Wildometeres, 2025). It was a former German colony and later placed under bordering apartheid South African rule by the United Nations to oversee a process self-governance (Tjirera, 2023). The latter never materialised and the then South-West Africa was incorporated as a fifth province in South Africa which exploited the economic mainstay of mineral and natural fishery resources for more than five decades (Rotberg, 2023). At the time, Namibia was subjected to tyrannical apartheid laws that imposed racial divisions that crippled the quality of life of African people. After a long battle of liberation wars, Namibia gained its independence in 1990 (Rule, 2022). In its constitution, the new democratic state ensured to all citizens the right to liberty, dignity and freedom from any cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, equality and freedom from discrimination, privacy, family and the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression, assembly and association (LAC, 2015). At independence, Namibia's population numbered approximately 1.5 million people and its iconic father of the nation and leader of the ruling South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) party, President Nujoma, emphasised a procreative heterosexuality as a means of nation-building. Nujoma's attempt to rebuild a divided and oppressed nation soon resulted in the control and regulation of sexualities. In 1996, Nujoma began an "erotic paranoid nationalism" 'project' (Nyeck, 2013, p. 151) when he publicly announced that Namibia did not acknowledge or protect the rights of homosexual people.

Repressive public attitudes towards LGBT communities developed in phases after Namibia's independence. Homophobic and transphobic sentiments and intolerance, coupled with enforced heterosexual ideals, led to the appointment of special law enforcement officers to surveil heterosexual masculine expressions. Men in public who were found to be wearing earrings were ordered to remove them, or they were ripped from their ears as it was deemed to be feminine and a symbol of homosexuality (Currier & Gogul, 2020). The only progressive law that barred discrimination in the workplace based on sexual orientation was reversed during the Nujoma presidency (Prempeh, 2023). Those with LGBT identities were denied full access to participation in services and resources bestowed on the hegemonic heterosexual community. Since 2015, citizenship has remarkably improved for LGBT identities in Namibia. There was a gradual shift of official state agents, religious organisations and civil society from an anti-sexual diversity stance to advocacy for the rights regardless of gender expression and sexual orientation.

The ruling SWAPO party that has had a stronghold since the establishment of democracy in Namibia still rejects the repeal of the colonial penile code that renders consensual sexual acts between same-sex males as illegal. With the recent national elections in November 2019, for the first time, the incumbent presidential candidate, Hage Geingob, expressed his support for the diverse communities in Namibia. However, despite his promise to build a metaphorical Namibian house inclusive of all citizens (Melber, 2015), he simultaneously rejected equality for sexual minorities, dismissing it as a luxury rather than a fundamental right (Ntinda, 2015). Seemingly, the then President of Namibia was complicit in endorsing legislative enactments that infringe the rights of its sexually diverse citizens. It is becoming more apparent that the Namibian house is divided with emerging new voices calling for the protection of all minority identities. The third *first lady* of Namibia, Madam Monica Geingos, recently described the sodomy law as cynical and incoherent with the country's liberties, suggesting that it be scrapped from the Namibian law books (The Namibian, 2019). The Chairperson of National Council in Namibia, Mrs Margareth Mensah-Williams held national dialogues where she advocated for the protection and inclusion of the various identities that are discriminated against in society. The LGBT identities featured prominently in these conversations. Namibia's Ombudsman for Social Justice has also been vocal against the discrimination of LGBT identities in Namibia (Kisting, 2019; Shapwanale, 2016).

Namibian sexual diversity education within a regional and global context

Life Skills teachers' perceptions of sexual diversity education reveal tensions between Namibia's progressive curriculum frameworks and persistent sociocultural barriers that echo similar challenges across Africa and globally. While Namibian education policy embraced inclusivity through its four pillars of quality, equity, access, and democracy after independence (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2018), this reform primarily addressed racial discrimination while neglecting sexual diversity – a neglect UNESCO (2016) documented through evidence of widespread homophobic bullying despite Namibia's unique position as the first African nation to mandate sexuality diversity education. This contradiction between progressive curriculum and discriminatory practices mirrors what scholars have observed throughout the region. In South Africa, Francis an Kuhl (2022) found teachers reinforcing heteronormativity despite progressive policies and demonstrated how teachers' personal beliefs create implementation gaps similar to those identified in Namibian classrooms. Humphreys's (2013) research in Botswana revealed teachers navigating tensions between institutional constraints and gendered expectations when addressing sexuality, paralleling observations about colonial influences on Namibian education. In Kenya, Håkansson et al. (2024) and Ocran (2021) in Ghana documented how teachers often reinforce rather than challenge heteronormativity despite progressive curriculum objectives. These regional patterns can be theoretically framed through Kwachou's (2023) postcolonial feminist framework critique, which acknowledges how colonialism shaped gender and sexuality discourses while recognising indigenous knowledge systems.

The tensions Namibian Life Skills teachers experience when implementing sexual diversity education reflect what Javahery (2024) identifies as the complex interplay between individual agency and structural determinants and align with Foucault's (1980) conceptualisation of power as productive rather than merely repressive. Francis and Brown's (2017) work on heteronormativity in Namibian schools provides crucial context for understanding institutional constraints, while Brown and Reagan's (2019) analysis of Namibian textbooks explain why "Life Skills teachers' efficacy on sexuality education is tainted with unquestioned knowledge, personal beliefs and repressive social discourses." The variations between urban and rural teacher perceptions connect with Ngabaza and Shefer's (2019) research on how geographic divides affect curriculum implementation, while social construction of gender framework helps explain the disconnect between the curriculum's progressive stance and teachers' binary gender constructs. These challenges transcend African contexts; Ullman (2021) documented similar moral panics undermining teacher confidence in Australia despite parental support for inclusive education. However, Namibia's postcolonial context adds unique dimensions through intersections of colonial legacies, religious influence, and traditional cultural values. As Fiaveh and Mensah (2023) argue, sexual identities in postcolonial African contexts are inseparable from questions of nationalism and cultural authenticity. Despite these challenges, Namibia's revised Life Skills curriculum (MEAC, 2018) demonstrates an institutional commitment to inclusive education by requiring teaching about human rights related to sexual orientation, affirming different sexual orientations, and promoting social cohesion. This curriculum has transformative potential to normalise differences (Awarab & Brown, 2024) and develop students' skills to understand diverse orientations as normal (Haitembu, 2023), though teacher education must evolve to support educators as agents of change in classroom implementation. By documenting how Namibian teachers navigate these competing discourses, our research contributes to what Msutwana (2020) describes as efforts to rethink sexualities in Africa beyond colonial frameworks.

A Critical Theoretical Lens of Sexual and Gender Diversity

This article draws on critical theory to analyse Namibian Life Skills educators' experiences about the teaching of diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions. The conflicting messaging about diverse sexuality and gender positions as well as the teaching and learning thereof highlights the need to engage with notions of critical theory. Critical theory is a cover concept that attempts to analyse, discern and rigorously reflect (Kellner, 2003) the taken-for-granted complex dynamics to link theory to transformative practice (Blake & Masschelein, 2002). Central to critical theory are the concepts of hegemony and power. Hegemony, as conceptualised by Gramsci (2020), refers to the process by which dominant groups maintain their position not merely through coercion but through manufacturing consent and legitimising their worldviews as natural, inevitable, and beneficial to all. In the Namibian context, hegemonic heteronormativity operates through religious, cultural, and political institutions to normalise heterosexuality while positioning other sexual orientations as deviant and unnatural. This hegemonic process is evident in how teachers potentially reproduce normative understandings of sexuality despite progressive curriculum frameworks. Power, following Foucault (1978), is understood not simply as repressive but as productive—shaping knowledge, discourse, and identity formation. Power circulates through educational policies, teacher training programs, and classroom interactions, determining what sexual knowledge is legitimate and how diverse sexualities are represented (Markis, 2017). In Namibian schools, power operates through the silencing of non-heterosexual narratives, the privileging of binary gender frameworks, and the subtle disciplining of gender non-conforming behaviours—even as the curriculum nominally promotes inclusivity (Awarab & Brown, 2024).

Critical theorists hope to enhance the conditions for human emancipation (Sanjakdar, 2018). This emancipatory objective positions teacher as potential agents of change—intellectuals capable of recognising oppressive structures and working to transform them. Within

sexuality education, teachers can disrupt dominant heteronormative narratives by creating spaces where diverse sexual identities are affirmed rather than marginalised. As Freire (1970) argues, critical consciousness enables educators to recognise their potential role in either reproducing or challenging systems of oppression. This is because critical theorists are motivated by ethical concerns for individuals who are subjected to rejection, discrimination, humiliation or injustice, and are longing for a better world. Research points to the institutionalised prejudice, social stress, social exclusion and (UNESCO, 2016) anti-homosexual hatred and violence that prohibit affirming and inclusive sexuality education. In Namibia, political and religious hegemonic forces indoctrinated society to validate only normative gender expressions and, implicitly, sexual attraction that is aligned with one's genitalia. Any alternative expressions are deemed as other and a deviation subjected to discrimination and oppression (Haitembu, 2023).

Ironically, the country's progressive Life Skills curriculum offers teachers transformative potential—opportunities to critically interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality and gender. By engaging with the curriculum as critical intellectuals rather than passive implementers, teachers can develop what Giroux (2011) terms "transformative agency"—the capacity to recognise how power operates through curricular discourses and to create counter-hegemonic spaces within their classrooms. When teachers critically reflect on heteronormative assumptions embedded in their own thinking and institutional practices, they become capable of fostering environments where diverse sexualities are not merely tolerated but affirmed as legitimate expressions of human diversity. If the teaching of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities becomes a critical act, it will undoubtedly serve as a basis for reform.

Methods

Research approach and design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore Life Skills teachers' experiences incorporating sexuality education content into the Namibian school curriculum. The quantitative component assessed teachers' knowledge and attitudes regarding the inclusion of sexuality education elements in the curriculum. The qualitative component provided deeper insight into specific areas identified in the quantitative data that warranted further investigation and more understanding. Consequentially, the study adopted an exploratory sequential research design. The choice of mixed methodology aligns purposefully with the critical theoretical framework underpinning this study. As Creswell and Clark (2007) argue, mixed methods research provides a more comprehensive understanding of power dynamics and hegemonic structures than single-method approaches. Critical theory recognises that oppressive social arrangements are often normalised and rendered invisible (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011); therefore, quantitative methods help identify broader patterns of heteronormativity across the education system, while qualitative methods illuminate how these patterns manifest in teachers' lived experiences and classroom practices. This methodological triangulation serves as what Mertens (2010) calls a "transformative mixed methodology," particularly suited to investigating how marginalised sexualities are positioned within educational discourse and practice.

Sampling

The sample comprised 133 Life Skills educators: 111 randomly selected for quantitative data collection and 22 purposively selected for qualitative inquiry. Participants included educators from both urban and rural schools with varying years of teaching experience to capture diverse implementation contexts. Selection criteria required that participants were currently teaching Life Skills in Grades 8 and 11 where sexual diversity content is mandated. This sampling strategy reflects what Mirza (2012) identifies as necessary for investigating how hegemonic frameworks operate across different educational contexts. The inclusion of both urban and rural educators acknowledges Fraser's (2009) argument that power manifests differently across geographic and socioeconomic divides, affecting how teachers interpret and implement curriculum mandates on sexuality diversity.

Data Collection Processes

Three data collection methods were employed: questionnaires for quantitative data, semi-structured interviews for qualitative data, and document review to better understand the inclusion of sexuality education in the Namibian curriculum. The aim of the questionnaire was to measure perceptions of diverse sexual orientations and gender non-conforming expressions in society and in the school environment. It also explored reactions to school-related homophobic and transphobic violence and bullying. Semi-structured interviews further explored issues raised in the questionnaire, enabling deeper examination of educators' lived experiences implementing sexuality education. The documents provided important background for understanding the policy environment in the Namibian schools.

This multi-method approach to data collection corresponds with what Bhana (2016) describes as necessary for capturing how power operates across different levels of educational policy and practice. The questionnaire identified broader patterns of heteronormative hegemony, while interviews revealed what Foucault (1980) terms "disciplinary power"—how teachers internalise, resist, or reproduce dominant sexuality discourses in their practice. Document analysis allowed for examination of what Apple (2004) calls "official knowledge," revealing how curricular texts legitimise certain understandings of sexuality while marginalising others. Together, these methods create what Collins (2019) describes as a "matrix of domination," revealing how sexuality hierarchies are maintained or challenged within educational systems.

Data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed through the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28 for descriptive statistics. The qualitative data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarisation with data through repeated reading; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the analysis. This systematic approach enabled rigorous identification of patterns in teachers' perceptions and responses to sexual diversity education. The analysis moved from descriptive coding to interpretive themes that captured teachers' navigation between curriculum demands and sociocultural contexts. The analytical framework employed was specifically designed to excavate what Gramsci (2020) terms "common sense"—the taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality that maintain heteronormative hegemony. Following Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis approach, the analysis focused not only on what teachers said about sexual diversity, but how their discursive practices reproduced or challenged power relations. This approach allowed for the identification of what Butler (1999) terms "regulatory practices" through which normative sexuality is maintained, even within ostensibly progressive curricular frameworks. The statistical analysis revealed patterns of institutional power, while thematic analysis illuminated how teachers negotiated these structural constraints, sometimes reproducing hegemonic heteronormativity, but also occasionally creating what hooks (1994) describes as "spaces of radical possibility" where alternative sexualities could be affirmed.

The themes emerging from this study focus on Life Skills teachers' perceptions of sexual diversity, their engagement with translating of the syllabus into the teaching and learning environment and finally, how teachers respond to sexual diversity issues in and around the classroom. The Ministry of Education granted permission to conduct this national study and ethical clearance was provided by the University of Johannesburg.

Findings and Discussion

Perceptions of Sexual Diversity among Life Skills Teachers

Perceptions about non-heterosexuality in Namibia have a deep-seated history of dissonance, vilification and dehumanisation (Haitembu, 2023). It was critical to first explore how Life Skills teachers in Namibia view diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Namibian schools, as a contaminated microcosm of its homophobic and transphobic social environment, continue to reproduce notions of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities as unAfrican,

misalignment with cultural values, and in conflict with religious doctrines (Awarab & Brown, 2024). Since Life Skills teachers are mandated to teach the theme of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in an affirming manner, it was critical to assess the perceptions along such lines. The questionnaire yielded very promising results in terms of social constructions of sexual and gender diversity. Analysis of questionnaire data revealed complex teacher perceptions of sexual diversity. While 71% of teachers acknowledged the presence of LGBTQ learners in their schools, their perceptions reflected varying degrees of acceptance. 65% of teachers expressed discomfort with teaching about non-heterosexual orientations, citing religious and cultural beliefs as primary concerns. However, 82% recognised the need to address discrimination, even while personally struggling with the content. Significantly, 94% of teachers reported teaching sexual diversity topics despite their personal views, indicating a professional commitment to curriculum implementation that often conflicts with personal beliefs. These findings demonstrate the tension between professional obligations and sociocultural values that shape teachers' perceptions of sexual diversity education. It is important to point out that the term homosexuality in Namibia is found to be commonly and collectively used to refer to individuals with non-heterosexual identities, although the term 'non-heterosexuality' is far more complex. The term 'homosexuality' was nevertheless used to explore Life Skills teachers' understanding of non-heterosexuality.

Although views from the questionnaire defy the dissonant constructions about diverse sexual orientations and gender non-conforming identities, interviews show that participants hold different perceptions from the questionnaires. Responses below from the individual interviews still uphold heterosexuality as the preferred and official expression and all other sexualities are subordinated. Teachers pointed out that:

"We have known only boys and girls. These things are new to us. I don't even know if I can talk about it." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Ohangwena Region

"You see the school uniform is male/female; the register is male/female even the sports, it is difficult to place these learners." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Hardap Region

"Here in the village, you are a man or a woman. If you a have funny behaviour then you will be teased. I have even seen teachers calling these learners names so that they can just be normal again. We need knowledge to help these kids not to choose to be gay." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Karas Region

These narratives point to enactment of a compulsory cisgender, heterosexual and gender binary in a linear and coherent relationship. The expectation is that the biological sex is expressed through gender scripts. Lindqvist et al. (2021) however assert that gender is not biologically determined but is a social and cultural expression. In this study, narratives from Life Skills teachers produce a contrary undertone that the biological sex/gender binary alignment is common, lauded and automatic. Any disruption of this normative identity scripting is sanctioned and not worthy of recognition (Bates, 2022). This conflict and the dichotomies within the personal beliefs and professional positioning found with Life Skills teachers threatens the wellbeing of learners that identify with sexual orientations other than heterosexuality. From the Life Skills teachers' responses, one can detect the disdain for the deviant othered. Heterosexual expressions thus serve as a reset button to fix deviated identities to 'what they should be'.

"I have a few boys in different classes who are feminine and soft. They might not be gay but if they try to participate in class then they are laughed at because of the soft and squeaky voice. I just reprimand the learners." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Omusati Region

"I think that the teasing is not such a bad thing because it might help those kids to change to what they really are. That is why I ignore them, and they report that other kids are teasing them." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Khomas Region

Research in Namibia shows that learners who faced homophobic and transphobic bullying are likely to drop out, experience depression and

resort to unwanted and harmful behaviour (UNESCO, 2016; Haitembu, 2023; Awarab & Brown, 2024). The unresponsiveness of teachers to homophobic violence and bullying towards *othered* sexual orientations violates the policy on inclusive education that purports that schools should provide an enabling and safe learning environment for all learners regardless of background (MBESC, 2006). More so, the insistence on acknowledging only heterosexual, binary gender identities and expressions in and around the classroom perpetuates homophobic discourses and discrimination (Francis & Manakali, 2021). The perpetuation of exclusively heterosexual and binary gender expressions in classrooms has significant educational and social justice implications. This practice not only reinforces systemic discrimination but also compromises the psychological safety and academic engagement of LGBTQ learners. When teachers privilege heteronormative expressions, they inadvertently legitimise exclusionary practices that can lead to increased dropout rates, mental health challenges, and diminished educational outcomes for gender non-conforming and sexually diverse learners. Moreover, this reinforcement of heteronormativity undermines Namibia's constitutional principles of equality and human dignity while contradicting the transformative aims of the Life Skills curriculum. The implications extend beyond individual learners to impact school culture, potentially limiting the development of truly inclusive educational spaces that could serve as catalysts for broader social change.

Teachers were also asked how their communities perceive diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. They first had to express how gender was defined. All teachers viewed gender within the binary contours of the heterosexual binary male/female. The struggle to affirm non-normative sexual orientations and gender non-confirming identities thus emanates from teachers tapping into pre-existing and hegemonic discourses of what socially acceptable forms of gender expression are (Youdell, 2004). This privileging of heteronormative frameworks is evident in teachers' own articulations of gender. When asked to define gender, teachers across different regions consistently expressed rigid binary views that essentialise biological characteristics, as illustrated in the following responses.

"Gender is male and female" Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Omusati Region

"You are either a man or a woman." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Kavango-East Region

"It is a man or a woman and when you are young, you are a boy or a girl." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Kunene Region

"If you have a penis, you are a man; if you are a woman, you have a vagina." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Kavango-West Region

Since bodies were fundamentally gendered through the physical evidence of sexual and reproductive organs, participants were asked if they had noticed people who are biologically male or female but express their sexuality differently. The majority of the participants mentioned that it is a common phenomenon across the country. A total of 71% of the respondents from the questionnaires indicated that they had seen homosexual youth at their schools. This is regardless of the view that sexuality is not visible and can only be tracked through conflations with gender scripts (Brown & Diale, 2017).

The findings reveal complex tensions between policy aspirations and classroom realities in Namibian sexuality education. While quantitative data shows promising levels of curriculum compliance (94% of teachers reporting teaching sexual diversity topics), qualitative insights expose significant contradictions between professional obligations and personal beliefs.

Three critical patterns emerge. First, there is a stark disconnect between reported teaching practices and actual classroom engagement. Though 82% of teachers acknowledge the need to address discrimination, their responses demonstrate passive and sometimes harmful approaches to homophobic bullying. As one teacher noted, "I think that the teasing is not such a bad thing because it might help those kids to change." This reveals how teachers' personal views undermine curriculum objectives (Awarab

& Brown, 2024). Second, the data exposes deeply embedded heteronormative frameworks guiding teacher perceptions. The consistent reference to binary gender constructs ("Gender is male and female") reflects what Bates (2022) describes as institutional resistance to gender diversity. This binary thinking manifests in practical challenges, evidenced by teachers' concerns about school structures: "the school uniform is male/female; the register is male/female even the sports, it is difficult to place these learners." Third, findings indicate a critical gap in teacher preparation. While 65% express discomfort teaching non-heterosexual orientations, their discomfort stems largely from cultural and religious beliefs rather than pedagogical challenges. This aligns with Haitembu's (2023) observation that teacher resistance often reflects broader societal prejudices rather than professional limitations.

These findings have significant implications for policy implementation. The disconnect between curriculum aspirations and classroom realities suggests that policy reform alone is insufficient. As Lindqvist et al. (2021) argue, transforming educational practices requires addressing deeply embedded cultural and institutional barriers. The data indicates that without targeted intervention in teacher preparation and ongoing support, Namibia's progressive curriculum may inadvertently reinforce rather than challenge discriminatory practices.

Life Skill Teachers and Sexual Diversity in the Curriculum

The sexuality education unit primarily aims to foster a sense of community, activism, and social justice. These themes have been integral to the Namibian Life Skills curriculum since 2006. It is thus imperative to interrogate how Life Skills over the past 14 years has transformed the teaching and learning of sexuality diversity in and around the classroom. The data from the questionnaires explored Life Skills teachers' awareness of the themes of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in the Life Skills curriculum.

Analysis revealed that 92% of questionnaire respondents were aware of the theme addressing diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in the Life Skills syllabus, and 94% reported teaching about sexual and gender diversity in their classrooms. Concerningly, 30% of respondents expressed ambivalence toward the curriculum outcome requiring affirmative teaching of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This highlights how complex social and institutional networks that shape teachers' understanding of sexualities effectively police teaching and learning spaces (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The narratives below confirm that teachers are captured by the pervasive dissonant political, cultural and religious discourses that dominate the understanding of sexual and gender diversity. A total of 27% of the questionnaire respondents reported that they do not feel comfortable when teaching about non-heterosexual orientations. This is not surprising since only 45% of the participants indicated that they had received training to address the topic of sexual orientation in the classroom. Narratives from the interviews were relatively mixed.

"I just look at what is in the textbook. I avoid many conversations because they want answers that I don't have." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Erongo Region

"Yes, I teach about it. I even ask them about people in their community they know. The kids love this topic." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Khomas Region

"This topic in the rural area is difficult. Kids respect their culture and I don't know how to make them understand." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Kunene Region

"I am a born-again Christian. When I teach about it, the kids question my beliefs. But I must teach the syllabus. It feels so weird." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Erongo Region

"We live in different times, and we cannot ignore the topic. Although I was never trained about it, I still teach what is in the syllabus. I have seen so many gay children at our school who are bullied and if we don't teach about it then we allow the problems to continue." Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Khomas Region

Although teachers do engage with the topic of sexuality and gender diversity in the classroom, it is not free from the cultural and religious values that reproduce the many restrictions on sexual and gender diversity expressions. These pedagogical approaches as explained by Francis and Monakali (2022) reinforce a certain way of being. In many schools, teachers position themselves as the authority and possess the power in the classroom (Awarab & Brown, 2024). With such (heterosexual) control, participants in this study could easily incite prejudice, discrimination and even surveillance and silencing of certain aspects of the curriculum based on the divergent views they hold of sexual and gender diversity. Though participants in the interviews as well as the questionnaire expressed a willingness to teach the themes of sexual diversity regardless of how equipped they felt, the reality is that Life Skills teachers are not adequately supported. Even with the best intentions of some Life Skills teachers, they are unsure of what to do. The risk is that when they do not know how, teachers are more likely to fall back to the previous default knowledge of religious moralisations that entrench heteronormativity. Even textbooks do not provide teachers with up-to-date knowledge about sexual and gender diversity that is based on discourses of rights and responsibilities (Brown & Reagan, 2019). Currently, Life Skills teachers' efficacy on sexuality education is tainted with unquestioned knowledge, personal beliefs and repressive social discourses about non-heterosexuality. The lack of training is critical in this discussion as teachers rely on inconsistent knowledge as noticed in the examples below.

"I want to know if people are born as homosexual because that will help me to teach the subject more easily. I learned from my community that people choose to be gay and the children in my classes have the same view. They don't want to accept this homosexuality thing, so how do I teach it?" Grade 11 Life Skills teacher in Ohangwena Region

"We are trained about the constitution in our teacher training programme but never learned about homosexuality. The constitution only talks of men and women. I just tell my learners that those people exist, but I don't support it." Grade 8 Life Skills teacher in Erongo region

The data reveals how hegemonic power structures shape sexuality education implementation in Namibian schools. The tension between high reported teaching rates and actual pedagogical practices illustrates what Kellner (2003) describes as the gap between transformative intentions and institutional realities. The findings reveal three distinct manifestations of heteronormative power dynamics. First, inadequate teacher preparation (only 45% received training) reflects systemic privileging of heterosexual frameworks, leading to superficial engagement: "I just look at what is in the textbook". This aligns with Francis and Brown's (2017) analysis of how institutional power structures maintain heteronormative dominance through limited teacher preparation. Second, religious-cultural hegemony significantly influences implementation. Teachers' responses ("I am a born-again Christian...") exemplify what Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) identify as institutional policing of sexuality education. The 65% discomfort rate with content delivery reveals how sociopolitical forces maintain heteronormative control through cultural-religious frameworks. Third, geographical disparities in implementation reflect broader power inequities. Rural teachers' struggles with cultural resistance demonstrate how hegemonic forces operate differently across contexts (Brown & Reagan, 2019). As Francis and Monakali (2022) argue, teachers' authority position can reinforce rather than challenge these power structures without adequate critical pedagogical support.

The 30% ambivalence toward affirming approaches reveals what Blake and Masschelein (2002) describe as the challenge of linking transformative theory to practice in contexts where institutional power structures remain unchallenged. This analysis exposes the need for interventions that address both individual preparation and systemic power dynamics in sexuality education.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex dynamics between progressive policy and

implementation realities in Namibian sexuality education. Through critical theory analysis of Life Skills educators' experiences, this mixed methodology research reveals significant tensions between curriculum mandates and sociocultural barriers. The quantitative data shows that while overall educators are aware of sexual diversity curriculum requirements and the majority report teaching this content, a third express ambivalence toward affirming approaches. Qualitative findings further expose this contradiction, revealing how educators' verbalised commitment to inclusive education often conflicts with classroom practices grounded in binary gender conceptions and heteronormative assumptions. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data exposes three interrelated implementation barriers: first, inadequate teacher preparation (with less than half reporting specific training); second, deeply embedded cultural-religious tensions that position homosexuality as "unAfrican"; and third, institutional structures that fail to support teachers' transformative potential. These findings align with what Gramsci (2020) terms "cultural hegemony," where dominant heteronormative worldviews are reproduced through educational practices despite progressive policy frameworks.

Moving forward, addressing these implementation gaps requires multilevel interventions: first, enhancing pre-service and in-service teacher education that critically engages with heteronormative assumptions; second, developing contextually sensitive approaches that reconcile cultural values with human rights principles; and third, establishing institutional support mechanisms that empower teachers as critical intellectuals rather than passive implementers. Teacher education institutions and the Ministry of Education must strengthen collaboration with civil society organisations to develop comprehensive training programs that bridge theoretical understanding with practical implementation skills. By adopting such measures, Namibia could transform the documented policy-practice tensions into opportunities for educational innovation, potentially positioning its unique curriculum framework as a model for inclusive sexuality education across Africa, while ensuring its transformative potential is fully realised in practice (Awarab & Brown, 2024; Haitembu, 2023). This approach would advance what Freire (1970) envisioned as education for critical consciousness, enabling Namibian educators to recognise their potential role in either reproducing or challenging systems of oppression related to sexual and gender diversity.

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