Curriculum issues on gender non-conforming learners

Viwe Lungisani Feni [a] *, Bulelwa Makena [b]

[a] Reikaeletse Secondary School, Xhariep, South Africa

[b] Walter Sisulu University, Komani Campus, 5322, South Africa

Abstract

This study argues that gender non-conforming learners do not relate to learning activities, the language used, and curriculum pedagogies. Due to gender socialization, the language used in some schools promotes gender binarism. The main aim is to investigate schools' tolerance of gender-conforming learners in one Eastern Cape Province Secondary school. In this study, a qualitative research approach was administered to study and narrate findings identified in the form of narratives. This investigation was embedded in the case study design as authors could not have unwinged the investigated problem without first getting acquainted with the logistics of the case holistically. Three teachers offering the subject known as Life Orientation across the GET and FET bands were purposefully sampled as the relevant cohort to submit what they perceive, as data informants for this investigation. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings established that gender non-conforming learners cannot relate to the curriculum offered as it promotes gender binarism through language and learning activities, with impressions that such learners are not welcome in schooling societies. The study recommends the use of gender-neutral language. Provision of gender-neutral activities, in classroom environments with gender non-conforming characters, and teacher training on gender inclusivity, can act as remedial strategies to curb the situation.

Keywords: Gender Binarism, Socialization, Curriculum, Learning, Tolerance.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduce the problem

When South Africa passed the Bill of Rights (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), the country experienced drastic changes aimed at redressing past injustices from the apartheid regime. After the constitution, some several acts and policies were developed and approved, aimed at upholding human rights

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* Corresponding author name. ORCID ID.: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7340-3001
  E-mail address: bmakena@wsu.ac.za

for all South Africans (Reilly, Neumann & Andrews, 2019). Such policies promote the "Batho Pele" principles denoting good leadership practices and transformation in spheres of government holistically (Msila, 2022). The Department of Basic Education did not escape the wave of drastic changes that came along with democracy imperatives in the refined Republic of South Africa.

Henceforth, there were new acts introduced inclusive of the South African Schools Act (1996). The School's Act does not only decentralize governance of South African schools by endorsing the formation of School Governing Bodies (SGB) and School Management Teams (SMT), but further addresses discrimination in South African schools by emphasizing the right to access education regardless of race, gender and class while promoting humanity (Ziroat & Zebisino, 2022). It is for this reason that this study investigates adherence to human rights and equality in schools in consideration of school tolerance of gender non-conforming learners. These are learners who do not fall into the category of gender–typed behaviours and practices taking place in schools because of societal influences and socialization within the South African context (Grosch & Rau, 2017).

1.2. Describe relevant scholarship

In this sector, it is where empirical together with theoretical underpinnings have been reviewed about the study's subject interest.

As declared by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), this policy focuses on the values of social transformation thereby ensuring that historic injustices are redressed as a means to do away with past marginalization (Department of Basic Education, 2011). With much attention directed toward gender equality, however, Wilmot and Naidoo (2017) found that heteronomy determines gender representation in Life Orientation learning. This is in line with Reygan, Potgieter, and Msibi (2014) who observed a lack of visibility for gender non-conforming identities in life orientation textbooks. This is tantamount to further and prolonged promotion of gender binarism. In line with the previous concern, a study conducted by Nene (2014) revealed that women in history related that references are given subordinate roles.

Accordingly, Alghamdi, Karpinski, Lepp, and Barkley (2020) challenge the dominance of social and cultural hegemony that dichotomizes gender identities in education. Such a dominating factor is subjecting minority learners to an oppressive school curriculum. This pedagogy creates an impression that non-conforming learners are not welcome in some schools as noted by a study conducted in the school context (Du, Zhang, Shelton & Hung, 2022). This comes because of dichotomized gender binary and heterosexual couples entangled in classroom activities given where teachers use binary terminologies such as ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, and males and females. Schools are supposed to be agents of change especially when it comes to equality and freedom. Makena and Mpahla (2021) are in congruency with these statements as they suggest that dynamics in the school curriculum have proven to have an impact on the teaching and learning environment, which allows consideration to be catered for, irrespective of varying differences engulfing the learning and teaching environment.

As stated by Ludbrook (2022), the use of gender-inclusive language has been proposed for a long time with more attention towards women's empowerment which later turned toward gender-neutral activism to accommodate gender non-conforming individuals. Such claims are in line with the use of gender binary language aimed to promote social stereotypes towards gender minorities as it affirms social control toward gender expression. Grey (2015) articulates that a singular word can be used to refer to an individual without opting for gendered pronouns such as *he/him* or *she/her*. The use of gender-neutral language when addressing curriculum-related matters can help affirm gender non-conforming learners, thereby removing social stereotypes.

1.3. State hypotheses and their correspondence to research design

This study is lensed through the Gender Schema Theory by Bem (1981). The theory stipulates that there are two categories: gender schematic and gender aschematic learners who behave according to socially accepted behaviours and actions. Gender aschematics are those who behave, and act solely based on interest and are not confined to the gender dichotomy of socially accepted behaviors. Gender aschematic learners have tendencies to enact behaviours in a sub-conscious manner as they filter before they act, also making decisions based on whether they are interested or not.

Looking at the educational implications of the Gender Schema Theory by Bem (1981), this suggests that there are learners who will behave in ways that are gender-typed and fall into one of the socially ideal gender categories. Concurrently, the same cohort is composed of learners who behave in ways that are non-gender-typed and are motivated by interests rather than gender. In a teaching-learning environment, this implies that there should be equality and freedom for all learners. Given that each learner is unique and essential, schools are expected to create a conducive atmosphere to support and develop learners without limiting their growth, self-esteem, and self-expression (Cameron & Paluszek, 2022). It is for this reason that we had an interest in undertaking this study, with the research question: What imperatives do schools have as means to tolerate gender non-conforming learners?

2. Method

This section is where methods and materials underpinning this study have been administered to investigate the nexus between curriculum issues and gender non-conforming learners. These techniques and procedures are guided by whether the study being undertaken is quantitative, qualitative or a mixed study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

2.1. Research approach

This investigation used a qualitative research approach, which consists of techniques and strategies that facilitate the transition from broad hypotheses to data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014). The goal of qualitative research is to better understand how people live in certain real-life situations (Government Design Manual, 2016). This is the most prominent research method especially when the investigation has no target for larger samples.

2.2. Research design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, which is characterized as an empirical investigation that examines a current event in its actual setting (Maree, 2007). As a case has the advantage of generating an in-depth understanding of a complex real-life situation, we felt it imperative that we embed a case study design to acquire a better understanding of schooling experiences by non-gender binary learners. When a group of learners feel intimidated by one reason or another, this raises some alarm bells because irrespective of gender disparities, all individuals are entitled to equal opportunities to learn in schooling environments of their choice.

2.3. Population and sampling procedures

All teachers offering services in one senior secondary school in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa were considered as the population for this study. Three teachers who offered Life Orientation as a subject underpinning the prescribed curriculum were purposefully sampled as participants for the inquiry. These participants were nominated because the site under investigation was noted to be experiencing problems of disregard for observing learner-human rights (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Participants were considered and chosen for the study only when they were identified as having relevant experience with regard to the topic under investigation. At the same time, these participants were accessible for inclusion in the study.

Following ethical considerations, participants willingly gave consent to engage in the investigation (Dawson, 2019). This was after we had clarified that all names of candidates who participated including their responses would not be divulged, confirmation was given that all responses would be regarded anonymous. Pseudonyms were used to align each participant to their response. Upon accepting the terms and conditions of the entire research process, all participants enthusiastically accepted to be part of the investigation. As confirmation to accept participation, they all signed consent papers after receiving assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.

2.4 Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used as an instrument for data collection (Evans & Lewis, 2018). This type of instrument allows for open-ended responses, therefore leading to vigorous engagements between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview schedule contained several open-ended type of questions. As a

result, we had to further pursue asking follow-up questions that were primarily not contained in the original set of questions. All questions asked were in line with schools' tolerance of gender non-conforming learners in the secondary schooling phase.

2.5 Data collection procedures

For all collected data not to be lost or misinterpreted, recordings and field notes were considered as a prerequisite. These methods of data capturing assisted significantly as all participant responses were well captured, unpacked, and logically arranged (Patton, 2015). As all follow-up questions were posed, participants gave indications that there were no more emerging responses. We then decided that we had arrived at a point of saturation. When no more new responses are flagged by participants, research declares that stage as data saturation (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). To ensure that we had captured all aspects from both field notes through playing and re-playing all recordings, we noted all responses. Those similar and varying from each other were grouped. Where relationships and similarities were identified, we grouped such responses coding them as categories. As the process of data analysis was beginning to take a certain direction, we grouped all related responses. These led to the formation of themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In the next section themes that emerged are presented as findings for this investigation.

Results

In this section, findings are discussed following the identified themes. In this investigation, two themes that emerged as findings are curriculum imperatives and teaching-learning strategies.

2.4. Curriculum Imperatives

When participants were interviewed to outline their perceptions on how curriculum issues impacted on gender consideration, one participant - T_1 - responded:

Learners in my class perform differently. I do understand that as learners they have varying learning abilities. It is therefore not in my line of duty to discriminate against non-accepted by looking at their differences in gender, instead, learner challenges should be addressed as they come. By so doing I make them participate equally when curriculum-related matters are addressed.

In line with the previous response, participant T_3 concurred and further endorsed that teaching should not be about gender, but the differences seem to be influenced by subjects taught, coupled with the nature of subject content:

When we go to classrooms, we go there to teach all our learners to pass at the end of the year. We do not judge their lifestyles or treat other learners differently. For example, I teach Mathematics and it is about numbers

and values that anyone can understand. It is not within my capacity to disintegrate learners according to their gender differences and performances.

2.5. Teaching-Learning Strategies

The second theme, distinct from the curriculum itself, centers on teaching-learning strategies used in schooling environments. This is highlighted by the response as indicated below:

> T_2- *Teaching strategies should not exclude any learner irrespective of gender they are. Additionally, the Life Orientation perspective clearly indicates to me as a teacher that it is my responsibility to guide learners to self-discovery, self-appreciation, and self-esteem.*

Of the same view as the above response, the third participant attested:

> T_3- *As a Life Orientation teacher, I must guide these learners to their self-discovery and holistic development. As I engage in these practices, I have noted that unpacking issues of gender differences has helped a lot because my learners can now understand their uniqueness and they are proud of how they are.*

3. Discussion

As one of the themes that emerged from data analysis, curriculum matters do affect learner-educational experiences. Learners, as young adults, learn about the realities of the outside world through lessons taught. There does not seem to be any proof that learners who identify as gender non-binary can relate to the learning material, especially in classroom circumstances.

There is a component of the hidden curriculum that encourages gender socialization, which is more prevalent in how learners are taught with consistency (Pickering, 2015). Although teachings, in this case, are meant for all learners, administered examples and activities use characters and situations that subtly favour gender binarism. Yet, it would be more equitable to equally represent both gender binary and non-binary for gender schematic and aschematic learners.

Among the subjects underpinning the prescribed curriculum at the senior secondary learning phase, Life Orientation is intended to assist learners in navigating life as teenagers. It also aids learners in discovering who they are, learning how to express themselves freely, and embracing their individuality. Although teachers recognize the significance of the Life Orientation curriculum on gender issues and learner self-discovery, much work still has to be done to eliminate gender stereotypes and supply adequate information to learners with regard to diversity (Reygan, 2014).

While many teachers noted that examples in activities will designate characters as Mr. or Mrs. and boy or girl, they use such examples as they are because the story is typically what is being highlighted rather than

the characters most of the time. This does not demonstrate that gender non-conforming learners can relate to the curriculum in terms of recognition, which could lead them to feel as though they are not members of society (Reygan, 2014).

To make sure that a classroom is a community where everyone is welcome and respected, teachers need to understand the importance of teaching without promoting gender norms and beliefs in the same way that they understand the importance of not promoting religious beliefs and other differences such as race and tribe (Fan & Chen, 2021). It is noteworthy that teachers confirmed it as one of their duties to handle diverse learners in an inclusive manner. In that way, barriers that favour one gender over the other when curriculum issues are addressed are broken. It is worthwhile to also note that varying methods of instruction must be both sensitive to learner rights and gender neutrality.

Conclusions

The study investigated schools' tolerance of gender non-conforming learners. Findings indicate that teachers demonstrated an understanding of what it means to treat each learner in the classroom equally, to build a respectful learning environment, and to encourage respect among learners themselves particularly considering differing personalities. However, teachers struggle to implement the curriculum in a way that does not reinforce gender norms and beliefs. The study recommends that curriculum and textbook design be gender-neutral so that teaching and learning do not reinforce gender binarism and the notion that gender non-conforming learners are not welcome in schools and societies and incorporate gender-inclusive teaching as part of teacher development to help teachers create healthy and stereotype-free communities in their classrooms using gender-neutral language.

Acknowledgments

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