



**Journal of Namibian Studies**  
**History Politics Culture**

**Editor**

Andreas Eckl  
eckl@namibian-studies.com

**Language Editor**

Eoin Ryan  
ryan@namibian-studies.com

**Editorial Advisory Board**

Bruno Arich-Gerz, Department for German Language and Literature Studies,  
University Wuppertal, Germany  
Christo Botha, History Department, University of Namibia, Windhoek,  
Namibia  
Medardus Brehl, Institute for Diaspora and Genocide Studies, Ruhr-  
University Bochum, Germany  
Tilman Dederig, History Department, University of South Africa, Pretoria,  
South Africa  
Ute Dieckmann, Institute of Ethnology, University of Cologne, Germany  
Gregor Dobler, Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University  
Freiburg, Germany  
John Friedman, Socio-Cultural Anthropology and Development, University  
College Roosevelt, Middelburg, The Netherlands  
Wendi Haugh, Anthropology and African Studies, St. Lawrence University,  
Canton, NY, USA  
Matthias Häußler, Department of Sociology, University Siegen, Germany  
Dag Henrichsen, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel, Switzerland  
Suzan Ilcan, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of  
Waterloo, Canada  
Meredith McKittrick, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University,  
Washington, D.C., USA  
Henning Melber, The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden  
André du Pisani, Department of Political Studies, University of Namibia,  
Windhoek, Namibia  
Chris Saunders, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town,  
Cape Town, South Africa  
Jake Short, Department of History, University of Georgia, Athens, USA  
Wolfgang Werner, Department of Land Management, Polytechnic of  
Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia  
Steven Van Wolputte, Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa,  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

## The construction and representation of sexual and gender diversity in Namibian school textbooks: Global discourses or Southern African realities?

Anthony Brown and Finn Reygan\*

### *Abstract*

*Liberal, western approaches to non-normative sexuality and gender have been roundly critiqued by queer education theorists for their regulation of sexuality and their perpetuation of cisgenderism and heteronormativity. School textbooks are a key regulatory site for the control of gender and sexuality and create zones of inclusion and exclusion in school systems. In Southern Africa sexuality and gender diversity has become a key site for global culture wars between locally embedded understandings and more global (read Western) discourses. Therefore we analysed 5 school textbooks in the Life Skills subject area in Namibia and found a clear attempt at liberal constructions and representations of sexual and gender diversity. This contrasts with local and national level understandings of non-normative sexualities and genders and is strongly influenced by Namibia's signatory status to a wide number of global education agreements that reflect a liberal humanistic understanding of sexual and gender rights.*

### Introduction

A growing number of scholars and educators are advocating for more inclusive pedagogies and classroom practices in relation to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender life.<sup>1</sup> Part of this (often Western) discourse is a focus on the need to affirm representations of sexual and gender diversity in schools so as to challenge ongoing

---

\* Anthony Brown is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: abrown@uj.ac.za

Finn Reygan is Chief Research Specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council, Extraordinary Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of the Western Cape, and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies (WiCDS) at the University of the Witwatersrand. Email: FReygan@hsrc.ac.za

<sup>1</sup> See Kirsten Helmer, "Reading queer counter-narratives in the high-school literature classroom: possibilities and challenges", *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37, 2016: 902-916; Mollie V. Blackburn and J. F. Buckley, "Teaching queer-inclusive English language arts", *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49, 2005: 202-212; Isabel Killoran and Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, "Unleashing the Unpopular": *Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity in Education*, Olney, MD, Association for Childhood Education International, 2007; Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural education*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston, MA, Pearson, 2012.

marginalization, oppression and victimization.<sup>2</sup> As Kirsten Helmer points out, there has been robust critique of anti-homophobia curricular initiatives that seek to challenge bias, change attitudes and provide information on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues and queer education theorists argue that the 'add on' approach of including more marginalized voices and teaching about the 'Other' is insufficient.<sup>3</sup> Helmer and these queer education theorists rightly point out that such discourses of affirmation are premised on liberal (and here we would add Western) concepts of acceptance and tolerance.<sup>4</sup> The real risk in the African context of such curricula and pedagogies of inclusion is that they are premised on particular, socially, culturally and politically contingent understandings of non-normative sexualities and gender. The work of Thabo Msibi, Dennis Francis and Finn Reygan challenges the taking for granted of Westcentric terms such as 'LGBT' and the ways in which they elide local and culturally bound understandings of sexual and gender diversity.<sup>5</sup> Such identities run the risk of perpetuating essentialised and identitarian politics that often do not speak to the lived realities of Southern African states. This liberal politics of sexuality re-inscribes dominant global hegemonies in relation the sex, gender and sexuality and continues to reinforce victimhood on the bodies of queer Africans.<sup>6</sup> The attempted embedding of supposedly liberatory but ultimately culturally dominant and contingent understandings of sexual and gender diversity, leads to simplistic and disconnected readings of sexuality and gender diversity in the Southern African context.

As Helmer points out, the queer education theorists writing in the North American and European contexts find that such liberal approaches to LGBT issues are deeply informed by homophobia and heteronormativity because educators continuously position learners as heterosexual and gender normative and facilitate the perpetuation of homophobia instead of positioning learners as allies or as embodying sexual and gender diversity.<sup>7</sup> She also points out that many classroom texts that focus on 'LGBTQ' issues are limited or problematic in the ways they construct and represent sexual and gender diversity, particularly in terms of the ways in which they highlight negative experiences such as bullying thereby perpetuating a discourse of LGBTQ victimhood. Here we extend this critique of liberal (and western) approaches to sexual and gender diversity by engaging

---

<sup>2</sup> See GLSEN, *Teaching Respect: LGBT-inclusive Curriculum and School Climate*, Research Brief, New York, NY, GLSEN, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Blackburn Buckley, "Teaching"; Deborah P. Britzman, "Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight", *Educational Theory*, 45, 1995: 151-165; Kevin Kumashiro, *Troubling Education. Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy*, New York, RoutledgeFalmer, 2002; Jiménez Karleen Pendleton, "Queering classrooms, curricula, and care: Stories from those who dare", *Sex Education*, 9, 2009: 169-179.

<sup>4</sup> Helmer, "Reading".

<sup>5</sup> Thabo Msibi, "I am use it now" experiences of homophobia amongst queer youth in South African township Schools", *Gender and Education*, 24, 2012: 515-533; Dennis Francis and Finn Reygan, "Relationships, intimacy and desire in the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in South Africa", *South African Review of Sociology*, 47, 2016: 65-84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

with school textbooks in Southern Africa and specifically in Namibia. Our reading of these texts is informed by the work of African theorists such as Sylvia Tamale.<sup>8</sup> We were interested in engaging the construction and representation of African sexualities and genders in school textbooks because of the pedagogical possibilities of using these texts to disrupt heteropatriarchy in Namibian schools and in so doing challenging deeply inscribed habits of feeling and doing. We hope that this work will speak to the project of developing an anti-oppressive pedagogy in Southern African schools that challenges normative and oppressive systems, practices and discourses that regulate and control sexuality and desire.

As Kumashiro's work on anti-oppressive education highlights: "oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular [harmful] discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact".<sup>9</sup> As Helmer points out, the practice of queering reading can assist in dismantling essentialised understandings of sexuality and gender while concurrently leading to an emerging understanding of such positionalities as being produced and reproduced, discursively and performatively, within regulatory regimes of control.<sup>10</sup> In this regard a deconstructive analysis of discourses and texts assists in opening up possibilities for alternative knowledge forms that challenge the construction and representation of sexual and gender diversity as well as resisting global, hegemonic discourses that elide and exclude local and culturally embedded knowledges.

We posit a queer African reading and analysis of school textbooks in Namibia, informed by a growing body of scholarship on non-normative sexualities and genders across the continent that engages with the complex ways in which power and privilege are manifest in these texts both in terms of sexual and gender diversity as well as in relation to geopolitical realities.<sup>11</sup>

## Homosexuality in Namibia

Article 10 (1) in the Namibian constitution provides that "all people shall be equal before the law and (2) no one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour, religion, ethnic origin, creed, social and economic status".<sup>12</sup> This provision that all persons are equal before the law translates into equal treatment for all people in

---

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Tamale, "Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power", *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 14, 2014: 150-177.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Kumashiro, "Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education", *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 2000: 25-53 (40).

<sup>10</sup> Helmer, "Reading"; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, NY, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 2006 [1990]; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage, 1990 [1978].

<sup>11</sup> Tamale, "Exploring"; Thabo Msibi, "The lies we have been told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa", *Africa Today*, 58 (1), 2011 :54-77; Zethu Matebeni, "Intimacy, queerness, race", *Cultural Studies*, 27, 2013: 404-417.

<sup>12</sup> Government of the Republic of Namibia, *The Constitution of Namibia*, Windhoek, GRN, 1990.

general.<sup>13</sup> Although homosexuality in Namibia is not illegal, post-Apartheid political leaders protected the colonial legislation on Sodomy which criminalizes consensual same-sex conduct between men.<sup>14</sup> Sustaining the sodomy law created an understanding that homosexuality is delegitimized.<sup>15</sup> But Namibia is signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights which explains sex as inclusive of sexualities, thus committing Namibia to the protection of LGBT people.<sup>16</sup>

For more than two decades influential elite figures within the Namibian political, religious and social schema constructed, produced and maintained a repulsive image of homosexuality that influenced how non-conforming sexualities are framed and sustained by the broader society.<sup>17</sup> Social perceptions of homosexuality in Namibia are now marred with vigorous repression, policing of a national identity imbued in compulsory heterosexual institution and the silencing of 'perverted' attractions. Discrimination experienced by individuals with same-sex identities is allegedly ignored and their concerns and challenges are treated as a non-priority by the Namibian government.<sup>18</sup>

Namibians with same-sex identities have resisted the continued repressive remarks by the prominent figures and explicitly displayed the lifestyles in public through beauty pageants, gay marriage celebrations, gay pride and same-sex activism.<sup>19</sup> Unlike in many

---

<sup>13</sup> Gloria Situmbeko, Gloria, *Sexual Orientations as a Right: The Namibian Constitution in Perspective with Specific Emphasis on the Interpretation of Article 10*, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Namibia, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Legal Assistance Centre, *Gender Based Violence through Community Engagement*, Windhoek, LAC, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Dianne Hubbard, "Ideas of equality, gender, sexuality and the law", in: Susan LaFont and Dianne Hubbard, (eds.), *Unravelling Taboos*, Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2007: 86-88.

<sup>16</sup> Gender Research and Advocacy Project, *Namibian Law on LGBT Issues*, Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2015

<sup>17</sup> Vasu Reddy, "Homophobia, human rights and gay and lesbian equality in Africa", *Agenda*, 16, 2001: 83-87; Suzanne LaFont, "Decolonising sexuality", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom*, Upsala, Nordika Afrika Institutet, 2007: 245-260; Robert Lorway, "Dispelling heterosexual African AIDS in Namibia: Same-sex sexuality in the township of Katutura", *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 8, 2006: 435-449; idem, "Defiant desire in Namibia: Female sexual-gender transgression and the making of political being", *American Ethnologist*, 35, 2008: 20-33; Patrick Awondo, Peter Geschiere and Graeme Reid, "Homophobic Africa? Toward a more nuanced view", *African Studies Review*, 55, 2012: 145-168; Ashley Currier, A, "Political homophobia in postcolonial Namibia", *Gender and Society*, 24, 2010: 110-129; idem, "The aftermath of decolonization. Gender and sexual dissidence in postindependence Namibia", *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37, 2012: 441-467; Patrick R. Ireland, "A macro-level analysis of the scope, causes, and consequences of homophobia in Africa", *African Studies Review*, 56, 2013: 47-66.

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Ombudsman, *Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia*, Windhoek, Office of the Ombudsman, 2013; Asser Ntinda, "Dr. Hage Geingob unimpressed by gay activist". SWAPO Party, [http://www.swapoparty.org/zoom\\_in\\_176.html](http://www.swapoparty.org/zoom_in_176.html) [accessed 5 June, 2019]; Ndapewoshali Shapwanale, "Nam digs in on sodomy law", *The Namibian*, 30 August, 2016, <https://www.namibian.com.na/154989/archive-read/Nam-digs-in-on-sodomy-law> [accessed June 5, 2019].

<sup>19</sup> Dan Littauer, "Mr Gay Namibia proudly marries his husband from Botswana", *Gay Star News*, 15 April 2013; Clemans Miyanicwe, "Everyday is a honey for Mr Gay Namibia and his life partner", *The Namibian*, 17 April 2013, <https://www.namibian.com.na/107240/archive-read/Everyday-is-a-honeymoon-for-Mr-Gay-Namibia-and-his-life-partner> [accessed June 6, 2019]; Roberto Igual, "Namibia Celebrates Pride", 9 December 2013, *Mamba Online*, <https://www.mambaonline.com/2013/12/09/namibia-celebrates-pride/>

other African countries where there are censorship of and punishment for homosexual lifestyles, there has been no such suppression by any state organ despite the political attitude that rendered same-sex identities inhuman.<sup>20</sup> A study on Human Rights in Namibia conducted by the Ombudsman's office in 2013 showed a gradual increase in support for LGBT people in Namibia.<sup>21</sup> In his presidential inaugural address, the current president of Namibia, Hage Geingob pledged

to serve all Namibians without exception. No Namibian must feel left out. [...] All of us must play our part in the success of this beautiful house we call Namibia. We need to renew it from time to time by undergoing renovations and extensions. [...] Let us stand together in building this new Namibian house in which no Namibian will feel left out.<sup>22</sup>

Is this an opportunity for LGBT people in Namibia to be numbered among the true inhabitants of this new Namibian house? Will Namibians with same-sex identities continue to live in the *kambasho* (a temporary shelter) from the main house or will Geingob extend his Namibian house to make room for his prodigal homosexual children? Within education, the Namibian curriculum policies are not silent on issues of homosexuality and explicitly call for the teaching and learning as well the appreciation and affirmation of diverse sexual orientation.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education is committed to the removal of barriers caused by systemic, organizational, pedagogical, curriculum-related, environmental, financial, societal, cultural and attitudinal barriers.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that education policies advocate for social justice and inclusion<sup>25</sup> school youth with non-normative sexualities face homophobic violence and discrimination from their peers and school staff.<sup>26</sup> Homophobia in schools could be

---

[accessed June 5, 2019]; Oswald Shivute, "LGBTI workshop ends at Ongwendiva", *The Namibian*, 10 July 2014, <https://www.namibian.com.na/125499/archive-read/LGBTI-workshop-ends-at-Ongwendiva> [accessed June 6, 2019].

<sup>20</sup> Ireland, "A macro-level analysis"; Adriaan S. Van Klinken, "Gay rights, the devil and the end times: public religion and the enchantment of the homosexuality debate in Zambia", *Religion*, 43, 2013: 519-540; Stella Yanzi, "Rhetorical analysis of President Jammeh's threats to behead homosexuals in the Gambia", in: S.N. Nyeck and Marc Epprecht, (eds.), *Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory and Citizenship*, London, Montreal & Kingston, 2013: 67-87.

<sup>21</sup> Office of the Ombudsman, *Baseline Study Report*.

<sup>22</sup> Henning Melber, H "From Nujoma to Geingob: 25 years of presidential democracy", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 18, 2015: 49-65 (61).

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education, *Life Skills Syllabus Grade 11 & 12*, Windhoek, NIED, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Education, *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*, Windhoek, Ministry of Education, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> See Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalised Children*, Windhoek, MBESC, 2000; Ministry of Education, *Education Sector Policy for Orphans & Vulnerable Children*, Windhoek, Ministry of Education, 2008; Ministry of Education, *Sector Policy*.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne LaFont, *Beliefs and Attitudes toward Gender, Sexuality and Traditions amongst Namibian Youth*, Windhoek, LAC & OYO, 2010; Anthony Brown, "School-based gender-related violence in Namibia: causes and manifestations", *Commonwealth Youth and Development*, 14: 2016, 54-64; idem, " 'Sometimes people kill you emotionally': policing inclusion, experiences of self-identified homosexual youth in secondary schools in Namibia", *African Identities*, 15 (3), 2017, 339-350; Dennis A. Francis and Anthony Brown, "To

linked to the remnants of the political and religious bigotry and homophobic slurs that was deposited by prominent leaders over two decades.<sup>27</sup> There is a need to hold education accountable to their statutory responsibility to ensure an inclusive and safe learning environment for all learners through the teaching, learning and curriculum and spaces.

## Findings

We chose Namibia as a site for the study as education policy there is among the most progressive in the region in relation to diversity and because, while it is clearly embedded in regional realities, Namibia is also a signatory to many global agreements related to inclusive education and diversity in education. School textbooks, one of the most critical sources for learning, are often valued as the legitimate and truthful knowledge frames.<sup>28</sup> As a result we analysed a series of textbooks in Namibia and asked the following question: What is the construction and representation of difference, specifically in relation to sexual and gender diversity, in these textbooks? In Namibia the key subject area for exploring issues of sexual and gender diversity is the Life Skills subject area. As a result we analysed the construction and representation of sexual and gender diversity in the Life Skills senior phase from Grades 8 to 12. We analysed the texts in terms of heteronormative power and privilege and we were particularly interested in the ways in which difference related to gender and sexuality was depicted on the pages of these Life Skills texts. These texts are important because they are key in determining how teachers in the classroom teach about sexual and gender diversity. Findings from our analysis of power, privilege and heteronormativity as perpetuated in and through these texts are presented below.

Previous research in the region, including in South Africa, highlighted the pathologising impetus of Life Skills subject area textbooks in relation to sexual and gender diversity.<sup>29</sup> In Namibia we found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities and lives were constructed and presented in an apparently affirming manner in the higher grades in Grades 11-12. For example on pages 160-162 of the Grade 11 textbook there are clear definitions presented of terms related to 'Sexual preferences', including Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Bisexuality and Asexuality.

- a. **Heterosexuality:** The norm is heterosexuality, which is feeling sexual attraction to a person of the opposite sex.

---

correct, to punish and to praise'. Learner Representative Council leaders' experiences and expressions of non-heterosexuality in Namibian schools", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 12, 2017: 1276-1293.

<sup>27</sup> Lorway, "Dispelling"; LaFont, *Beliefs and Attitudes*; Brown, "Sometimes".

<sup>28</sup> Michael W. Apple, "The text and cultural politics", *Journal of Educational Thought*, 24, 1990: 117-133.

<sup>29</sup> Cheryl Potgieter and Finn C. G. Reygan, "Lesbian, gay and bisexual citizenship: A case study as represented as a sample of South African Life Orientation textbooks", *Perspectives in Education*, 2012: 39-51.



**b. Trans-sexuality:** There are some people who do not feel comfortable in their physical body and they identify with the opposite sex for example boys would wear make-up and girls would wear male clothes. It goes as far as transgender operations where they change their bodies from male to female or from female to male. This is often not sexually motivated but a case of being born in the wrong body.

**c. Homosexuality** involves sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. People may feel quite comfortable in their own bodies but they may develop sexual feelings for members of their own sex. Being gay means someone falls in love with a person of the same sex. Gay women are called lesbians.

**d. Bisexuality** means that you are sexually attracted by persons of both sexes.

**e. Asexuality** means that the person does not have a sexual drive. It could also mean that the sexual organs of the person are under-developed and that there are not hormonal changes to the body.

In terms of semiotics, there are visual portrayals of both an opposite sex and a same sex couple. There is also a clear articulation of bias and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation with a paragraph explaining 'Homophobia' on page 161. However, while these pages appear on the surface to foster inclusion, also on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and function as a corrective to homophobia, thereby fostering Education for All policies, something else is also happening.

On closer inspection the visual representation LGBTI identities has been rendered somewhat asexual in comparison with the picture of the opposite sex couple. In the latter the man's arms encircle the woman's waist, his hands rest on her belly, and her arms rest on his.



In contrast, the picture of the same-sex representation shows a group of young people in what could also be read as a depiction of friends or 'buddies'. The same-sex representation indicates that same-sexualities cannot be seen, perhaps to avoid stereotyping.



Heterosexuality is also placed first in the list of possible 'sexual preferences', is denoted by the letter 'a', and is defined as the norm relationship for most people. Consequently, heterosexuality continues to be privileged in these texts as the preferred. Homosexuality is also immediately associated with the West, with United States President Obama quoted in relation to equality and 'equal rights for all'. It is here that the global discourse around 'gay rights' and the inclusion of sexual and gender minority learners comes to the fore. It is also here that work by United Nations bodies such as UNESCO is implicit in relation to homophobic bullying in schools.

There follows a paragraph about the origins of homosexuality that appears at first glance to be affirming and inclusive. Here the authors of the textbook state clearly that homosexuality is not a mental disorder or disease and reference the damaging effects of efforts at reparative therapy. Again, this discourse speaks to the western historical curve in relation to homosexuality, including the declassification of homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association and the depathologisation of homosexuality in the West. Again, the pervading discourse is a global/Western discourse in relation to gay rights that has also begun to emerge in global discourses around EFA. Nevertheless, in an otherwise supposedly affirming approach the focus on the aetiology of homosexuality pathologises non-normative sexuality. By focusing on where homosexuality comes from, the authors position homosexuality as deviating from the 'normal' and 'natural' psychosexual development arc, which concludes successfully in heterosexuality.

The topic of personal sexuality and preferences also emerges in earlier grades, including in grade 8 on page 49. Here the semiotics are quite clear: when it comes to non-normative sexuality, a terse, depressive and gloomy air pervades. There is also some conflation in the text of sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Sexual orientation** refers to who you are as a human being, your femaleness or your maleness. Our sexuality begins at birth and ends at death. Your sexuality is an interaction between body image, gender role and sexual orientation. How

people express sexuality is influenced by their families, culture, society faith and beliefs.

The neologism of 'trans-sexuality' in grades 11 and 12 is also coined and transgender experience is presented in terms of the 'trapped in the wrong body' trope.

**Trans-sexuality:** [...] It goes as far as transgender operations where they change their bodies from male to female or from female to male. This is often not sexually motivated but a case of *being born in the wrong body* [emphasis added].

Trans-sexuality is also foregrounded in a broader section on sexuality, though the risk of conflating the two is highlighted by the authors of the text. Also, while much of the focus of the text is on sexual attraction, homosexuality is also understood as falling in love with a person of the same sex.

Overall, the generally favourable and affirming representations of sexual and gender diversity in Namibian Life Skills textbooks reflects a strong focus on diversity and inclusion in Namibian school policy. Therefore our findings add to the critique of those anti-homophobia curricular initiatives that purport to challenge bias and provide information on sexual and gender diversity. The 'add on' approach and a focus on the sexual and gendered 'Other' are insufficient in Namibian textbooks and reflect a critique of such materials elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> We found a troubling reliance on liberal, Western discourses of tolerance and affirmation that are premised on socially, culturally and politically contingent understandings of sexual and gender diversity that have emerged in other geographical areas. In short, we find little that was 'Namibian' or 'African' in the construction and representation of non-normative sexualities and genders in these Life Skills textbooks from Southern Africa. This finding is not new at a regional level, given the work done in the South African context, but is to our knowledge the first study of the elision of local and culturally bound understandings of sexual and gender diversity in Namibian school textbooks.<sup>31</sup> To better understand the semiotics of these textbooks it is necessary to understand the broader, global education policy context.

## Geopolitical discourses

'Education for All' has become a key trope in the international education arena and has generated policy and programming transnationally. Several countries in the Southern Africa region, including Namibia, are signatories to various international treaties and conventions on education. Global policies and treaties have been instrumental in the restructuring of Namibia's education from the Apartheid ideologies based on racial, ethnic, language, (dis)ability and gender factors.<sup>32</sup> In 1990 the newly elected democratic government of Namibia set about building an education system that would foster ideals

---

<sup>30</sup> See Blackburn and Buckley, "Teaching"; Britzman, "Queer pedagogy"; Pendleton, "Queering classrooms".

<sup>31</sup> Msibi, "The lies"; Francis and Reygan, "Relationships".

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Education, *Education Sector Policy for Orphans*; Ministry of Education, *Sector Policy*.

based on the values of democracy, social justice, equality and human rights.<sup>33</sup> The adoption of international policy statements on human rights created guidelines for greater equality particularly in the education sector. However, after two and half decades the reality in Namibia is that equity and quality education are selectively granted to some groups while others are excluded.<sup>34</sup>

The architecture of education in Namibia is based on the various universal declarations made since the early days of country's democracy. Among others is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Namibia in 1990 to affirm the right of the child to participate in all matters affecting the child.<sup>35</sup> The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was ratified in 1990 and asserts that all children shall be treated with humanity and with respect.<sup>36</sup> A key global declaration is UNESCO's Salamanca Statement on Inclusive Education of 1994 which promulgates that schooling should be able to cater for all children regardless of their differences or difficulties. It is a global development towards the provision of education which is free from discrimination and advocates the adherence to human rights within the education system.<sup>37</sup> In 2000 Namibia signed the Education for All Action Framework in Dakar which calls for global education equity and improved quality of education around the world.<sup>38</sup> Global policy statements support a campaign for an intensive revision of policy, curriculum and pedagogy in order to facilitate the actualization of an inclusive educational practice that would ensure that all children receive quality education.<sup>39</sup> The effects of these declarations on education policies in Namibia are clearly visible and this in turn has determined the content of the textbooks analysed in this study.

In 1990 Namibia adopted the policy of Education for All, as enshrined in Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution which states that "All persons shall have the right to education."<sup>40</sup> The policy of Education for All meant that: all psychological, social or physical barriers to learning are to be removed; the state provides an education that will benefit all; and the state integrates those learners into the education system who were previously denied such opportunities. These various instruments devised by the Namibian government facilitate an education system that is non-discriminatory and inclusive and appear to support an education system which recognises the existence of

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Education, *Education Sector Policy for Orphans*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs*, Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, Salamanca, June 1994, UNESCO, New York, 1994

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*, UNESCO, New York, 2000

<sup>39</sup> Mojdeh Bayat, "Global education diplomacy and inclusion in developing countries", *Childhood Education*, July/August, 2014: 272-280.

<sup>40</sup> Government of the Republic of Namibia, *Constitution*.

diversity in social, cultural and gender landscapes. However there are contradictory factors that exist within this education system which pose a problem if not a threat to the realisation of this assumed diversity. Although the Namibian government has committed itself to EFA, it is not clear who is really included in the *all*. These policies are particularly designed to support children who are vulnerable or at risk and ensure that all children benefit from the opportunities of education. The Ministry of Education through the various policy frames has made considerable effort to identify children who are vulnerable and at risk of failing to complete their education. However the gap between the expression of rights in policy statements and the delivery in practice is still wide. In particular, there continues to be ambivalence about youth who embody non-normative sexualities and genders and in terms of the development of materials that specifically name and include such young people in an affirming way.

School textbooks, particularly in poorer countries where the latest technology is not widely available, are one of the most valued mediums for facilitating learning. We know that what is taught in most schools is defined not by the course or subject of study but largely by the textbook and that students expect the textbook to be the framework for the majority of information and experiences.<sup>41</sup> 'Life Skills' forms part of the school curriculum in Namibia and aims to equip learners to respond positively to the multi-faceted community that we live in and to uphold the responsibilities of living in such a community. It focuses on holistic development in the personal, social, intellectual and emotional dimensions of life. This subject for all grades in secondary school is one of the most effective entry points in dealing with various ideas of diversity, social justice, decision making, democracy and human rights. Threats to these fundamentals, such as violence, abuse and discrimination, are also addressed and social cohesion is promoted. It is in this broader conceptualisation that 'LGBTI' rights find a home in education policy in Namibia, albeit an uncomfortable one. This ambivalence is reflected in the ambivalent construction of sexual and gender diversity in the textbooks analysed here.

In Namibia there is a deafening silence when it comes to the education, care and support of young people who do not conform to sexual and gender norms. These learners frequently experience rejection, isolation, discrimination, and may drop out of school or even contemplate suicide.<sup>42</sup> At the same time gender in Namibia is conceptualized through various misconceptions, stereotypes and taboos that are driven by powerful structures of culture, religion and politics.<sup>43</sup> Schools as microcosms of society are found to normalize, reproduce and privilege stereotypical masculinity and hegemonic heteronormative gender identities.<sup>44</sup> This challenges assumptions as to who

---

<sup>41</sup> Vicky L. Snyders and Francis S. Broadway, "Queering high school biology textbooks", *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 41, 2004: 617-636.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, "School-based"; idem, "Sometimes".

<sup>43</sup> Philip Talavera, *Challenging the Namibian Perception of Sexuality: A Case Study of the Ovahimba and Ovaherero Culturo-Sexual Models in the Kunene North in an HIV/AIDS Context*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2002; LaFont, *Beliefs and Attitudes*; Currier, "The aftermath"; Lorway, "Defiant".

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, Elizabeth J., *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools*, London, Springer, 2010.

has rights within the EFA framework as operationalised in Namibia. On issues of sexual and gender diversity in schools, clear tensions emerge between what is common practice globally and what is acceptable within the local context. Therefore it is important to explore how tensions between global ratification and local context over sexual and gender diversity are dealt with in the education system. In Namibian Life Skills textbooks, of which one standardised textbook exists for each school grade, sexual and gender diversity are covered in grades eight to ten. For example, understandings about homosexuality are one of the learning outcomes of the secondary school Life Skills syllabus. The various sections covered in the Life Skills textbooks are compiled according to the Life Skills syllabi. Since there are national standardized textbooks, uncertainties exist around how publishers were identified as well as about the textbook authors' ontological and epistemological positioning.

## Conclusions

Following Vicky Snyder and Francis Broadway, we agree that knowledge within textbooks is not neutral but rather the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable groups on issues including gender, sex, race, nationality, and sexuality.<sup>45</sup> Such knowledge can be viewed as either giving students a set of tools from which they can create their own physical and social future or as controlling their future by instilling cultural dangers that threaten the dominant normative morality. Unpacking how sexual and gender diversity is presented in the Life Skills textbooks is critical to ensure the practical realisation of the various policies that guide education in Namibia. In conclusion, we ask: Why do these school textbooks apparently employ, if inconsistently, a liberal approach to sexual and gender diversity? As queer education theorists have already shown in the western context, such an approach leads to the perpetuation of regulatory and normative approaches to sexuality and gender. These Namibian texts were no exception as they semiotically perpetuate cisgenderism and heteronormativity but in a manner that is reflective not of local understandings of non-normative sexuality and gender but rather of the global discourse emanating mainly from Europe and North America. In attempting to trace the emergence of such discourses in Namibian textbooks we found that the issue of 'diversity in education' has increasingly come to the fore in education systems across Southern Africa in recent times, as reflected in initiatives such as a Ministerial Committee on diversity in education in South Africa as well as a recent UNESCO/GALA study on diversity in schools across the region.

In this postcolonial and post-apartheid, developing economy context characterized by great regional diversity, the issue of difference in education foregrounds multiple fault lines in relation to race, gender, age, language, ethnicity, class and sexuality among others. The latter in particular has received much greater attention most recently as sexual orientation and gender identity are being articulated as the next frontier in the global human rights discourse, which is also taking place in Southern Africa. In terms of

---

<sup>45</sup> Snyders and Broadway, "Queering".

diversity in education, the role of texts is pivotal in fostering among a younger generation of Southern Africans competencies related to power, privilege and difference. Although education stakeholders in Namibia have made efforts to align local educational policies with global educational values, the reality in Namibian classrooms does not reflect existing policy. In this regard the local rhetoric on sexual and gender diversity is framed through a strong hegemonic and heteronormative lens that views non-normative sexualities and genders as unAfrican.<sup>46</sup> This results in intolerance, discrimination and rejection of individuals who do not conform to the norm in Namibia.<sup>47</sup> Young people in schools who identify themselves or are perceived to be non-heteronormative are subjected to violence, bullying and discrimination by fellow learners, teachers and school administrators.<sup>48</sup>

There are many countries in the Southern Africa region, Namibia included, that have signed global treaties and agreements in relation to EFA which include an understanding and acceptance that particular groups, such as girls and young women, have been and continue to be excluded from full access to education. In response a growing number of international bodies, including those of the United Nations, are developing programmes and interventions to foster greater access to education for previously marginalised groups including most recently a growing focus on sexual and gender minority inclusion. However, given prevailing cultural and social norms in the Southern Africa region, as well as anti-homosexuality legislation in some states the focus on LGBTI inclusion creates clear tensions. Nevertheless, as a signatory to international agreements on inclusion and equality in education, Namibia has been propelled towards embracing diversity in education. However these competing national, regional and global discourses create tensions and inconsistencies that filter down into the writing of textbooks for schools. These tensions are apparent in Life Skills textbooks which on the surface appear generally affirming and inclusive but also display a subtle and indirect antipathy towards and rejection of non-normative sexualities and genders. Power is manifest in these texts as heteronormativity is continuously inscribed and re-inscribed and where homosexuality is semiotically presented as 'other', risky and tenebrous. In short, the presentation of sexual and gender diversity in Life Skills textbooks in Namibia has yet to be grounded culturally, linguistically and contextually so as to speak to the lived experience of young people in schools throughout the country. The current construction of sexual and gender diversity in these textbooks owes much to global, and particularly Western, discourses around sexual orientation and gender identity and has yet to fully engage with Namibian understandings and ways of knowing.

---

<sup>46</sup> Legal Assistance Centre, *Corporal Punishment: National and International Perspectives*, Windhoek, LAC, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Currier, "The aftermath"

<sup>48</sup> Brown, "Sometimes".

## Bibliography

### Books and articles

- Apple, Michael W., "The text and cultural politics", *Journal of Educational Thought*, 24, 1990: 117-133.
- Awondo, Patrick, Peter Geschiere and Graeme Reid, "Homophobic Africa? Toward a more nuanced view", *African Studies Review*, 55, 2012: 145-168.
- Bayat, Mojdeh, "Global education diplomacy and inclusion in developing countries", *Childhood Education*, July/August, 2014: 272-280.
- Blackburn, Mollie V. and J. F. Buckley, "Teaching queer-inclusive English language arts", *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49, 2005: 202-212.
- Britzman, Deborah P., "Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight", *Educational Theory*, 45, 1995: 151-165.
- Brown, Anthony, "School-based gender-related violence in Namibia: causes and manifestations", *Commonwealth Youth and Development*, 14: 2016, 54-64.
- Brown, Anthony, "'Sometimes people kill you emotionally': policing inclusion, experiences of self-identified homosexual youth in secondary schools in Namibia", *African Identities*, 15 (3), 2017, 339-350.
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, NY, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 2006 [1990].
- Currier, Ashley, "Political homophobia in postcolonial Namibia", *Gender and Society*, 24, 2010: 110-129.
- Currier, Ashley, "The aftermath of decolonization. Gender and sexual dissidence in postindependence Namibia", *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37, 2012: 441-467.
- Francis, Dennis A. and Anthony Brown, "'To correct, to punish and to praise'. Learner Representative Council leaders' experiences and expressions of non-heterosexuality in Namibian schools", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 12, 2017: 1276-1293.
- Francis, Dennis and Finn Reygan, "Relationships, intimacy and desire in the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in South Africa", *South African Review of Sociology*, 47, 2016: 65-84.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage, 1990 [1978].
- Gender Research and Advocacy Project, *Namibian Law on LGBT Issues*, Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2015.
- GLSEN, *Teaching Respect: LGBT-inclusive Curriculum and School Climate*, Research Brief, New York, NY, GLSEN, 2011.
- Government of the Republic of Namibia, *The Constitution of Namibia*, Windhoek, GRN, 1990.
- Helmer, Kirsten, "Reading queer counter-narratives in the high-school literature classroom: possibilities and challenges", *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37, 2016: 902-916.
- Hubbard, Dianne, "Ideas of equality, gender, sexuality and the law", in: Susan LaFont and Dianne Hubbard, (eds.), *Unravelling Taboos*, Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2007: 86-88.
- Ireland, Patrick R., "A macro-level analysis of the scope, causes, and consequences of homophobia in Africa", *African Studies Review*, 56, 2013: 47-66.
- Killoran, Isabel and Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, *"Unleashing the Unpopular": Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity in Education*, Olney, MD, Association for Childhood Education International, 2007.
- Kumashiro, Kevin, "Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education", *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 2000: 25-53.
- Kumashiro, Kevin, *Troubling Education. Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy*, New York, RoutledgeFalmer, 2002.
- Legal Assistance Centre, *Gender Based Violence through Community Engagement*, Windhoek, LAC, 2010.



- Legal Assistance Centre, *Corporal Punishment: National and International Perspectives*, Windhoek, LAC, 2010.
- LaFont, Suzanne, "Decolonising sexuality", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom*, Upsala, Nordika Afrika Institutet, 2007: 245-260.
- LaFont, Suzanne, *Beliefs and Attitudes toward Gender, Sexuality and Traditions amongst Namibian Youth*, Windhoek, LAC & OYO, 2010.
- Lorway, Robert, "Dispelling heterosexual African AIDS in Namibia: Same-sex sexuality in the township of Katutura", *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 8, 2006: 435-449.
- Lorway, Robert, "Defiant desire in Namibia: Female sexual-gender transgression and the making of political being", *American Ethnologist*, 35, 2008: 20-33.
- Matebeni, Zethu. "Intimacy, queerness, race", *Cultural Studies*, 27, 2013: 404-417.
- Melber, Henning, "From Nujoma to Geingob: 25 years of presidential democracy", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 18, 2015: 49-65.
- Meyer, Elizabeth J., *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools*, London, Springer, 2010.
- Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalised Children*, Windhoek, MBESC, 2000.
- Ministry of Education, *Education Sector Policy for Orphans & Vulnerable Children*, Windhoek, Ministry of Education, 2008.
- Ministry of Education, *Life Skills Syllabus Grade 11 & 12*, Windhoek, NIED, 2009.
- Ministry of Education, *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*, Windhoek, Ministry of Education, 2013.
- Msibi, Thabo, "The lies we have been told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa", *Africa Today*, 58 (1), 2011 :54-77.
- Msibi, Thabo, "I am use it now" experiences of homophobia amongst queer youth in South African township Schools", *Gender and Education*, 24, 2012: 515-533.
- Nieto, Sonia and Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural education*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston, MA, Pearson, 2012.
- Office of the Ombudsman, *Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia*, Windhoek, Office of the Ombudsman, 2013.
- Pendleton, Jiménez Karleen, "Queering classrooms, curricula, and care: Stories from those who dare", *Sex Education*, 9, 2009: 169-179.
- Potgieter, Cheryl and Finn C. G. Reygan, "Lesbian, gay and bisexual citizenship: A case study as represented as a sample of South African Life Orientation textbooks", *Perspectives in Education*, 2012: 39-51.
- Reddy, Vasu, "Homophobia, human rights and gay and lesbian equality in Africa", *Agenda*, 16, 2001: 83-87.
- Situmbeko, Gloria, *Sexual Orientations as a Right: The Namibian Constitution in Perspective with Specific Emphasis on the Interpretation of Article 10*, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Namibia, 2008.
- Snyders, Vicky L. and Francis S. Broadway, "Queering high school biology textbooks", *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 41, 2004: 617-636.
- Talavera, Philip, *Challenging the Namibian Perception of Sexuality: A Case Study of the Ovahimba and Ovaherero Culturo-Sexual Models in the Kunene North in an HIV/AIDS Context*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2002.
- Tamale, Sylvia, "Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power", *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 14, 2014: 150-177.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs*, Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, Salamanca, June 1994, UNESCO, New York, 1994.

- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*, UNESCO, New York, 2000.
- Van Klinken, Adriaan S., "Gay rights, the devil and the end times: public religion and the enchantment of the homosexuality debate in Zambia", *Religion*, 43, 2013: 519-540.
- Yanzi, Stella, "Rhetorical analysis of President Jammeh's threats to behead homosexuals in the Gambia", in: S.N. Nyeck and Marc Epprecht, (eds.), *Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory and Citizenship*, London, Montreal & Kingston, 2013: 67-87.

### Newspapers and internet sources

- Igual, Roberto, "Namibia Celebrates Pride", 9 December 2013, Mamba Online, <<https://www.mambaonline.com/2013/12/09/namibia-celebrates-pride/>> [accessed June 6, 2019].
- Littauer, Dan, "Mr Gay Namibia proudly marries his husband from Botswana", *Gay Star News*, 15 April 2013.
- Miyanicwe, Clemans, "Everyday is a honey for Mr Gay Namibia and his life partner", *The Namibian*, 17 April 2013, <<https://www.namibian.com.na/107240/archive-read/Everyday-is-a-honeymoon-for-Mr-Gay-Namibia-and-his-life-partner>> [accessed June 6, 2019].
- Ntinda, Asser, "Dr. Hage Geingob unimpressed by gay activist". SWAPO Party, <[http://www.swapoparty.org/zoom\\_in\\_176.html](http://www.swapoparty.org/zoom_in_176.html)> [accessed June 6, 2019].
- Shapwanale, Ndapewoshali, "Nam digs in on sodomy law", *The Namibian*, 30 August, 2016, <<https://www.namibian.com.na/154989/archive-read/Nam-digs-in-on-sodomy-law>> [accessed June 6, 2019].
- Shivute, Oswald, "LGBTI workshop ends at Ongwendiva", *The Namibian*, 10 July 2014, <<https://www.namibian.com.na/125499/archive-read/LGBTI-workshop-ends-at-Ongwediva>> [accessed June 6, 2019].