


School principals' responses in creating an inclusive schooling space for gender and sexual diverse learners

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Background: Numerous policies and initiatives of South African Department of Basic Education mandate principals to ensure inclusive school spaces to support and cater for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer or questioning (LGBTIQ) learners. Yet, heterosexual and cisgender youth are still valorised by principals as the only gender and sexual category in schools.

Objectives: Drawing on the social justice leadership theory, this article aimed to add to the conversation on how school principals in their leadership positions can enable a safe and inclusive schooling space for learners with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

Methods: Principals are mandated to collaborate with the community and parents such as the School Governing Body (SGB), thus the attitudes and responses of these principals through the narratives of parents of LGBTIQ children were examined. As part of a qualitative study, individual interviews were conducted with six parents in the Free State and Gauteng provinces of South Africa, and the data were analysed thematically.

Results: The results of this study showed that the principals did not comply with any of these policy requirements or responsibilities and willingly ignored them.

Conclusion: Expanding LGBTIQ content in educational leadership training is a necessary step to convince school leaders that LGBTIQ awareness and inclusion are necessary for creating a positive and inclusive schooling climate.

Contribution: This study provided reasons for principals to disrupt normative ideas of gender and sexual diversity and the effect of their silence and ignorance.

Keywords: principals; LGBTIQ youth; gender and sexual diversity; heteronormativity; cisnormativity; inclusive education; social justice leadership.

Introduction

School principals in South Africa are being compelled by influential policies and laws to reconsider their approach towards establishing and advocating for a secure, comprehensive, and supportive educational environment for students of different genders and sexual orientations. Some of these policies and legislative work include the Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship (SASP) (2015), the *South African Schools Act (SASA), 1984 (Act No. 84 of 1996)*, *Child Justice Act, 2008 (Act No. 74 of 2008)*, White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (2001) etc. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer or questioning (LGBTIQ) youth are protected under these policies and legislative frameworks and deliberate attempts have been made by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), through the policies and legislative frameworks as mentioned, to create safe and inclusive schooling spaces for these minority youth by acknowledging them. However, Payne and Smith (2018) found in the context of the United States (US), that school principals as institutional and organisational leaders still resist and avoid LGBTIQ youth and their mental health. They also revealed that school principals resist the conversation around school responsibilities to not only the learners but also their families. According to Bishop (2012), principals resist the notion of inclusive and equal education because of their own biases. To respond to this resistance, progressive policies and legislation, which the Department of Education (DoE) needs to be commended for, heteronormativity and heterosexism still exist. Several challenges have hindered the effective implementation of these policies and where space is allowed for principals to ignore these required policies. As with many inclusive education policies and legislations, there are still discrepancies between policy and practice. These include addressing issues of compulsory gender binaries and marginalisation of gender and sexual minority youth.

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The stigmatisation, marginalisation, and discrimination of LGBTIQ youth are well documented and associated with many health and social inequalities both in South Africa and around the globe (Bhana, 2012; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Msibi, 2012). Cisnormativity, as a structure, dominates South African schools and is reflected in the regulation of everyday practices such as hairstyles, bathrooms, and school uniforms (Francis, 2021; Francis & Monakali, 2021; Haffeejee & Wiebesiek, 2021; Msibi, 2012). This study is not negating the importance of prior research on gender identity and sexual orientation in youth comprehensive sexuality education. However, the focus is on the duties, responsibilities, and practices of school principals and their hetero- and cis-normative ideologies rather than rehashing the same conversation about the lives of the LGBTIQ youth, the teaching of comprehensive sexuality in schools, and the exclusion of gender and sexual diversity in schools. As Francis (2023) underscores, the existence of institutionalised practices sets hetero and cisgender learners apart from the rest of the school.

A limited empirical research explicitly addresses school principals' efforts to create more inclusive school environments for LGBTIQ learners. Studies have been conducted that focused on principals who identify themselves as socially just leaders (Albritton et al., 2017). However, little attention has been given to principals who resist social change in their schools, specifically including gender and sexually diverse learners. The inability of school management, and specifically school principals, to respond, engage with, and challenge a homophobic and transphobic schooling culture is a vital reason behind this study (Francis, 2023). This article addresses the key question: How do school principals position and respond to enable a socially just school culture that is safe and inclusive and affirming for learners with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations? The following sections that are included in the study are: literature review, theoretical framework, research methodology and design, results, discussion, and finally recommendations and conclusions.

Literature review

The literature review will address two main topics: the description of mandated principalship policies and the role of principals as leaders promoting social justice.

Mandated principalship policy descriptors

Identifying ways in which principals assist LGBTIQ learners has become increasingly critical as more learners experience daily oppression at schools. Queer youth experience marginalisation (Butler & Astbury, 2008) and victimisation (Mostert, Gordon & Krieglner, 2015; Harris & Farrington, 2014). LGBTIQ youth's experiences of marginalisation, (Butler & Astbury, 2008) and victimisation (Gordon & Krieglner, 2015; Harris & Farrington, 2014) are documented in this article. Incidents of homophobia and transphobia dominate the field of gender and sexuality studies in schools (Francis, 2023). Many progressive policy and legislation changes such as

Policy on the SASP (2015), the *South African Schools Act (SASA), 1984 (Act No. 84 of 1996)*, *Child Justice Act, 2008 (Act No. 74 of 2008)*, White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education, (2001) etc., are set in place to put pressure on school principals to ensure safe and inclusive schools as well as for parents to have a voice in the schooling of their children. However, even after the employment of a sequence of inclusive education policies post-1994, several challenges have stalled the effective execution of these policies in South Africa. One is that school principals avoid the existence and identity of the LGBTIQ community. The SASP aims at establishing a clear and agreed understanding of the expectations from school leadership and management, and working towards inclusivity and equality. Furthermore, the SASP emphasises the core values as underpinned by the Constitution of the Republic of South and the transformational goals of the South African Education system. In the SASP document, the DBE highlights the critical role that school principals play in enabling and maintaining a schooling environment of safe and inclusive schooling spaces for learners with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, working against heteronormativity and heterosexism. However, a culture of discrimination and marginalisation remains where principals remain in powerful positions of patriarchy and act as active agents to promote a culture of hetero- and cis-normativity.

The SASP, in line with other policy initiatives as mentioned earlier, is designed to improve professional standards of leadership and management for the benefit of all learners and the quality of the education service. According to SASA, all learners have the right to access meaningful learning experiences and opportunities and the school community has the right to a safe and secure learning environment. The well-being of all learners must be fostered within the school and the wider community, which according to the SASP, is the responsibility of the school principal. Even with the policy and legislative support, LGBTIQ youths still experience high levels of institutional and interpersonal discrimination. Principals as social justice leaders are in the position to counter hetero- and cis-normativity in schools (Francis, 2023). As with heterosexuality, cisgender, that is, aligning gender and sexual identity with biological sex and societal norms, is recognised and privileged in schools. Research shows that LGBTIQ learners report higher levels of discrimination, bullying, victimisation, depression, alcohol use, and drug use than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. High degrees of discrimination against homosexual and transgender youth point to the privilege of the heterosexual and cisgender world. Therefore, school principals have the ideal opportunity to fulfil their duty of establishing a secure and fair educational environment for young individuals who identify as LGBTIQ.

Principals as social justice leaders

Principals have a large influence on creating a non-violent and positive climate for the schools they serve, free of personal biases and ignorance. Nevertheless, the actual situation does not always align with this notion, as discussions

around gender and sexual diversity tend to be frequently disputed and sidestepped within schools (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). This is also because of the fear that gender and sexuality are not appropriate in schools and the curriculum. Principals as government employees are required to ensure that all learners have equal education in a safe learning and socially just environment. A socially just school climate benefits all learners by playing a key role in the acceptance of difference and in lessening the threats associated with being considered as different, strengthening the potential for positive identity development. According to Brown (2006), it is expected for principals to challenge their views and values. The leadership of the principal is one of the most important variables in a school reform towards a safe and inclusive schooling environment. Schools are expected to become centres of reform, change, and transformation, and it is the principal who is responsible to navigate it in such a matter institutionally and culturally. The principal's leadership position sets the tone for what are acceptable behaviour and practices by establishing and enforcing school policies, connecting with the teachers and parents, and leading the school towards a socially just and positive school climate. The SASP is underpinned, among other roles and duties, by the following educational and social values, which need to be upheld :

- The principal should acknowledge that a variety of sexual orientations exist among their learners and ensure that there is respect for the orientation and identity of every learner.
- The principal should create systems that will build relationships.
- The principal should involve parents and communities involved in the school for suggestions about how to change and improve processes and situations at the school.

Theoretical framework

The social justice leadership theory explores factors that preserve social inequities and oppression and propose solutions to address these issues. School leaders who utilise this lens of emancipation, challenge the assumptions behind school policies and traditional exclusive school practices. The author has used the social justice leadership theory by disseminating the position that school principals critically and continuously evaluate the use and abuse of power, discover how leadership practices enable and promote the perpetuation of inequities, and actively seek to transform those inequities into equity for all learners (Wang, 2018). Using Foster's (1989) idea of social justice leadership, the author considers how socially just leaders in schools wield power by concentrating on diverse school learners and providing an inclusive and safe learning environment. According to Foster's (1989) theory, school leadership is about people and relationships to battle oppressive structures that are present within schools. Foster also recognises that leading for social justice cannot be accomplished by a single person, but rather requires collaborative efforts from school

leadership, learners, and the community. Being a leader in promoting social justice is however a complex undertaking and often involves confronting substantial systemic obstacles and encountering resistance on a broad scale. As found in the study by Albritton et al. (2017), principals failed to utilise their positions of authority to support, acknowledge, or advocate for LGBTIQ learners. Brooks et al. (2007) concur that social justice leadership is a process that is constantly reconstructed in response to evolving requirements in the educational system.

This article engaged with the social justice leadership theory, and argues that principals and leaders who encourage their schooling spaces to move from exclusive to inclusive by employing both practice and policy, can be leaders working towards social justice (DeMatthews, 2015; Shields & Hesbol, 2019). Social justice leadership promotes and actively engages in the ideals of inclusiveness and equity as well as fighting against any form of social injustices or exclusions. Social justice leadership also believes in distributive leadership where the education of a child is not only limited to that of the school but also the parents and community.

Research methods and design

This study explored how school principals resist and avoid discussions on the inclusiveness of sexual and gender-diverse learners. A qualitative research design by using parents' experiences with principals regarding the inclusion of their children with LGBTIQ identities was employed. The narratives of these parents served to analyse, describe, and understand their experiences with principals in terms of the discriminatory school culture their children face (Mostert Gordon & Krieglner, 2006). In this study, a phenomenological method was used to explore and describe these lived experiences of six parents. The narratives of the parents were collected through semi-structured interviews. There were however strict criteria for these parents to participate in the study:

- The parent had to be aware of their child's LGBTIQ identity as a school child
- The parent had to be aware of any form of discrimination or exclusion towards their LGBTIQ child in the schooling space
- The parent had to have consulted or intervened with the school principal regarding this discrimination and exclusion.

The participants of this study had the opportunity to share their personal firsthand experiences with the principals and raise their views on the responses from the principals upon raising issues that their LGBTIQ children are experiencing under their leadership. This study was conducted in the Free State and Gauteng provinces of South Africa. Therefore, purposive sampling based on the criteria of parents affirming and embracing their children with self-reported 'non-normative' gender identity and sexual orientation was utilised. To represent the diversity of South Africa, the population was heterogeneous in terms of race, language,

TABLE 1: A summary of participants' biographical information.

Parent	Gender of the child	Sexual orientation of the child†	Race	Location
Parent 1	Intersex – Female Registered	Lesbian	Black person	Johannesburg – Gauteng
Parent 2	Male	Gay	Black person	Qwaqwa – Free State
Parent 3	Intersex – Female Registered	Lesbian	Black person	Johannesburg – Gauteng
Parent 4	Female	Lesbian	White person	Bloemfontein-Free State
Parent 5	Male – Transgender	Gay	Black person	Qwaqwa- Free State
Parent 6	Male	Gay	White person	Bloemfontein, Free State

†, Self identification.

location, and socioeconomic status of both the principals and parents. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' biographical information. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis, data were analysed in a stepwise process. The information underwent a systematic process of examination, starting with a thorough review of the interviews with the six parents. Common themes and recurring patterns in the descriptions and perceptions of the parents and their interactions with the principals were identified. Themes were then identified.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (No. REC-110613-036). The purpose of the study was explained verbally, and the same information was also included in the informed consent form signed by the participants.

Results and discussion

The findings highlighted the array of ways in which school principals contest and avoid conversations and opportunities for LGBTIQ youth and their parents. The findings revealed that these parents were starting to put more pressure on schools and school principals to acknowledge and affirm the diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation. The data obtained from the participants were examined and analysed, and the following themes arose from the collected data: school principal's hegemonic responses to gender and sexual diversity inclusion; principal's perspectives on heterosexual and cisnormative school environments; and lastly, the inclusion of LGBTIQ students in schools and the key expectations of parents.

Theme 1: School principal's hegemonic responses to gender and sexual diversity inclusion

Against the SASP backdrop and objectives, this article was concerned with investigating the network of power that is implicated in how high school principals negotiate the terms of regulated gender and sexuality norms and behaviour. Conversations about sexual and gender diversity remain contested and avoided (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). With regard to the hegemonic and patriarchal positions of these principals, they not only denied the bullying culture in their schools but also protected and defended the hetero and cisnormative acts of learners and teachers:

'The Principal was not serious about the matter. It is his job to protect my child. My son was very upset that he was part of the girls' side of the class register. She [*the teacher*] first calls the learners according to their gender, boys on one side and girls on the other. Whenever his [*her son's*] name was called from the girls' side the whole class would start laughing. That made me furious, and I went to see the principal about this and other cases of bullying in his school. I addressed the matter with the principal, and he said that he will speak to the teacher. I asked that the teacher calls the learners out in alphabetical order. This only lasted one week.' (Parent 1, Intersex son, Johannesburg)

These narratives underscore how the principals entertained the ridicule of these minority groups of learners and promoted the concept of segregation and gender binaries in their schools as seen from the given narrative. As read in the response from Parent 1, there was not much done about the case since 'it only lasted one week'. When the parent was asked what they expected from the principal, the participant said with confidence that she expected the principal to address this issue and execute his moral obligation as a leader. As seen from the narrative, this was not the case. There was thus resistance and avoidance around the inclusion and protection of the intersex child. This is aligned with the study conducted by McKenzie et al. (2008) where they suggest that a principal is expected to ensure an equitable and fair environment within the school that benefits all students. Parent 1 was however not the only one with these experiences. Parent 2 added the following:

'My son was so scared and cried every day to go to school. I then decided to speak to the principal and ask for his help. I was surprised by his response. Before I could even start explaining my reason for the meeting, he started with my son, his bad attitude, and that he received complaints that he [*the son*] goes to the girls' bathrooms. I knew about this because my son gets bullied in the boys' bathrooms. He said that it is unsafe for the girls when he is in there and that it is against school policy. He [*the principal*] said that he wasn't aware of this bullying thing and said he [*the son*] must go to the bathrooms that he is supposed to go to. By the response of this principal, it is clear that he was aware of the bullying and only provided this information after the parental intervention.' (Parent 2, Gay son, Qwaqwa)

As with Parent 1, Parent 2 continued with their expectation of a school principal being a social justice leader. The issue of the bathroom is especially important because this gay learner felt that he had no choice but to go to the girls' bathroom for his safety. Instead of addressing the issue of the safety of the learner, the principal rather focused on the 'bad attitude' and 'complaints' of the boy:

'... [H]e [son] told us about the bullying, teasing, and that no one is helping him [son]. It wasn't something that we as parents wanted to hear. My son did report all of this to his register teachers. He was so so scared. When I heard that the teacher knew, I went to the principal about this ...' (Parent 6, Gay son, Bloemfontein)

Many examples in the data were found where five of the six principals knew about the bullying and did nothing to support the child. It was however never reported to the parents. This supports the extant literature where school principals' reactions to homophobic bullying are largely ineffectual and observed as either inadequately responding to incidents or failing to respond at all (Painter & Keaney, 2009). As a result, these principals did not display a readiness to disrupt unfair structures and practices in their schools and did not adhere to a social justice agenda:

'I thought this was the new South Africa where we appreciate and accommodate the school learners regardless of their gender identity. Her situation was different. The school years had simply become too much for us as parents, so I just wanted them to be over. Although painful, we accepted her dropping out. She couldn't take it anymore. My child and I suffered from this as a result. The principal ignoring our cries for aid made the situation worse.' (Parent 3, Intersex daughter, Johannesburg)

As observed from all six of the parents, the principals did not express their thoughts or provide any feedback regarding the well-being of their child or any form of inclusive education, nor did they discuss what actions will be taken to combat any form of discrimination in their school.

Theme 2: Principal's perspective on heterosexual and cisnormative school environments

It was clearly articulated by the parents that there was strong resistance and ambiguity towards education and social reforms. Instead of following their required duties, as set in the SASP and other policy and legislative documents, the lack of interest and responsiveness caused three of the six LGBTIQ learners to drop out of school. None of these learners finished grade 10 (ages between 15 and 16). The consequence of the schools' responsiveness (or lack of) and denial of diverse gender and sexualities did not only affect the psychological well-being of the learners but also severely hampered their education and career. According to McKenzie et al. (2008), all students should have equal access to education, and it is critical to recognise the connection between academic success, critical awareness, and inclusive practices. As indicated, this was not the case because the parent of a lesbian daughter responded as follows:

'I spoke to the principal about the persistent bullying. The principal abruptly began complaining about my daughter's disruptive behaviour and that it is unacceptable. He also said that I need to speak to her since her teachers told him that her grades were rapidly declining. I followed up by asking if he knew about the bullying and said that he has not heard any such allegations. I knew he was lying.' (Parent 4, Lesbian daughter, Bloemfontein)

From the narrative of Parent 4 it is evident that the principal specifically mentioned the decline of her grades. This implies that not only was the principal aware of the bullying but also of how it affected the learner's academics. School victimisation on the basis of sexual orientation severely impairs academic performance of school youths, resulting in school failure, lower grades, drop out, and limited life opportunities that curb vocational and career development and undermine their human potential (Mostert Gordon & Kriegler, 2006; Brown, 2017; Brown & Diale, 2017):

'Our son took part in fights. It was funny to us because at home he never showed any signs of aggression. It was only after we spoke to our son that he told us that the other kids are calling him names and pushing him around. He said that the teacher has seen this. We received no such information from the school.' (Parent 2, Gay son, Qwaqwa)

As observed from the narratives of 5 of the 6 parents, the focus of the principals was poor behaviours, ill-discipline, and poor academic performance, but they never considered the reason for 'acting out'. The principals stringently opposed the advancement of gender and diverse learners because of their systemic institutional reservations. The parents specifically pointed out that the strategy of the principals was to abuse their power and silence their concerns, and support the ideals of heterosexuality and cisgenderism as the only sexual orientation and gender identities. The involvement of the principal has been identified and explained as having a significant impact on the creation of a fair and equitable school climate (Seashole Louis et al., 2010).

Theme 3: Inclusion of LGBTIQ learners in schools- key expectations of parents

The principal bears the duty of establishing and initiating parental support in spearheading the battle for equality among all learners (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006). The parents of the LGBTIQ children did put pressure on the school and specifically the school principal to provide equal education opportunities for their children. There was an expectation from all participating parents that the school principal and school leadership will listen and work with them in enabling a safe and socially just schooling space and to listen and work with them in stopping the bullying of their child. However, this was not the case with these parents and the school principals. These parents were dismissed, ignored, vilified, and the principals did not comply with the policy and legislative mandate. Reporting to and keeping parents informed about their children is a duty, according to the SASA and SASP, of the principal. An example of this was given by one of the participant:

'My son told me of the bullying in the bathrooms. There was a lot of scuffling and name-calling that cause huge unhappiness. I went to the school to ask how they could help. The principal said it is new to them and they will consult with the district office. I thought this information was part of becoming a teacher. It must be.' (Parent 5, Transgender son, Qwaqwa)

There was a lack of awareness, as expressed by Parent 5, following the principal referring it back to the district office

as well as stating that he is not aware of any bullying, but only of the problems that the child is bringing forward. All 6 of the parents mentioned the lack of moral obligations and expectations of the principals. Parent 6 went on to say:

'I was disappointed, surprised, and angry at the same time. I expected the teacher and principal to be compassionate and protect my son. That didn't happen. They ignored him and our calls for help. He was all alone.' (Parent 6, Gay son, Bloemfontein)

From these parents' responses, it was clear that there was no social justice vision in the school and for their children. Parent 2 uttered her frustration and helplessness stating that:

'Nothing changed after meeting with the school and explaining the bullying.' The bullying persisted. I reasoned that moving my child would help the situation. We were attempting to protect him from being bullied, discriminated against, and treated differently. He attended three different high schools. We now realise that it was not the solution to the problem. Perhaps it made matters worse for him. He wasn't pleased with any of them.' (Parent 2, Gay son, Qwaqwa)

According to Theoharis (2007), principals who are driven to work for social justice in their schools highlighted intentional and real communication as critical to creating relationships with parents and the community. As seen from the narratives of the parents, this was not the case. These narratives confirm that heteronormativity and heterosexism are still pervasive in the schooling context where sexuality and gender are constructed as a single and correct entity (Msibi, 2012). This study projects a gloomy picture of the impact of the principals' non-compliance and reluctance to get involved in the schooling of homosexual and transgender youth. Deacon et al. (1999) correctly state that the contention is that principals frequently clash with progressive policies in the country when it comes to their perspective on democracy and transformation, as they tend to cling to traditional patriarchal beliefs and religious ideologies. These narratives from the parents show the expectations and the necessity for socially just leadership working towards a socially fair and inclusive schooling space for their LGBTIQ children.

Conclusion

The perspectives of principals who assume democratic ideals are critical in the quest of social justice in schools (Wang, 2018). This article echoes Ryan's (2006) finding in the sense that there is considerable reason to be worried about social justice in today's schools. This article has attempted to address the resistance of school principals towards a social just, inclusive, and safe schooling space for gender and sexual diverse school learners. This study made an important point: school principals do not believe in fostering fairness and justice through policy and practices, as discussed in the literature review. School principals are also in the position to counter heteronormative and heterosexist perspectives in schools and collaborate with parents as partners to combat a school culture of oppression because of diverse gender and sexualities.

Recommendations

The study recommends an increase in LGBTIQ content in the training of principals, which is necessary for convincing school principals that gender and sexual diversity competence is necessary for creating a safe, inclusive, and enabling schooling space. Principals should have a clear understanding of the meaning of social justice and need to be educated on both preservice and in-service level education. Principals should be aware of the requirements, as stipulated in the policy, of inclusive education and should be able to support learners with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Professional development can significantly increase the development of the awareness of LGBTIQ learners and their needs. School principals should also recognise that creating a socially just schooling space is critical to the school's responsibility to support the academic achievements of all learners. By challenging the assumptions about their students and the parents they cater to, school principals can gain a better understanding of the needs and experiences of LGBTIQ learners, which can inform their daily decision-making. By doing this, the principals will be able to better understand and identify the functioning of gender and sexual norms in their schools through knowledge. Limitations to the study however include the small sample size and also that the responses were limited to that of the parents. Therefore, the findings of this article cannot be generalised.

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