



STRENGTHENING GENDER-RESPONSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM AS A CATALYST FOR ACADEMIC EQUITY IN NAMIBIA

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Abstract

In Namibia, gender disparities in academic achievement often begin in early childhood, shaped by curriculum and classroom practices. This study reviewed education and Early Childhood Education (ECE) policies and curriculum frameworks to determine the integration of gender-responsive learning materials, activities, pedagogy and teaching practices. It also examined whether the principles of academic equity are integrated into policies and curricula. The review assessed whether ECE policies and curriculum frameworks align with Namibia's national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals on gender equity and equality. It further examined whether these frameworks ensure that children acquire the foundational competencies, skills, and values needed for survival, community participation, and contribution to the country's social and economic development. A gender-responsive early childhood curriculum fosters equitable participation and promotes long-term academic success for children. Inclusive pedagogical practices, relevant materials, and teacher training strengthen the education system's inclusivity and resilience in addressing gender-based and academic inequity. This study examined how strengthening a gender-responsive ECE curriculum could promote academic equity in Namibia, focusing on learning activities, learning materials, pedagogical approaches, classroom environments, educator-child interactions, and educators' expectations of all learners. In addition, the study considered the role of curriculum content, language use, assessment practices, and educator training in challenging gender stereotypes and ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all children. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study conducted a thematic literature review guided by inclusion criteria focusing on key Namibian policies, including the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2007), the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013), and curriculum frameworks for 0-2 and 3-4 years. The review also drew on recent scholarly and empirical studies. The review identified gaps within the policies and curriculum frameworks, particularly in curriculum content, language use, learning activities, learning materials, pedagogical guidance, and values, that do not align with the principles of a gender-responsive early childhood curriculum to promote academic equity. Based on these findings, the study recommended revising existing policies and curriculum frameworks to strengthen the integration of gender-responsive ECE and promote equity. These revisions address gaps, enhance curriculum coherence, and ensure equitable learning outcomes.

Keywords

Gender-responsive curriculum, Early childhood education, Academic equity, In-service teachers

Introduction

Globally, research demonstrates that high-quality Early Childhood Education (ECE), characterised by intentional pedagogy, inclusive learning environments, and well-prepared teachers, significantly improves cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for young children. Such benefits are particularly pronounced for learners from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds (UNICEF, 2019; OECD, 2019). Quality ECE is therefore recognised as a powerful equaliser for mitigating early inequalities and ensuring equitable learning (Schmutz, 2023). This underscores why strengthening gender-responsive early childhood education is increasingly recognised as a foundational strategy for achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as well as gender equality, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality).

SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This goal emphasises access to quality ECE, care, and pre-primary education, and focuses on eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equity in education. SDG 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls (United Nations, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). Sustainable Development Goal 5 is relevant to early childhood education, since gender norms and stereotypes are formed at this stage of life and are reinforced through curriculum content, classroom interactions, and teachers' expectations. A gender-responsive early childhood curriculum thus supports the realisation of SDG 5 by consciously challenging discriminatory practices, promoting equal opportunities for learners, and fostering respectful and inclusive learning environments (United Nations, 2015).

Furthermore, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2016) provides a comprehensive regional mandate for promoting gender equality and equity across all sectors, including education. The Protocol commits Member States, including Namibia, to eliminate gender disparities in education, promote gender-sensitive curricula, and ensure equal access to quality education at all levels (Southern African Development Community (SADC), 2016). The SADC Protocol emphasises the importance of gender-sensitive curricula and teacher training to challenge stereotypes and discriminatory practices in education. Strengthening a gender responsive early childhood curriculum and policies aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015) and Namibia's regional obligations to mainstream gender equality in education (SADC, 2016).

Together, SDG 4, SDG 5, and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development provide a coherent global, regional, and national framework to strengthen gender-responsive early childhood curricula in Namibia. Aligning the curriculum with these frameworks, ECE can promote academic equity, gender equality, and inclusive social development from the start of learning. Namibia's national policies and curriculum frameworks integrate gender-responsive approaches. These include the National Early Childhood Policy, the Inclusive Education Policy and curriculum frameworks for children aged 0–2, 3–4, all of which emphasise gender equality and equity. Embedding gender-responsive approaches in early childhood curricula promotes equitable participation, improves learning outcomes, and advances Namibia's commitments to quality education and gender equality.

Gender-responsive ECE addresses the different needs and experiences of children, actively challenging traditional gender stereotypes (UNESCO, 2023; VVOB, 2022). Gender responsiveness extends beyond curriculum content to the "hidden curriculum," including teacher expectations, classroom interactions, play, and learning materials. Even seemingly neutral curricula can perpetuate gender norms unless deliberately designed to promote equitable participation and outcomes.

Based on gender responsive approaches, a gender-responsive early childhood curriculum includes inclusive content, diverse learning activities, equitable teaching methods, and supportive pedagogical approaches. It fosters participation, challenges stereotypes, and nurtures holistic development. Assessment practices that address harmful gender norms are integral (UNGEI & UNICEF, 2020). In early childhood, where foundational attitudes and identities are formed, such approaches promote equitable participation, positive self-concept, and inclusive learning for all children (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2019).

Studies highlight that classroom practices play a role in challenging or reinforcing gender inequalities. In Namibia, evidence suggests that teachers' failure to apply gender-responsive pedagogies contributes to the reproduction of gender inequality in education (Thununu, 2023). Such practices include differential expectations from children, gender-stereotyped learning activities, and unequal participation, all of which negatively influence learners' academic and self-concept from an early age.

Integration of gender responsiveness and academic equity in early childhood curricula is critical for supporting effective classroom implementation by in-service teachers. Tawana and Higgs (2024) emphasise that teacher preparation and professional development play a central role in equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to enact gender-responsive practices. When curricula embed principles of gender equality and equity, teachers can translate policy intentions into inclusive pedagogical practices that promote equitable learning for all children. Curricula that lack guidance on gender responsiveness may limit teachers' capacity to implement equitable teaching practices.

This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which together provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how gender-responsive ECE curricula can promote academic equity in Namibia. These theories emphasise the environmental socio-cultural influences on child development.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provide complementary lenses for examining gender responsiveness in ECE. Bronfenbrenner frames child development as occurring within interconnected systems: microsystem (classroom, family), mesosystem (home-school interactions), exosystem (teacher education, curriculum authorities, policies), and macrosystem (cultural norms and values), all of which shape children's understandings of gender roles and academic potential.

Vygotsky adds that learning happens in social interaction, language, and culturally embedded tools, with gender reinforced or challenged in daily interactions between children, peers, and teachers. Together, these theories highlight that a gender-responsive ECE curriculum needs to operate systemically: equitable pedagogy, inclusive

materials, and balanced teacher expectations function at the microsystem. Alignment with teacher education, curriculum frameworks, and national gender commitments should occur at exo- and macrosystem levels. Guided interaction and play within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) further ensures that scaffolded learning promotes equal participation, challenges stereotypes, and develops cognitive, social, and leadership skills. This integrated framework aligns with the study's focus on curriculum, pedagogical practices, classroom interactions, and teacher expectations as determinants of academic equity in the Namibian context.

These theories also inform the study's methodology, guiding the selection of variables related to gender-responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and learner engagement, and shaping data collection and analysis to capture both systemic influences and social processes. The integrated lens ensures findings are interpreted in relation to individual learning interactions and broader structural and cultural contexts. Overall, applying these theories provides a robust, contextually relevant foundation for examining how strengthening a gender-responsive early childhood curriculum can reduce inequality within Namibia's academic landscape.

Despite growing recognition of gender-responsive ECE, empirical studies in Namibia remain limited. Regional research in Southern Africa shows that while some interventions enhance participation, systematic approaches integrating curriculum design, teacher training, and policy alignment are lacking (Ismail et al., 2022; VVOB, 2022). Globally, evidence highlights the role of the hidden curriculum and teacher expectations in achieving meaningful equity outcomes. Grounded in the ecological and sociocultural frameworks, addressing these gaps is critical to ensuring that early childhood curricula and pedagogical practices promote equitable learning opportunities in Namibia. Promoting gender equity in early childhood can also yield long-term social and economic benefits, informing policymakers, educators, families, and communities. Therefore, the current study reviewed early childhood policies and curriculum frameworks for children aged 0–2 and 3–4 years, examined the integration of gender-responsive principles and practices, and identified approaches to strengthen curricula and promote academic equity in Namibia.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, combining systematic document analysis with a thematic literature review to examine how gender responsiveness is embedded in ECE policies and curricula (Yin, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach allowed an in-depth understanding of complex social constructs such as gender equity within real-world educational contexts.

The study analysed national policy documents, including the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2007) and the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013), alongside ECE curricula: the Resource Guide for Educators, Parents and Caregivers of Children in Namibia Aged 0–2 Years (2022) and the Curriculum Framework for Children in Namibia Aged 3–4 Years (2013).

Document analysis was used to identify explicit and implicit references to gender responsiveness, inclusion, learner-centred pedagogy, equity, and equality across policies and curricula (Bowen, 2009; UNESCO, 2024). A thematic literature review of national and international studies complemented this analysis, highlighting recurring themes in gender-responsive pedagogy and the role of intentional teaching in promoting academic equity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Xu, 2025). Triangulation of documents and literature enhanced credibility and depth of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Results are presented under thematic constructs derived from both the reviewed documents and the literature.

Results

This section presents the findings from national policies, curriculum frameworks, and scholarly literature on gender responsiveness in Namibian ECE.

National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2007)

The IECD policy promotes inclusive, learner-centred approaches and supports diverse learning needs, contributing to equitable participation and positive outcomes (MGECD, 2007). It integrates health, education, nutrition, and social services to support holistic child development. From a gender perspective, it ensures equal access and encourages non-discriminatory practices. Every child has the right to the best start in life (MGECD, 2007, p.3). However, it does not explicitly guide teachers on challenging gender stereotypes, promoting equal participation, or implementing gender-responsive pedagogy, materials, or interactions.

Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013)

The policy advocates equitable access, participation, and support for learners, emphasising early childhood as a critical stage and promoting cross-sectoral planning. It prioritises learners with disabilities and marginalised groups but omits gender as a distinct focus. Inclusive education aims to remove barriers and ensure all children can learn (MoEAC, 2013, p.5). This omission creates a gap that may limit gender equity in practice.

Curriculum Frameworks: Resource Guide for Children Aged 0–2 Years (2022)

The framework supports holistic development through responsive, stimulating interactions. This Guide aims to ensure that every child is stimulated holistically to reach his/her full potential (MGEPESW, 2022, p.1). It emphasises individualised learning and nurturing care but does not explicitly address gender or guide gender-responsive pedagogy, leaving equity dependent on teachers' interpretation.

Curriculum Framework for Children Aged 3–4 Years (2013)

The framework guides educators to support holistic development, communication, exploration, and investigation. Its principles promote inclusion, child-centred learning, safe and nurturing environments, and equitable opportunities, indirectly supporting academic equity. All children should have opportunities to explore, experiment, and participate in a range of activities that foster holistic development. Build on children's prior knowledge and experiences by providing a safe, loving, and stimulating environment for learners to learn through play, routines, and organised activities (MGECEW, 2013, p.14-15).

While these principles foster inclusivity and responsiveness to individual needs, they do not explicitly address gender differences, challenge stereotypes, or guide gender-responsive pedagogy. Consequently, gender responsiveness remains implicit, depending on how educators interpret and implement the curriculum. To promote academic equity effectively, gender-sensitive learning strategies and explicit guidance on equitable participation are needed. Holistically, policies and curricula promote inclusion and holistic development but lack explicit gender-responsive guidance, highlighting gaps that may hinder academic equity in ECE.

Overall, the review found that the Resource Guide supports general inclusion and child wellbeing, but it does not explicitly integrate gender responsive approaches or sufficiently promote academic equity. For this reason, there is a need for clear guidance on gender-responsive pedagogy and equitable learning opportunities to enhance its contribution to academic equity in ECE.

Discussion

This study reviewed Namibia's ECE policies and curriculum frameworks for children aged 0–2 and 3–4 years to assess their contribution to gender-responsive curriculum practices and academic equity. The findings indicate that key policy instruments, notably the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy and the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education, establish a strong commitment to inclusive, learner-centred education and the protection of children's rights. These principles align with international evidence that inclusive early learning environments support equitable access, school readiness, and positive developmental outcomes (UNICEF, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Despite this inclusive orientation, the results show that gender responsiveness is not explicitly embedded within the reviewed policies. While non-discrimination is promoted, the absence of deliberate guidance on addressing gendered experiences and barriers limits the policies' capacity to advance academic equity. Research consistently demonstrates that gender-neutral policy language alone is insufficient to address early gender disparities unless gender-specific risks and socialisation processes are intentionally addressed (Unterhalter, 2017; UNICEF, 2021).

Similarly, the curriculum frameworks for children aged 0–2 and 3–4 years emphasise holistic development, play-based learning, and nurturing environments. These approaches are widely recognised as developmentally appropriate and effective in supporting cognitive and socio-emotional development in early childhood (OECD, 2019). However, the findings reveal that explicit guidance on gender equity and gender-responsive pedagogy is absent from both frameworks. As a result, early gender stereotyping and unequal participation in learning activities may remain unchallenged, despite the inclusive intent of the curriculum.

The analysis further indicates that the promotion of academic equity through gender-responsive teaching is largely dependent on individual teachers' awareness and capacity rather than being systematically guided by curriculum expectations. Empirical studies in similar contexts show that when teachers lack structured guidance and training, classroom practices may unintentionally reproduce gendered norms and inequalities (Mlama et al., 2005; Thununu, 2023). This reliance on individual interpretation weakens the effectiveness of the curriculum frameworks as tools for achieving equitable learning outcomes.

In sum, the findings suggest a disconnect between policy intentions and curriculum-level implementation. While Namibia's ECE policies and curricula provide a solid foundation for inclusion, their contribution to academic equity is constrained by the lack of explicit gender-responsive direction. Strengthening curriculum guidance and educator support is therefore essential to ensure that inclusive policy commitments translate into equitable learning experiences for all children from the earliest years.

Conclusion

Gender-responsive early childhood education has significant potential to advance academic equity in Namibia. While national policies provide a supportive framework, curricula for children aged 0–2 and 3–4 years lack explicit guidance on gender-responsive pedagogy, learning activities, materials, classroom organisation, and teacher–learner

interactions. As a result, equitable learning outcomes depend on strengthening curricula and teacher capacity to implement intentional, gender-responsive practices. Embedding gender-responsive principles across all aspects of teaching, providing professional development for teachers, fostering mentoring and peer-support networks, and establishing systems to monitor and support classroom practices can help bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Aligning policy, curriculum, and teacher preparation ensures that ECE is not only inclusive in principle but transformative in practice.

Strengthening these areas is essential to ensure equitable learning opportunities and holistic development for all children from the earliest stages of education. Additionally, this study relied on document analysis and literature review, without direct classroom observation or engagement with teachers and learners. These limitations mean that findings reflect potential implications rather than definitive conclusions about the implementation of academic equity and gender responsiveness. Nevertheless, the study provides a critical foundation for understanding how gender-responsive principles are conceptualised in Namibia's ECE and identifies priority areas for future empirical research.

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