

# Unintelligibility, personhood and curriculum silences of intersex bodies in the Life Orientation high school classroom: A case study

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Despite an increase in the research that promotes affirmative gender and sexual diversity in the South African Life Orientation (LO) education, there remains an uncomfortable silence on intersex bodies. In the absence of distinctive binary classifications of external genitalia, learners with variant intersex characteristics are incapable of integration into socio-educational environments. This article explores how individuals with variant intersex characteristics learn about the self in relation to society within LO lessons. It extrapolates factors that influence the educational and psycho-social agency in and around the classroom. This phenomenological study has drawn on in-depth interviews with six individuals with variant intersex characteristics post schooling. The evidence shows that the LO curriculum privileges distinct genital developments as a marker of normal human development and means of gender identification. Previous studies found that the mutually exclusive biological sex characteristics drawn from XY (male) and XX (female) chromosomal development were major determinants of social sexual and gender embodiment in puberty lessons. Lensed through the theory of unintelligibility, bodies that deviated from this normative development were seen as ambiguous and derogatively referred to as hermaphrodites. Their personal identities were marred with constructions of freaks and abnormality. Vilifying personhood rhetoric impacted the social skills of intersex learners and their peers. Learners with intersex bodies were uncomfortable to engage with the gender binary curriculum content, facilities and school culture. Silences on intersex bodies in the LO curriculum made these learners feel invisible which led to early school dropout. This article argues for the integration of intersex knowledge that affirms, humanises and protects all gender, sexual expressions and sex characteristics in the school context. The LO curriculum is well-positioned to disrupt problematic constructions of intersex bodies as deficit and embarrassing by including variant sex characteristic developments as a norm.

**Keywords:** intersex characteristics; unintelligibility; distinctive genitalia; Life Orientation; compulsory heteronormativity; comprehensive sexuality education.

## Introduction

Schools are spaces that not only offer cognitive learning opportunities but also enable young people to learn about the complex realities of sexual and gender identities and the self in relation to their diverse societies they emanate from.<sup>1,2</sup> The school site is also known to legitimise and normalise sexuality, gender and sex characteristics often through curriculum and pedagogical approaches.<sup>3</sup> Despite the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity in South African schools,<sup>4</sup> lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender youth have continuously been vilified for deviating from the privileged and valorised expression of heterosexuality.<sup>5,6,7</sup> With reference to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) acronym that alludes to sex, sexual and gender diversity issues, intersex research remains unexplored in the South African school context. Research regarding people with variant intersex characteristics has been mainly carried out through clinical studies. Moreover, a gap remains as to what the educational needs may be. The first publicly known person in South Africa with an intersex variant development, the Olympian medallist Caster Semenya, was locally and internationally subjected to relentless scrutiny because of diverse sex characteristics which was believed to privilege her unusual track performance.<sup>8</sup> Nthabiseng Mokoena, an activist who reclaimed their intersex identity, shared how they were subjected to shame and embarrassment because of non-binary male/female sex characteristics, which is considered to be unnatural.<sup>9</sup> Bodies with characteristics such as chromosomes, gonads or genitals that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies are read as unreal and subjected to violence, discrimination,

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rejection and often killed in South Africa.<sup>8</sup> The invisibility around intersex bodies is critical in formal and public education in South Africa. The general aim of the school curriculum explicitly points out that inclusivity should become a central part of the organisation, planning and teaching at each school.<sup>10</sup> The teaching and learning space should infuse key principles of human rights and social justice as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. It is important to point out that the South African Constitution recognises the rights of all persons irrespective of sexual orientation, gender identity and physical characteristics amongst other diversities.<sup>11</sup> Life Orientation (LO) is one of the learning areas where learners would engage in issues of diversity.

The Life Orientation Learning Area aims to empower learners to use their talents to achieve their full physical, intellectual, personal, emotional and social potential ... it addresses skills, knowledge and values about the self, the environment, responsible citizenship, a healthy and productive life. (p. 8)<sup>12</sup>

To align with constitutional principles, the Department of Education has made considerable efforts to address issues of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in using LO scripted lesson plans. This inclusion was influenced by the burgeoning research that shows violence, discrimination and vilification towards lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender identifying learners and those with variations of intersex characteristics of which the main perpetrators are their peers and teachers in and around the classroom.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Despite the comprehensive sexuality education scripted lesson plans that attempt to address aspects of sexual and gender diversity, there remains a paucity and invisibility about learners with intersex variations. Intersex learners present variant chromosomal, gonadal or genitalia that do not present distinctive male or female characteristics.<sup>16</sup> The medical fraternity discursively explains this development as incomplete or abnormal chromosomal, gonadal development of distinctive male or female genitalia and in derogatory sense, it is labelled as Disorder of Sex Development (DSD).<sup>16</sup> This definition points to the critical and persistent power of the medical world to categorise the normality of the body into compulsory sex/gender nexus of pre-discursive categories of maleness and femaleness.<sup>17</sup> Approximately one in 2000 children globally is born with DSD.<sup>16</sup> Some statistics suggest that this number in South Africa may be much higher, with an estimate of one in 500, or even as high as one in 200.<sup>18</sup> It is inevitable that these children will soon embark on a journey of schooling. An emerging body of literature on gender and sexuality research has shown that South African schools are producing sites of fixed gender categories in their curricula, pedagogies, ethos and resources such as textbooks.<sup>13,19,20,21,22</sup> The LO learning area enables young people to vicariously and often overtly learn about each other, their relationships to one another and subsequently the differences amongst themselves.<sup>23</sup> In an environment that privileges normative gender identities that align with distinctive sex developments, it is uncertain how learners with variant sex characteristics experience the LO classroom.

This sheds light on the discourse of variant intersex characteristics in the school context.

## Lack of educational research regarding intersex bodies

Presently, there is no curriculum, textbook or policy in South Africa that offers information on the education about people with intersex variations. The newly developed scripted lesson plans on comprehensive sexuality education in LO include limited content on lesbian and gay identities in the school context. However, the Equality Clause in the South African Constitution is all-inclusive to preserve the human rights of all persons, including those who identify themselves as LGBTI, yet there remains a disjuncture between the Constitution and its implementation or access to those being discriminated against.<sup>24</sup> Schools are still centres of rejection, ridicule, discrimination and dehumanised experiences for youth with counter-normative sexual and gender identities.<sup>15,25,26,27</sup> This is because children and youth bodies are continuously categorised and regulated through discourses of 'normality' and those who are in need of intervention.<sup>28</sup> Despite the scholastic mandates for a dignified learning experience through the *South African Schools Act of 1996*,<sup>29</sup> the ratification of safe and inclusive learning environments<sup>30</sup> and the statutory responsibility of educators to refrain from discrimination, the reality of the South African schooling system is that it is riddled with repression and abhorrence towards otherness.<sup>31</sup> The emerging body of research that explores diverse gender and sexualities in schools has shown the vilification in the presence of misaligned expressions of the sex/gender binary.<sup>15,32,33</sup> These studies demonstrate that the school culture in South Africa (re)produces and valorises normative sex/gender binaries that ensure that the performance of behaviours of bodies with distinctive genitalia are in congruence with their gender markers and associated socio-cultural scripts. There is a systemic panoptic lens that polices the embodiment of gender through dress codes, subject types, associations, gestures and voice tones.<sup>20,22</sup> Deviated scripted gender behaviour from its sexed body has been subjected to violence, discrimination, isolation, exclusion and neglect.<sup>15,25</sup> These compulsory gender binary expressions often labelled as compulsory heteronormativity regulate identity, behaviour and expressions.<sup>13</sup> Heteronormativity enforces a romantic and emotional attraction to the distinctive opposite sex.<sup>16</sup> With the lack of variant intersex characteristics knowledge in the recently released series of scripted lessons on sexuality education,<sup>33</sup> this article is concerned about the inclusion and affirmation of individuals with non-binary distinctive sex or chromosomal characteristics.

Existing literature, globally, has focused primarily on gender assignment, psychosexual outcomes, including gender role and gender identity and ethical considerations related to treatment of intersex individuals.<sup>34</sup> There is a paucity of international literature on the psycho-educational realities of intersex school youth. Individuals with intersex variations,

[S]ometimes, face significant educational barriers around puberty and secondary schooling; inclusive approaches, good quality policy and guidance are needed on the proper inclusion and that school staff (particularly, school counsellors) and students also need training on how to react to disclosures about intersex variations in a non-discriminatory manner. (p. 16)<sup>17</sup>

In light of all of the above, I question how the intersex body as a construct of abnormal diagnosis could be perceived and engaged with in the LO classroom that is mandated to promote knowledge and values of diversity and social justice.

## Theoretical framework

I employed Judith Butler's Intelligibility Theory that provides researchers with a framework to understand how individuals are made intelligible by ascribing and conforming to normative standards of gender intelligibility.<sup>25</sup> 'In western culture, sex, gender, and sexual orientation are viewed as closely linked, essential qualities' (p. 2).<sup>35</sup> The predominant understanding is that sex is naturally binary, important and regular. This means that all bodies are required to be born with an either distinctive penis or vagina which eventually becomes the determiner of gender.<sup>26</sup> There is a predominant belief that a baby born with a penis matures into identifying and acting like a man, with the gender roles that are predetermined by a specific culture that compels a sexual attraction to females.<sup>27</sup> Butler contests this dichotomous notion of natural sex and culturally constructed gender saying that there is nothing that guarantees that the one who becomes a woman is necessarily female or the inverse. Correspondingly, an infant born with a vagina matures into identifying and acting like a woman, with the gender roles that are predetermined by a specific culture with the expectation of a sexual attraction to males.<sup>27</sup>

Cultural interpretation oversimplifies sex, which results in a binary perspective, pointing to evidence regarding the substantial variability in 'chromosomes, genitalia, and hormones, that do not always align in the expected, binary manner'.<sup>26</sup> Butler states that even biologists:

[A]rgue that a binary view of human sex is overly simplistic and that sex should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, in terms of anatomical, hormonal and even cellular sex. (p. 2)<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, biology in itself does not produce distinct binary categories.<sup>26</sup> Butler argues against the notion of a stable, pre-discursive sex that awaits gendering, claiming that the idea of natural and distinctive sex characteristics is itself a discursive construction that was conveniently produced for the sustenance of heterosexuality. Schools are microcosms of society<sup>28</sup> and emulate the values of communities. Schools are found to produce and perpetuate an ethos that requires distinctive gendered scripts determined by distinctive biological sex development of a penis or vagina. For learners with unintelligent bodies because of intersex genitalia, the school environment could be a space of exile. When the body has sex characteristics that either have distinctive male and female genitalia, no genitalia and chromosomal development

that do not align with genital development, the body is rendered *unintelligible*. The body becomes delegitimised, delegitised and is framed as deformed and unacceptable.<sup>26</sup> As such, these bodies with variant intersex characteristics are invisibilised and by implication should not exist. The study reported here aimed to explore how people with intersex variations experience LO classrooms and how their bodies may (not) be acknowledged and validated in school curriculums, practice and culture because their misalignment with distinctive sex characteristic development that produce gender.

## Method

A case study approach using individual interviews explored the experiences of individuals with intersex variations. The case study method allowed for a real-life detailed, in-depth data collection with people with variant intersex developments. By employing a phenomenological paradigm, my sole objective was to understand and explore the participants' understandings and experiences of being intersex in the school environment.<sup>29</sup> I identified six participants with the assistance of a civil society organisation called Intersex South Africa (ISA). The participants are members of ISA where they are provided with psychosocial, educational and other social support to navigate around the realities of intersex developments. Intersex South Africa contacted its members to inform them of the study and only six people voluntarily agreed to participate. It is important to point out that these experiences are retrospective reflections because all participants either completed school or dropped out. The average age of participants was 25 years and they have left school in the past two to five years. Embarking on this study, I was aware that the meaning and understanding around schooling experiences are explored in a setting where heterosexuality is constructed as normal and sexualities that deviate from this norm are silenced.<sup>30</sup> This study applied pseudonyms to protect the identities of the self-identifying intersex participants.

## Participants (pseudonyms used)

1. Sibongakonke (pseudonym) aged 21 dropped out of school at the age of 20 after repeatedly failing various grades. He attributed his failure to ongoing and untreated depression to his non-normative sexuality. Sibongakonke was born without any distinctive genitalia. At birth, doctors asked his parents what gender child they wish to have and they agreed to a male child. Through *corrective* surgery, a penis was appended to his body. The penis, however, remained small and did not develop as he was growing older. As a young adult, Sibongakonke still has the penis size of an infant.
2. Jacky aged 28 was born with XY (male) chromosomes with both external vaginal and testes genitalia. Jacky's parents who registered and raised her as a female insisted that *she* focusses only on her school work, never to make friends at school, or talk about or show her testes to anyone. Jacky's parents also prevented *her* from playing

sports or participate in physical education. According to Jacky, her testes were removed at the age of 16, which left her with visible scars around the pelvic area. Jacky was injected with oestrogen hormonal treatment to enhance her external female physical characteristics such as breasts and the reduction of the male hormone progesterone. Jacky completed secondary school and pursued higher education.

3. Bongs was born with both a vagina and a penis. During adolescence, Bongs developed breasts and presented more as a female physically. Bongs was also registered as female by her parents. She experience severe menstruation difficulties, which resulted in long periods of hospitalisation in grade 12 which resulted in Bongs dropping out of school.
4. Thandi was born with a vagina and a penis but was registered as a female at birth. Thandi who was raised as a female frequently questioned her mother about the 'growth' above her vagina. Thandi was told by her mom that *it* should go away and was warned not to show her penis, which had grown, to anyone. Thandi completed secondary school and completed a higher education diploma.
5. Jabu aged 22 was born with a fully developed vagina and a small penis. Although she was assigned a female identity at birth, Jabu always identified as a male. According to Jabu, he preferred male clothing, chose to play with boys and told people that he is a boy. The school insisted that Jabu should wear the female school uniform that caused discomfort and confrontation as Jabu preferred to wear the male school uniform. Jabu became extremely aggressive in fighting off bullying peers and teachers, constantly moved from one school to the other, and eventually dropped out at age 17 in grade 10.
6. Andy aged 26 was registered as male at birth as he was with a penis and vagina but with an XY chromosomal development. After failed surgery to *correct* the genitalia, both the vagina and penis were removed. Andy grew up with an opening in the pelvic area, which required him to sit down when he had to urinate. The males in the school bathroom noticed this behaviour and through constant invasion discovered that he does not have any genitals. This resulted in unending bullying that led to violent fights that caused Andy to get suspended for severely beating up another learner. He eventually dropped out of school in grade 11.

### Data analysis

Critical discourse analysis was used to ascribe meaning to the data collected in this study. Education researchers turned to discourse analysis as a way to make sense of the ways in which people make meaning in educational contexts. This introduced an elaborate framework for coding teachers' and students' discourse acts in classroom talk.<sup>2</sup> Their intention was to provide an extensive structural model of discourse organisation in classroom interactions. Educational scholars describe the micro-interactions that occurred in classrooms to theorise about the ways in which social structures are

reproduced through educational institutions.<sup>22</sup> I searched for different elements within each case study and categorised them into themes that could respond to the research questions. This article will discuss two themes only, namely, puberty, sex education and relationships in LO; and from the LO classroom to school bathroom: a space of horror.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (Ethics no. 2-2019-024). All participants fill out a consent form since they were above the age of 18 years. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the study and a pro bono therapist was on standby in the event of psychological support. The latter was, however, not required. All participants shared their experiences willingly and expressed an appreciation for an opportunity to have their realities voiced.

### Limitations of the study

I acknowledge that the experiences of the participants are retrospective and span over a five-year period. However, there remains a silence and invisibility in relation to learners with variant intersex bodies. The findings for present day LO education is still valid and relevant.

### Findings and discussions

These two themes extrapolated from individuals with variant intersex characteristics intended to bring an understanding to the daily realities and navigation in and around the LO classroom.

The school experiences of learners are shaped either positively or negatively by the attitudes and behaviours of peers and staff, as well as general school ethos.<sup>31</sup> These themes show how experiences with learning in the LO classroom influenced and shaped the entire schooling experience of people with variant intersex developments. The participants in this study reflected on their early childhood, and primary and secondary school experiences. Participants also shared their experiences of ridicule, unacceptance, ostracism and discrimination and the impact these had during their primary and secondary schooling. It was important to explore participants' perceptions regarding the quality of learning, teaching and issues that affect these, as such factors are significant to ensuring that all learners are involved, active and assured in their education and school experiences.<sup>32</sup>

### Puberty, sex education and relationships in Life Orientation

In this theme, participants shared their experiences as these relate to core content in the Life Skills and LO lessons. The puberty and sex education curriculum is not inclusive as it leaves out representation of the full variety of human physical or bodily diversity.<sup>10</sup> For all the participants, representations of distinctive and so-called 'normal' male and female

genitalia in the textbooks were evident wherein their bodies and indeterminate genitalia were developing outside the biologically and socially expected norm. They narrated that sexual reproduction and development were taught inside the binary classification of male/female and variations seemed to be incomprehensible. Such views correlate with a report that sexuality education has been deployed to regulate and discipline young sexualities, and reinforce and perpetuate gender binarism and heteronormativity.<sup>8</sup> To these participants, the LO curriculum served as a reinforcement that they were an abnormality, which further increased their agony and need to 'fix' this medical and social anomaly. This decreased the desire to learn and be in the school social context, as it was discriminatory and exclusionary:

'I realised I was different when I was very young, at the beginning of primary school. I grew up with other boys, their penises were larger than mine. I was about 7 years old. It happened when we all went to the bathrooms. It has always been a game to have a strong beam when you urinate standing away from the urinal. Their bodies became visible to me and mine to them. Again, I relived the stares and later the teasing. This time it was more children and they would tell other boys about my baby penis. My whole life became about my penis. They would forever talk about my small penis. As you know kids unknowingly can be cruel. I started to use the stalls to relieve myself. Those who heard the rumours about my penis would lean over the walls of the stalls to see if it was true. Leaving the stalls was always the most difficult because I would be faced with stares, laughter and torment.' (Sibongakonke)

'I never learned about my kind of body in class. We were taught about the penis and vagina and nothing else about challenges in development or differences in bodies. Information in the Life Orientation class and the textbook made me realise I had not reached puberty. I was frightened and traumatised, I had just realised my body was abnormal. The giggles from learners in my class, as they compared what they had seen or heard about my micro-penis, further added to my anxiety and fears. The textbooks confirmed what they have been saying all along. I wish I never attended those classes, as they showed how deformed I was.' (Sibongakonke)

'Over the years my doctor told me that my chromosomal make up was XY. I simply thought that it explains why I have testes and a vagina. Since I focused on my school work, I suppressed this unusual growth in my body. It was in the Life Science class that I learned that XY means you are male and XX means female. The Life Orientation classroom was an additional confirmation that I am a strange. The teacher explained the chromosomal make up of different genders. Internally, I was male, externally, I was female with some male organs and registered as female. It was a mess. I decided to go in a deeper isolation. No one could know about me. I was scared all the time. I had no one to talk to.' (Jacky)

'I knew from the beginning that something was wrong with me. I had no penis nor a vagina. I knew I was a boy because I looked like one and dressed like one. When I was in primary school I would rush home to use the toilet because my school was close. This was on the instruction of my mom to hide my situation. It was until I went to secondary school that my nightmare started. I had to use the bathroom stalls which made me different from all the other boys who used the urinals. After a long questioning by the boys for using the stalls to pee, in one incident they one day pulled down my pants and discovered I have nothing.

My secret was out and my nightmare started. So when the LO teacher discussed issues of puberty, the boys looked at me and laughed. The one asked the teacher what they should call people with no "tools." I knew they were referring to me but surprisingly the teacher remained silent. That day I decided to stand up for myself and fought really hard. That was my last day at school because I was suspended and never returned.' (Andy)

Apart from questioning their own bodily development, their peers also pointed out their bodily deformation in the LO class. These lessons were extremely difficult as their peers stigmatised their bodies, creating in the participants a sense of bodily shame. These participants endured humiliation during sexuality education in the form of stares, silent whispers and giggles from other learners, who openly compared their bodily variation and penis size to that contained in the textbook. Individuals with intersex variations, 'sometimes face significant educational barriers around puberty and secondary schooling' (p.16). The unpleasant classroom and school experience resulted in some of the participants repeating school grades during high school, and some dropping out of the education system entirely. The constant teasing during puberty and sexuality lessons resulted in the participants absconding class, or they were physically present but mentally absent as a coping mechanism:

'I would rather be at home than to be at school. I only came to school because my family forced me to be there. There was nothing to learn that is about me. Learning about the others made me feel I don't belong and that I was unimportant. For that reason I would rather be on my own.' (Jabu)

'I met friends in a park near the school. They would smoke weed. I started smoking with them. It made me feel better than to learn how misinformed I was. They did not know about the secrets in my body. My private parts were private. I would pretend to go to school and end up in the park with my friends. This was really better than me being mocked in the presence of a teacher who didn't care of my pain.' (Andy)

'LO was only twice a week. That was the good thing. But those two periods felt like forever. I was happy to do the other subjects that had nothing to do with my body, like languages and maths. Once I entered the LO class I zoomed out. It was as if my body was there but mentally I was absent.' (Jacky)

Bodily shame led to Andy not attending school, whilst Jacky would mentally remove herself from the classroom. Taking numerous days off from school often resulted in them missing out on important schoolwork. Studying from home on their own was another difficulty, which was the very source of their trauma, as the textbook could not facilitate learning. More so, there was no other material like magazines or books where they could learn about their unique bodily developments. This resulted in many of them internalising the offensive remarks that were made in the class:

'Since my parents asked me to focus on my school work, I thought I will zoom out in class and catch up later. I could not do that. The textbook did not speak to my body which was abnormal. The teacher did not speak about my body nor could I find any other information. I did not even know what to search on the internet because I did not have a name for my weird body.' (Jacky)

'Sometimes I thought I would study the work on my own at home. The only information in the textbook was about their normal bodies. My body was nowhere. I realised I was some sort of a moron, some freak from a horror movie. Think about it. I am boy with no penis, no private part, just a hole. No wonder I could not be in the textbook. How do you teach people that this is a normal body? In schools we learn of normal things.' (Andy)

It was difficult for them to remain focused on learning during lessons. They would be captured by memories and images of the bullying in and around the classroom. They were more concerned about what was said about them or anticipating the next attack from their peers. Quiet chuckles and whispers would make them hyper vigilant. This alertness was important because their mental response needed to be prepared to go into fight or flight mode, in case another bullying stunt lurked around them:

'The giggles from leaners in my class added to my anxiety and fears, as the textbooks confirmed what they have been saying all along. They would compare what they had seen or heard about my small penis. I wish I never attended those classes, as they made me feel like a monster.' (Sibongakonke)

'Although I kept to myself and they did not know of my deep secret, every time the lessons of puberty was taught I felt as if they could see through my clothes that I have balls and a vagina. I would be scared and would draw deeper into isolation. I was not ready that this world knows my secret. I saw what they did to other kids who are different.' (Jacky)

HIV education is amongst the core content in the LO classroom to mitigate infections and mortality rates.<sup>8</sup> Lessons in LO predominantly focus on abstinence and safe sex practices.<sup>8</sup> Whenever teachers addressed knowledge on condom use, it normally was from a heteronormative perspective. Condom use education focuses on distinctive genitalia. Participants in this study with non-distinctive genitalia raised how they yet again were absent from sex, HIV and safety education:

'I have a penis and a vagina. I preferred my penis even if it is small. The condoms that teachers showed in class were too big. I was always worried that I will get AIDS when having sex without a condom. The message in the LO class was always, no condom equals AIDS. I had no clue how I would protect myself from the cruelty and from HIV.' (Thandi)

'The topic of HIV was always a topic of sex in LO. Leaners would talk long after the lesson ended about sex. This was one topic that excited everyone but it would depress me. I don't have a penis or at least if only this hole was a vagina. This was my most horrible lesson. I had nothing and this class was not for me. I wanted to die because I was not a real person. I thought I would never have sex. All I was doing was to piss and to shit. I was broken for a long time.' (Andy)

'I wish they allowed some lessons to put ear plugs. I did not enjoy HIV education lessons. The kids would obviously talk about sex. Here I was, inside a boy, outside girl with balls. Before surgery [when testes were removed], I was always worried how I would explain this messed up body should I decide to have sex. That activity was off limits. Again, I withdrew more and more.' (Jacky)

Sex is a critical topic for young people in the LO classroom and genitals are made central to this activity according to Andy. The absence of these organs on his body not only makes Andy feel excluded, but also inhuman. Andy feels worthless with intense depression to the point that he prefers to die because of the absence of this distinctive bodily organ. Similarly, Jacky also feels anxious that her genital characteristics would not enable her to have a normal sex life. Attending lessons that focussed on sex education was more traumatising than informative to them. It is not surprising that the participants do not recommend a curriculum that includes education regarding bodily variety or intersex, considering the ridicule, torment, shame and anxiety that they have been subjected to by their peers during learning. They prefer the silence and invisibility, not because they are not curious to learn about their developments, but rather as protection from their peers. The punishment for being different from the norm has left them with a fear of school in general.

The only way to effect change in the educational system is to educate learners about body variances and differences in sex characteristic development. John Dewey emphasised that 'school curriculum was the platform from which intellectual advancement as well as social change was to occur' (p. 1).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, sexual scripts that are exclusionary can only be transformed by instilling new social norms through education.

Participants would rather visit medical practitioners to acquire information regarding their bodies and possibly another operation, than learn about their intersex variation from school. These participants were desperate to 'fix' their bodies so as to align with what is thought of as acceptable and normal sex characteristics. It is important that school staff such as an 'educational psychologist and students need education about intersex variations in a non-discriminatory manner' (p. 116).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, when schooling experiences of intersex learners are not shaped by bullying, ridicule and shame, they would be more comfortable in participating in a curriculum that describes intersex variations.

## Intersex bodies, exposure and humiliation in school bathrooms

Deviating from what the society perceives as a norm is dangerous, especially if the defiance is subversive in nature. This is deemed unintelligible.<sup>26</sup> The unintelligible person is then seen as a threat because they are regarded as disordered, unnatural or monstrous, provoking disquieting anxiety towards the seemingly unintelligible person, who is then regarded as inhuman and is subjected to disrespect, as well as violation of their rights.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, those with intersex characteristics from childhood experienced considerable anxiety and dissatisfaction regarding their non-normative genitalia.<sup>16</sup> They also internalise messages of abnormality from a very young age like Sibongakonke's penis size that has bothered him since he was 7 years old. This was when he

commenced grade 1 and realised that his cousin's penis was larger than his. He narrated how the bathroom became a site of horror.

The penis seems to have a performing role in the schooling community, as it preserves models of gender binarism. The physical structure of the bathroom reinforced the binaries of gender that is determined by distinctive genitalia.<sup>16</sup> Those who are born with a penis will enter the bathrooms designated for males and those born with a vagina will enter the bathrooms designated for females. Sibongakonke's penis and the absence of normative genitalia for Andy did not fit into the biomedical characteristics of a 'normal' developing sex organ, therefore the penis failed in its performing role:

'I look like a boy so I go to the boys' toilets. But I don't have a penis that makes me to be a boy. We learned in those LO lessons what a boy looks like and what a girl looks like. Girls sit down when they pee and I sit down too. Am I a half boy/half girl? Those lessons cause problems for every part of my life. Am I even in the right toilet or is there toilet? I felt like someone on an island. That's why when I was suspended I decided to never come back. It was like freedom for me.' (Andy)

'Boys do many things in the toilet. We learn in LO in adolescence lessons you develop sperm that could impregnate girls. So boys would go into the stalls and wank [*masturbate*] to show the sperm and brag that they are now men. They would chase me out of the stalls and tell me I have a baby penis I should not play with myself. I was not even using the stalls for that reason. I could not do what normal boys do.' (Sibongakonke)

Butler writes that gender is a performance to a social audience, scripted by prolonged observation, reproduction and adoption, creating a society that preserves and authenticates the established gender binary.<sup>29</sup> The absence of distinctive or normative developed genitalia is a symbol of failure and non-compliance of the 'norm' and therefore, a threat to ancient social scripts. The above extract points to the severe punishment in the school toilets because their expectation of a penis did not fall within 'normative' binary standards. Through these excerpts, I find that peers would police what or who is normal and acceptable, and what is unacceptable or abnormal. Subsequently, such bodies would be subjected to rejection and ridicule. The regulation of the body is however learned and needs unlearning. Affirming intersex education has the potential to reduce discrimination, othering, bullying and provocation because of diverse characteristics.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on the experiences of people with variant intersex developments and their experiences in LO classrooms when they were at school. Through a case study approach lensed through the theory of intelligibility, this article sought how intersex developments were acknowledged and affirmed in the LO classroom which predominantly

deals with knowledge of the self and society. The voices of participants in this study have demonstrated that the South African schooling environment is not ready to affirm and protect sexual diversity, and in this instance, intersex learners. This is underscored by the LO curriculum that excludes intersex development and privileges fixed binary gender categories of male and female as located through distinctive sexed genitalia. Findings show that school youth with variant intersex genitalia are subjected to teaching and learning experiences that exclude them.

There is an urgent need to address the exclusion of intersex identities from the LO curriculum. As this study found, sexuality education was largely exclusionary of intersex identities, and instead promoted distinctive sex developments, cisgendered bodies and compulsory heteronormative identities. The school curriculum failed to affirm intersex bodily variations, resulting in the further discrimination and unacceptance of intersex school youth amongst their peers. The silences on variant intersex characteristics education in the LO curriculum made these individuals feel excluded, miss classroom participation, or lead to their suspension or eventual dropout. Additionally, they became depressed and adopted risky behaviours which resonates with the findings of literature.<sup>36</sup> It is crucial that the South African Department of Basic Education urgently develops a policy and guidelines to facilitate the adequate inclusion of learners with intersex variations. The LO curriculum already has a space with this knowledge and simply needs adaptation. The LO curriculum contains sections on gender constructions and society and the newly scripted lessons on comprehensive sexuality education could be ideal content areas that could respond to knowledge on intersex developments. Whilst the intersex body is positioned as a site of problem and deficit, I argue for the mainstreaming through a shift in LO education and a rights-based approach to dignity that aligns with constitutional affirmation and protection. School resources such as textbooks should be developed to include knowledge of sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Training for LO educators and other staff members on how to affirm, protect, support and include intersex learners in the schooling environment should be provided. This study further argues that awareness of intersex individuals be facilitated amongst school-going youth to educate them on intersex bodily variation, as well as anti-bullying workshops to train peers in supporting intersex identities against bullying. Furthermore, the study endorses that schools be equipped with adequate psychological support staff to assist intersexed learners in understanding and building a positive self-image with regard to their bodily variations.

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## Author's contributions

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## Data availability

All interview transcripts will be made available upon reasonable request from the author.

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