Parents resist sexuality education through digital activism

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Abstract

South Africa has high rates of HIV infection among its young population, high rates of unintended pregnancy among the youth, and extremely high rates of gender-based violence. Given all this, it is essential that young people be taught skills that will enable them to manage their sexuality. Schools have been shown to be best placed to provide accurate and relevant information on young people's sexualities. Through the Life Orientation (LO) curriculum, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) offers age-appropriate sexuality education as a response to these concerns. However, research in sexuality education shows that there is a lack of guidance and preparedness by educators, and this hampers how sexuality education is delivered in South African schools. A recent attempt by the DBE to upscale and strengthen the sexuality education curriculum in South African schools was met with resistance from parents and other lobby groups. This resistance was driven across many different media platforms, and particularly through an online hashtag #LeaveOurKidsAlone, largely on Facebook and Twitter. Through this resistance, we are introduced to parents/adult response to the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in South African schools, a voice that has been missing to a great extent in this debate. Working within a broad feminist qualitative framework, I use critical discourse analysis to map out some of the key discourses emerging from the #LeaveOurKidsAlone resistance in an attempt to understand how parents/adults use social media to resist CSE in South Africa. I foreground critically adult voices and the implications of these for the teaching and learning of CSE in South African schools.

Keywords: parents, sexuality education, resistance, digital activism, South Africa

Introduction

In this paper, I will first outline briefly how social media has been used as a means of resistance to education in general and sexuality education in particular. I then discuss how sexuality education in South Africa has been widely resisted. I follow this with a brief overview of sexuality education in South Africa to define the context within which I make my argument.

Social media as a tool of resistance

Using social media as a tool of resistance has gained prominence all over the world. Hashtag movements, as they are popularly known, have the power to facilitate real-time connections as users take note of issues they would not otherwise have noticed or acted on. In different parts of the world, hashtag movements have been used to drive change and resist inequality or policies promoting social injustice and lack of transformation (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovich, 2018; Brennan et al., 2021; David, 2018; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Selvi, 2022; Thapliyal, 2018). In South Africa, advocacy for decolonial and free education, through #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, took centre stage in digital activism in 2015 and 2016 as young university students resisted the lack of transformation and demanded change in curricula at higher education institutions. Hashtag movements have become a very popular way of sparking, organising, and sustaining protests (De Fina, 2021; Spiro & Monroy-Hernández, 2016) and the power of these movements lies in their ability to network and to connect people (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), as well as in their ability to shape public discourse (Yang, 2016). In this paper, I will draw on one such hashtag, #LeaveOurKidsAlone, to foreground how adults' voices resist comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), and how such resistance intensifies complexities in the teaching and learning of CSE in South African schools.

Resistance to comprehensive sexuality education in South Africa

In 2015, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed and piloted scripted lesson plans (SLPs) in five of the nine provinces in the country in an attempt to strengthen the teaching of CSE in South African schools. These SLPs were a response to an independent review of sexuality education in South Africa (see Kirby, 2011) that pointed to the way in which educators are challenged in teaching in this particular learning area. In the last quarter of 2019, a Facebook group using #LeaveOurKidsAlone reacted to these SLPs, displaying shock and outrage at what was disseminated to young people in schools. What began as a resistance to SLPs spiralled into huge resistance to the teaching of CSE in South African schools. Within a few weeks, the group had garnered more than 100,000 supporters, and by the last week of March 2021 it had about 136,328 members. This backlash against SLPs has become a full-blown resistance to CSE. The key concerns raised by the users on the Facebook page were that there had been inadequate consultation with parents and school governing bodies. They deemed the curriculum inappropriate for children of primary school age, claiming that it would sexualise them and promote risky sexual behaviour. Further claims suggested that the curriculum is based on Western ideals, funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United States Agency for International Development, that undermine the authority of parents and was therefore unsuited to the South African context (#LeaveOurKidsAlone Facebook page). A few scholars have reacted to this pushback (Chaskalson et al., 2019; Davis, 2019; McEwen, 2019; Ubisi, 2020) but most of this work appears to be in the popular media.

Writing about narrative agency in hashtag activism, Yang (2016) indicated how the power of digital activism plays out in shaping public discourse. I find Yang's notion very useful since I focus on the power of the narratives shared on #LeaveOurKidsAlone. These are personal stories, shaped broadly by the narrators' social context and ideological inclinations. It is from these narratives that I map out emerging key discourses with the aim of understanding how adults resist CSE in South Africa, and what the implications of this resistance are to the teaching and learning of this subject area in schools.

There is limited work on resistance to CSE in South Africa (Ubisi, 2020), particularly by parents. In contrast, this work is quite prominent in other parts of the world (see Robinson et al., 2017; Saarreharju et al., 2020), all of which shows how parents push back and contest the teaching and learning of CSE in their different contexts. Bialystok and Wright's (2019) work on how parents resist CSE in Ontario, Canada, is also interesting to note for its relevance to this work. They argue that CSE debates in most cases tell us more "about the identities of particular groups and individuals and the cultural narratives they represent than any pedagogical issues related to youth sexuality" (p. 343). This notion is highly useful in thinking about and reading the voices of public resistance to CSE on the #LeaveOurKidsAlone online platform. To provide a basis for further understanding these adult online discourses, I provide below a brief background to the discourses emerging in CSE research in South Africa.

Teaching and learning sexuality education in South Africa

Since 2000, the DBE in South Africa has offered Life Skills education at primary and secondary schools through its Life Orientation (LO) syllabus. The current curriculum, National Curriculum Statements (Grades R–12) that appears in all LO Curriculum Assessment Statements, aims to equip young people with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and values necessary for self-fulfilment and meaningful participation as citizens of a free country (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 4). Although this learning area was introduced as a response to the challenges experienced in relation to HIV and AIDS, teaching sexuality education was a response from the Department of Education to sexual and reproductive health and gender injustice—concerns affecting young people of school going age. Schools have been shown to be ideal spaces for disseminating knowledge on sexualities to young people, since they can take into account the appropriate packaging of relevant information in a structured manner (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2009, 2018). In addition, young people spend most of their time in school. However, a substantial body of empirical work in South Africa points to many complexities that complicate the teaching and learning of CSE in schools. Scholars have questioned who should be teaching the subject and on whose culture the subject content should draw in a multicultural and diversified context (Baxen & Breidlid, 2009; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Francis, 2010; Francis & DePalma, 2014; Helleve et al., 2009; Shefer et al., 2015). Such questions are not unique to the South African context. See, for example, Khau (2012) who has written from Lesotho, Robinson et al. (2017) from the United Kingdom, and Sham et al. (2020) from Malaysia. In South Africa, research further shows how teachers are struggling

with the subject content; this struggle is rooted in the challenges educators experience with regard to their beliefs and convictions (Ahmed et al., 2009; Bhana et al., 2008; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Diale, 2016; Rooth, 2005), as well as a lack of adequate skills and readiness for the pedagogical issues related to teaching about sexualities (Helleve et al., 2009; Kirby, 2011; Masinga, 2009; Mathe, 2013).

Research with learners further speaks to the complexity of the pedagogical process, thus magnifying these concerns. CSE is most often taught from the perspective of danger and disease (Macleod, 2009; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Young people, particularly female learners, are warned and cautioned to guard their sexuality (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2022; Ngabaza et al., 2016) and to steer away from immoral and risky sexual behaviour. In addition to this, sexual abstinence is promoted (Francis, 2012; Moletsane, 2011; Smith & Harrison, 2013). Homophobic language is (however inadvertently) used and explicitly accommodated in classrooms as heterosexual notions of personhood are reinforced (Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019) in the controlling and regulation of sexualities (Francis & DePalma, 2014; Ngabaza et al., 2016).

Using these key narratives as a backdrop, I map out discourses emerging from the online hashtag #LeaveOurKidsAlone in an attempt to make sense of how adults resist CSE, and the implications of this resistance. Although research has widely documented the voices of teachers and learners (Bhana et al., 2010; Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Morrell et al., 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2016: Shefer et al., 2015), the online hashtag responses are critical for highlighting the missing voice in sexualities research in South Africa, i.e., that of parents and other adults. Although digital communication is the new mode of communication, access to digital spaces is racially and socially stratified. This is also true in South Africa. One should, therefore, be cautious of universalising this voice to all parents in this country. Avigur-Eshel and Berkovich (2018), writing from Israel, claimed that middle-class parents use social media to mobilise as aggrieved parents, but also use this very mode to push for a middle-class agenda. It is also helpful to consider that not all adults in this group are parents, and that not all parents are represented here. Making sense of how adults used this digital platform to resist CSE, however, cannot be overemphasised since it contributes to a holistic view of key discourses shaping CSE teaching and learning in South Africa.

Methodology

Facebook is a commonly used source of data in social media, particularly to identify and select content associated with a particular set of circumstances, in this case resistance to CSE. Via the #LeaveOurKidsAlone Facebook group, the founder of the group, a parent, has conducted numerous media interviews with different radio stations defending the group's stance. Most of the group's activity took place between October 2019 and February 2020. My focus in this paper is on the discourses emerging from collective social media posts linked to the hashtag between 26 October 2019, when the Facebook group emerged, and August 2020.

Relevant posts and comments were randomly extracted from Facebook, copied manually and then pasted thematically onto a spreadsheet in a secure archive. Given that social media posts contain personalised information, all extracts were edited to maintain users' privacy and all identification links removed from the data. This is in line with recommendations by Franz et al. (2019) and Kosinski et al. (2015) that while Facebook data can be used for research purposes without user consent, all data should be anonymised. I was also careful to extract both user-generated and user-directed content (Franz et al., 2019) from the group activity to enable a collection of detailed nuances.

I employed a feminist qualitative methodological framework to explore Facebook and Twitter posts as personal narratives embedded in users' sociocultural ideologies. It is essential to understand the personal within the broader discursive frameworks for understanding the political, and a feminist lens is critical to making sense of this interplay (Cole, 2009; Thompson et al., 2018). After extracting and inserting posts into a spreadsheet, the posts were checked for relevance, i.e., all posts had to show resistance. A total of 696 Facebook and Twitter posts were then grouped thematically and examined for discursive patterns. I then conducted a critical discourse analysis to understand the key discourses that appear in these social media posts in order to explore how adults use social media to resist CSE in South Africa.

Critical discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is generally concerned with how language is used to create meaning in particular contexts. Discourses are usually dominant sites of struggle in which power relations are perpetuated and ideological positions are entrenched in societies (Fairclough, 2001; Lazar, 2007). By using critical discourse analysis, I was able to explore how the emerging discourses entangled with other social and political concerns within this context, and how these emerging discourses further competed for "dominance, power and control" (Foucault, 1980, p. 35), as users collectively lobbied against and resisted CSE in South African schools. The critical exploration of the text used, and how meaning was created and conveyed through these texts from the posts, allowed language to operate as a tool for the enactment of ideology (Fairclough, 2001, 2013). Through these texts I was able to identify how personal views and positionalities were not only entangled with other popular views raised in the posts, but that they also collectively sustained particular discursive modes of resisting CSE, as explained below.

Discourses from #LeaveOurKidsAlone

By means of critical discourse analysis, I identified five key discursive messages from the posts, which I present here, that point to how parents use social media to resist CSE in South Africa. The emerging discourses include the following:

1) Leave our kids alone
2) CSE is immoral and out of line with religious beliefs

3) Parental control and authority: *Teach sexual health only or abstinence until marriage*
4) Fear and sensationalism: *Do parents have a say?*
5) CSE as a Western concept: Discourses of prejudice and intolerance

Childhood innocence: Leave our kids alone

#LeaveOurKidsAlone is a direct message of resistance to CSE. The hashtag is a clear illustration of the critical significance of how language is intentionally used for a particular effect, and how the intentional use of language enacts discourses that remain embedded in the broader community's ideologies on sexuality (Fairclough, 2013; Thompson et al., 2018). The use of the word "Kids" in this hashtag communicates the assumed innocence of children and their ignorance of sex and sexuality. One parent noted, "A child does not need to lose their childhood innocence that fast", and another, "Children need to be children." Scholarly work broadly criticises educators for assuming that children are innocent of sexual knowledge, and that they need adult wisdom and guidance to understand their sexuality. (Bhana, 2008, 2016; Goldman, 2008). This is especially so because young people know that the internet is readily available and that knowledge on sexualities is easily accessible (Beyers, 2013; Francis, 2019); this poses a direct challenge to the narrative of childhood innocence.

The entire resistance is premised on childhood innocence and the perception that schools sexualise young people. Ringrose (2016) argued that the discourse of childhood innocence is simultaneously a debate on the sexualisation of young people. A further implication of this debate is that childhood sexuality is then considered a moral problem in some societies, as is evident from the media posts I discuss below.

Entangled with the childhood innocence debate is what is known as protectionist discourse (Goldman, 2008). Parents want to protect their children, hence the use of the word kids to communicate resistance and to emphasise innocence. For example, a parent says*,*

> I don't want other people teaching my kids stuff they don't have the emotional capacity to handle . . . I don't want them exposed to things they are not ready for.

This resistance is based on the parents' belief that schools have no right to communicate about sex and sexuality to their children, and that educating young people on sexualities should remain solely their domain (see Goldman, 2008). Robinson et al. (2017) suggested that such resistance could be associated with fear based on the lack of knowledge about what schools would teach, and a deep-seated desire to shelter kids from sex-related information, or, as Goldman (2008) further suggested, a fear of the uncertainty of the long-term benefits of CSE for young people. At the same time, research shows that children are sexual beings who are conscious of their sexuality from an early age (Bhana, 2015, 2016). Despite a few studies indicating that parents communicate information about sexualities to their children, this communication is considered inconsistent, inadequate, and poorly conveyed (Goldman, 2008). Additionally, some parents claim that they are unprepared to talk to their children about sexuality, or that it is taboo to do so (Beyers, 2012). It is therefore still optimal to disseminate information about sexuality in school, as empirical studies show, and school is

still the most suitable place for disseminating knowledge about sexuality; this has been confirmed empirically (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2009).

Immorality: CSE "immoral" and out of line with religious beliefs

The exchanges and posts on Facebook are made up of personal narratives, people's stories about their values and their faith, and their ideological position on sexualities. The idea of CSE as a moral problem that is founded on the notion of childhood innocence, intensified in the social media posts as parents continued to draw on their ideological positions to justify why their kids should be left alone. Plummer (2012) reminded us that concerns about sexualities always bring other social factors into play, and Bialystok and Wright (2019) have added that these factors are about people's identities, their beliefs and values, and not about pedagogy. It is therefore not surprising that users draw on faith and culture, mobilising discourses of morality to challenge CSE. A hashtag user[1] said

> Its morally wrong. We have tolerated this nonsense for long, I subscribe to both Christian and traditional culture and none of those endorse it. Fact that we keep quiet about it doesn't make it right. It's even worse teaching a 10 year old about this gabbage of behaviour.

Another asked, "are our religious leaders captured? Is this why they are so quiet on the CSE issue? If so, we are truly on our own." This attitude to CSE and what parents think their children should or should not be exposed to is reminiscent of early 20th-century anxieties about young people's sexualities, evoking what Burns (1996) termed the "sexuality crisis of the 1930s." These anxieties, which continue to be revisited, were associated with the "lax morality" (p. 87) of young people in the burgeoning urban spaces in colonial South Africa. For this reason, CSE is also perceived as being out of line with parents' religious beliefs, and therefore generally immoral, with some associating it with the work of the devil in saying things like, "The devil is a liar" thus fuelling anxiety among parents.

Schools are seen to be lacking the right to expose their children to CSE. The group narrative is that of petitioning, demanding, and appealing (Yang, 2016) to the government and the DBE to leave their children alone. In this morality discourse, there is a further condemnation of the removal of religious education from the school curriculum, with some users suggesting that this is the reason why CSE has found its way into mainstream education. As one parent put it,

> I think this is punishment from God baba, I mean why did they close bible studies at school in the first place. I don't know where is this country is leading us. Only God can help us from this subject, in him we shall never fail.

More sentiments point to an unacceptable change in the school curriculum, with messages such as "now children are trapped in subjects that are taking our children straight to hell" that

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[1]   Users' words are presented here verbatim; nothing has been edited.

illustrate the concern with CSE. There is emphasis on the fear that CSE will clash with parents' religious teachings and values (Robinson et al., 2017). Christian values (as expressed here) seem to underpin the sentiments of most of the group, and there is a deep yearning for the colonial approach to sexuality education that dictated that the main aim was instilling moral values in young people through the church (Duff, 2015). Parents see this gradual departure from religious education in favour of the current CSE as problematic. A parent said,

> after removing the bible and religious studies at school, assemble prayers reduced to only 1 day or nothing now this, how important is this to our kids as it will damage their future and tarnish good morals and values.

Referring to CSE as "this" speaks to moral panic about the teaching of sexuality and a lack of understanding of CSE by parents, as noted in another context by Fine (1993), that is linked to the assumption that children are innocent and having knowledge of sexualities is immoral. This discourse is further sustained in this statement:

> I am surprised that Parents are only realising this now, you should have realised this when Bible studies, Home Economics and woodwork was removed from the curriculum.

The main concern propagated in this discourse is that CSE is not in line with Christian, traditional, and cultural values. The statement that "some policies are here to confuse society and destroy the little morality left in society" and that CSE is unsuitable for children remind me of the discourses based on reminiscing about the value of colonial education in South Africa.

For a nuanced understanding of the discourse of morality in the context of religion, it is helpful to revisit South Africa's colonial history; sexuality education was introduced after the First World War to promote physical and sexual hygiene. This was at a time when there was huge concern about the global outbreak and spread of syphilis. Duff (2015) explained how the church and state converged in an attempt to produce morally upright young people who would then be channelled into compulsory heteronormativity through other parallel systems adopted at the time. Religion, particularly with Christian principles, has always been, and continues to be, a very significant discourse in benchmarking moral values (Burns, 1996; Duff, 2015). What is concerning is that moral values are always juxtaposed against shame, stigma, immorality, and the concept of evil, and condemnation is targeted at those who subvert this (supposedly) moral standard. These discourses sustain the way in which parents deploy religion to control and regulate their children's sexuality. The bulk of these posts suggests that CSE is immoral and goes, therefore, against religious beliefs, and this assumption fuels adult/parent anger. Bialystok and Wright (2019) also reported on how immigrant parents mobilised religion to resist CSE in Ontario, arguing that this resistance was more about parents' beliefs and identity than about pedagogy.

Parental control and authority: Teach sexual health only or abstinence until marriage

I note, however, that although this resistance is driven by a collective voice, this voice also disintegrates and the collective resistance fragments as it becomes disrupted by other intersectional voices and factors that underlie the group dynamic. Some users understand the basic need to teach sexualities to young people and they are selective in pushing back.

> We are not against sex education . . . we saying we want age appropriate sex education not this hogwash they wanna bring into the schools . . . of course children need to be educated about sex . . . however a 10 year old does not need to be taught how to pleasure her boyfriend.

They are careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater as they advocate for the necessity of allowing schools to teach age appropriate CSE. Parental power and control further play out as different discursive tones emerge, competing with and challenging the voice of the collective. While other voices focus on a complete rejection of CSE, some disrupt this collective voice, advocating instead for the teaching of the biomedical nature of sexuality (see Blake, 2008). These adults understand that South Africa struggles with high rates of HIV infection among its young population along with high rates of unintended pregnancy, and that young people require reproductive health knowledge (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2018). However, even if these parents are aware of these concerns, they are careful about, and quite clear on, what they want schools to teach and this is sexual health. But what is worth noting is how these voices also prefer to problematise sexual rights knowledge in this discourse. In the following post, the phrase "sexual rights" is presented in uppercase with exclamation marks to recreate and convey as Fairclough (2013) might have put it, utter resistance and the power to control what should and should not be done. Note the power in the tone of this statement.

> Now before I start, let me make one thing clear . . . We have no problem with our children being taught these principles within the Life Orientation subjects. However, CSE is nothing even closely related to sexual health, CSE is about SEXUAL RIGHTS!! The United Nations calls it a 'right based education.'

Adults here are also lobbying the government and the DBE to teach sexual reproductive health to alert young people to the danger and likelihood of sexually transmitted diseases but to avoid any other issues of sexualities education. As the parent quoted above, put it,

> Every Parent in South Africa we would love our children to be taught about Sexual Health at school as we will also be teaching our children sexual health in our homes. Sexual health teaches our children about the diseases and infections which are sexually transmittable, especially in South Africa with a high prevalence rate of HIV.

There is an acknowledgement that reproductive health challenges are a reality with which every parent should deal, and that parents should school their children in this area. Research

also shows that reproductive health challenges among young people are linked to inadequate knowledge and lack of information on sexual and reproductive health (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019). Schools are therefore expected to teach abstinence or faithfulness to one partner. The parent quoted above agrees: "It is important that our children are taught the right moral principles of abstinence till marriage, being faithful to one partner." These voices illustrate the authority parents want to have over their children in requiring young people to refrain from sexual activity until they are ready for it, or until they are married. But the reality is that young people are engaging in sexual activity, are exposed to sexually explicit material (Bhana, 2019, 2022), and they are open about it (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). In studies on sexuality education conducted with young people, responses revealed that they are not even listening to messages about abstinence and disease (Francis, 2019; Ngabaza et al., 2016). The notion that abstinence until marriage should be the only approach taught in schools, as emphasised by some Facebook group users above, assumes that everyone wants to be and should be married and should be faithful to one heterosexual partner (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Such assumptions discount and deny the reality of sexual diversity in school age young people.

These Facebook texts raise concerns and assumptions about young people's sexualities that I find essentialist, mainstream, and worrying in that sexuality is conflated with sexual activity and such misframing becomes a source of rage among adults. Most adults do not seem to have a clear understanding of sexuality education in thinking that it is education on sexual activity (Sham et al., 2020) and the pushback hinges on this misunderstanding, pointing to a need for wider and deeper consultation with adults on the nature of the CSE curriculum.

Despite resisting CSE, adults realise that gender-based violence is on the rise, particularly among young people, as demonstrated in the statement that "[w]e are not ignorant of the crisis we face with increased STI infection rate, teenage pregnancy etc." They suggest that young people should be taught the psychological effects of abuse and be guided on where and how to seek help and go on to comment on the necessity of "teaching children the deep psychological impact of being raped, abused etc. and where to seek help." The emphasis is on equipping learners with knowledge of the impact of violence on their bodies. The irony is that rejecting CSE is in fact disallowing young people the possibility of circumventing such violence through accurate knowledge that can be empowering. Interestingly, the parents' call to teach children and young people about the diseases and consequences here resonates strongly with the approach taken by educators in teaching sexualities. Most educators are comfortable with teaching CSE in relation to danger and risk of disease (Francis, 2011; Macleod, 2009; Ngabaza et al., 2016; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015) and they have been criticised for approaching CSE in a such a manner.

Fear and sensationalism: Do parents have a say?

Another key emotion mobilised throughout the Facebook texts is fear. Some users carefully select language that is sensational to make claims that intend to instil fear in other users, sensationalising the pushback against CSE. For example, one of the posts reads,

> Researh has shown that CSE has caused enormous damage to Parent/Child relationships everywhere it has been taught. Cases of STI's have sky rocket, Abortions have increased, kids have been left disoriented not having any morals attahced to sex, anything goes. The results of CSE is then a generation who have been sexualised at young age, many who go into depression havev low self esteem issues.

The user does not cite or substantiate this claim, although there is reference to research, and this creates an assumption of evidence. This type of post carries inaccuracies while at the same time contributes to instilling panic and inciting backlash. The language used here is meant to sensationalise, terrify, create panic, and present CSE as a crisis. This sensationalist momentum has been taken up by other users, one of whom posted,

> Please keep fighting and please keep posting. This is an insidious attempt to harm our children and all adults should be taking a stand against this. As a teacher myself I would refuse to have anything to do with this never mind teach it.

Other voices further reproduce this sensationalist tone. One person said, "Where is the world actually heading to?" and another exclaimed, "NO, NO, NO to this insanity. I am not having my unborn grandchildren learning about this madness."

Responses to these posts show how such sensationalist discourses force some parents into a hopelessness that fuels uncertainty while drawing support and momentum for the pushback. Subsequently, we see some parents raising concerns and uncertainty about their roles, their capabilities, and their options as this post illustrates.

> My question do we as parents have a say? Lately everything is being discussed and we just have to fall in. How fair is this to us parents it seems like we dont know how to raise our kids. Who decicdes all these things? what happens if i dont wnt my child expose to this CSE#jsasking.

Another user says "This is shocking. It is to do with parenting. Do parents not teach values to kids anymore?" This fear and uncertainty are fuelled by what emerges as a lack of appropriate information on CSE as is evident here: "I wonder what the benefits of CSE will look like. Parents beware!" and "We just need clarity on the sex education side. What exactly will be taught?" These statements remind us of the conclusions reached by Robinson et al. (2017) and Fine (1993) writing from other contexts, that parents are in some instances unsure of CSE and its potential value, and this could be a genuine concern that needs to be considered in this case. One post summarises this as "Parents need more influence over curriculum choices" and another says, "How can we be involved?" and "What can we parents do?" The perpetuation of the discourse of fear is further noted in the language of mobilisation in the plea, "Keep fighting and keep posting."

CSE as a Western concept: Discourses of hate and intolerance

The dynamics of this resistance are undercut by narratives that take a different form. The general form followed by the voices of resistance is that parents challenge the DBE from a

collective position and from their different individual positionalities. Some posts use hate speech, especially homophobic statements, to project their personal views on diversity and difference as one user said,

> Thank you, Sir, this issue must be dealt with strongly. Why is the government so hasty to introduce this at such an early age. My view is power of the LGBT communities to normalise homosexuality as violence and witchcraft are normalised through SABC.

In this discourse, CSE is associated with the power of LGBT communities to normalise homosexuality in the same way as violence and witchcraft are said to be normalised by the South African Broadcasting Corporation. It is not surprising that some parents resort to homophobia to challenge diversity and difference. These discourses once again bring the issue of power to the fore. Earlier, I referred to mainstream discourse that explicitly normalises heteronormativity, silencing any form of sexual diversity in schools. In the same way, hate speech is mobilised to silence sexual diversity, projecting heteronormativity as the powerful norm, but also pointing to what Davis (2019) saw as a culture war in which children are used as pawns. Davis reminded us of Plummer's (2011) observation that any concerns with sexuality always bring in other intersectional power relations in their wake.

Parallel to the hate speech, the discourse of sexuality education emerges as a Western concept, and this discourse is an attack on the government. The assumption raised here is that the government fails to appreciate being voted into power by South African citizens, and it is blamed for failing to uphold African ideals, choosing instead to buy into CSE, a foreign concept. Politics is conflated with African identity as the government is understood to work in collusion with UNESCO and the United Nations, thus betraying the citizens who voted them into power as the following post claims.

> The insensitive way which this document (SLPs) deals with the sensitive issues of sexuality in un-African. The interlocuters of this government are not the people who elected them into power . . . it fails to appreciate the fact that it has been elected by the South African citizens but behaves as if it has been put into power by Western Countries and the United Natins. When it suits its agenda, it proclaims its allegiance to African identity but when it comes to matters of sexual ethics it disregards African cultural practices and ethos.

Another user refers to the UN as "a criminal organisation" and some continue to challenge CSE for its association with UNESCO, suggesting that CSE content is UNESCO's content that is age inappropriate.

> UNESCO's content is not age appropriate. I don't want other people teaching my kids stuff they don't have the emotional capacity to handle. I don't want them exposed to things they are not ready for . . .

> This controversial program is forced on children by UN agencies like UNESCO without the knowledge and consent of parents.

McEwen (2019) claimed that this adult/parent pushback is ironically supported by profamily conservative American organisations that are against progressive ideals.

Discussion

Discourses emerging from the social media posts linked to the hashtag #LeaveOurKidsAlone are shaped by personal stories. These stories are moulded around people's beliefs and are embedded in their identity and convictions as well as in their religious and cultural ideologies concerning sexualities (Fairclough, 2013; Plummer, 2011). It is evident, though, that the parents' resistance to the teaching of CSE attracted some form of cohesion since key discourses suggest this unity. For example, "leave our kids alone" shows a partly harmonised resistance driven by discourses that mobilise religion, culture, and tradition, and an intense belief in childhood innocence. I deliberately use "partly" because this harmonised resistance fragments when some users begin to acknowledge the significance of scientifically accurate reproductive health information in CSE, and the necessity for children to be exposed to it. Even then, the voices are resolute on what should and should not be taught, pointing to parents' desire to control that to which their children are exposed. The determination to teach CSE through a biomedical lens and not from a rights approach, is emphasised and resonates strongly with the group members. I realise that parents' appeal for a focus on teaching about disease is in line with the silent resistance shown by some educators in the teaching of sexuality education in South African schools. Research has shown how selective educators are regarding what to teach and how to teach it, because of the discomfort they experience with some CSE curricula content (Ahmed et al., 2009; Helleve et al., 2011; Rooth, 2005). In the same way, parents are discomforted by the SLPs and by CSE broadly, thus complicating the teaching and learning of CSE in South African schools but also justifying the need for intense engagement by all stakeholders in CSE. Further, scholars who critique the biomedical approach to teaching CSE acknowledge that this approach is grounded in the link between the teaching area and HIV and AIDS education. Parents similarly acknowledge the link with HIV and AIDS, supporting the need for accurate knowledge for young people in this area, but carefully pushing back on any focus on young people's rights.

Given that South Africa is a multicultural and diverse society, teaching sexuality education has always been characterised by complexity (Ngabaza et al., 2016). Francis (2011) spoke about the rifts between policy and personal and community values, arguing that educators feel trapped by the expectations of policy and the mandate of their jobs (see also Ahmed et al., 2009). The same challenges play out in discourses emerging from parents who are questioning their personal and collective roles and how they can be pivotal in educating their children on sexuality issues instead of having schools and the state (policy) taking over completely and leaving parents helpless. One can discern fear, panic, and anxiety in their voices.

Noteworthy in these voices is evidence that some parents genuinely lack knowledge on CSE (see Fine, 1993) and what its value could be (see Robinson et al., 2017). This is of critical concern for the teaching and learning of CSE, and there may be need for extensive consultation with parents by key stakeholders from the DBE. Not all parents are comfortable discussing sexuality issues with their children (Beyers, 2013) and not all children have parents who can give them appropriate information on sexuality (Chaskalson et al., 2019). Therefore, sexuality education remains a necessity in South African schools. Discourses from the online engagement point to anxieties and a crisis in sexuality education (Burns, 1996; Ringrose, 2016), rendering CSE a very emotive subject. The use of homophobic language and the assumption that CSE is a Western concept both point to the intricacies of CSE.

Some scholars (see Hearn, 2018) would argue that adultist and protectionist ideologies form the bedrock of this resistance since parents believe that they know what is good for their children and are keen to protect them from what they see as immorality. But what they fail to accept, as Allen (2008) suggested, is the reality and experiences of young people. Other scholars dispute this protectionist view, suggesting that young people should be central to the teaching and learning of sexuality. They should be given an opportunity to contribute to what is best for them (Beyers, 2013) and not what their parents wish for them.

Conclusion

CSE is a complex matter. Parents/adults' voices in #LeaveOurKidsAlone mobilise childhood innocence to resist CSE that they perceive to be immoral. Drawing on religion and culture they collectively justify why their children should not be exposed to CSE. The collective, however, fragments when some voices acknowledge the significance of teaching young people about reproductive health and the dangers of sexually transmitted disease. While parents are generally raising mixed opinions in resisting CSE, these discourses resonate with key themes and factors arising from empirical research on sexuality education in South African schools.

Recommendations

There is fear, uncertainty, and anxiety as to who should be teaching CSE and what content should be covered. This is a question that researchers have raised and is linked to the complexities inherent in the teaching and learning of CSE in South African schools. One critical issue arising from this work is that parents are broadly showing a lack of understanding about what CSE is and how it will benefit their children, and this points to a great need for extensive consultation and education on CSE. This lack of knowledge about CSE in parents is of critical concern for key stakeholders in CSE. Given this lack of knowledge about CSE, there is a need for stakeholders in this field to consult extensively with parents in order to develop a harmonised approach to CSE in South African schools.

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