

“Girls need to behave like girls you know”: the complexities of applying a gender justice goal within sexuality education in South African schools

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Abstract:

Sexuality education, as a component within the Life Orientation (LO) programme in South African schools, is intended to provide young people with knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their sexuality, their own health and that of others. Key to the programme are outcomes relating to power, power relations and gender. In this paper, we apply a critical gender lens to explore the ways in which the teaching of sexuality education engages with larger goals of gender justice. The paper draws from a number of ethnographic studies conducted at 12 South African schools. We focus here on the data collected from focus group discussions with learners, and semi-structured interviews with individual learners, principals and Life Orientation (LO) teachers. The paper highlights the complexities of having gender justice as a central goal of LO sexuality education. Teaching sexuality education is reported to contradict dominant community values and norms. Although some principals and school authorities support gender equity and problematize hegemonic masculinities, learners experience sexuality education as upholding normative gender roles and male power, rather than challenging it. Teachers rely heavily on cautionary messages that put more responsibility for reproductive health on female learners, and use didactic, authoritative pedagogical techniques, which do not acknowledge young people's experience nor facilitate their sexual agency. These complexities need to be foregrounded and worked with systematically if the goal of gender justice within LO is to be realised.

Introduction

Sexuality education is offered as a component in the Life Orientation (LO) programme in all South African schools. Life Orientation is a compulsory life skills subject focusing on empowering learners to be aware of themselves, their roles in their communities, and their responsibilities as citizens. Within this context, the sexuality education component emphasizes that learners should be guided to make informed choices about their own health and that of others. In addition, a key outcome, as outlined by the Department of Basic Education, is an understanding of “power, power relations, masculinity, femininity and gender”. Learners, it is indicated, need to be taught about the “influence of gender inequality on relationships and general well-being: sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, violence, STIs including HIV and AIDS”. While there is a component on “decisions regarding sexuality”, sexual diversity or LGBTIQ issues are not specifically mentioned in the LO curriculum statement.¹

South African researchers have recognised how sexuality education is entrenched in knowledge about relationships, gender and power and have criticised some views of sexuality education as a simple

response to the HIV epidemic.² The latter focus has been challenged for reducing the sexuality component of the Life Orientation syllabus to disease and danger, with schools foregrounding abstinence and protection discourses in the teaching of sexuality education.^{3,4} Similar concerns have been expressed concerning sexuality education in other contexts.^{5,6} The United Nations and the US government, which was instrumental in promoting abstinence only education, have acknowledged that abstinence and fidelity focussed sexuality interventions have been ineffective.⁷ At the same time, programmes that take an empowerment approach (such as the “It’s All One” intervention) show promising results in focussing on gender issues and fostering young people’s critical thinking skills through interactive teaching methods.⁸

While sexuality education is reportedly welcomed and valued by many stakeholders at schools – both learners and educators⁹ – there are mixed concerns about a range of issues pertaining to the pedagogical nature of the component. Some scholars question the values the school sexuality curriculum focuses on, arguing that teachers are uncomfortable with teaching sexuality as they grapple with reconciling their own values with the content in sexuality education.^{2,10} Providers of sexual and reproductive health to adolescents have also raised such discomfort.¹¹

In South Africa, scholarly work exploring relationships among young people has been conducted within the context of HIV and gender-based violence, and primarily highlights male power and dominance in sexual relationships with young women.^{12–14} Sexuality education has been envisaged as a key resource to challenge and disrupt such practices through introducing and reinforcing positive sexual relations and reproductive health knowledge among young people in schools. It is within this framework that we present a critical gender analysis of current experiences and reported practices of sexuality education. We ask questions concerning how gender justice is being implemented or undermined within current LO sexuality education.

The study

In this paper we use data from two different qualitative studies that focus on young people’s experiences at school in different ways. The first study explored the experiences of young women who fall pregnant and become parents at school in some schools in the Western Cape.¹⁵ The second study interrogated how sexuality programmes in selected schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces in South Africa challenged or reproduced normative constructions of gender and gendered power relations in the sexuality education component of Life Orientation in South African schools.*

Participants for the studies were recruited from 12 public schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape. The schools were selected to represent a diversity of learners from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Adopting an ethnographic approach and utilising a critical gender lens, the studies used multiple approaches in the collection of data. The data used in this paper include in-depth interviews with young mothers in school, focus group discussions with 15-19 year-old grade 10 learners, and individual semi-structured interviews with some of the learners from the focus group discussions,

Life Orientation teachers and school principals. These data were analysed through thematic analysis, informed by discourse analysis¹⁶ focussing on dominant ideological constructions of sexuality, gender and family.

Ethical approval for the studies was obtained from two local universities where the researchers were located. Permission to access schools was given by the responsible education authorities in each province. Participation for all participants was voluntary and based on informed consent, with all participants aware that they could leave the research if they so wished without any penalty. Signed parental consent was also obtained for all learners who participated.

Challenging gender norms within diverse cultural contexts

Khau and Helleve and colleagues have noted that teachers, particularly in rural areas, cite their own cultural positions as constraining factors in teaching^{17,10} sexuality education. Indeed, Khau argues for a sexuality education that incorporates communities' traditional ways of knowing into the current curriculum, showing a quest for balance between school and home.¹⁷

Principals of schools[†] alluded to the dominance of particular cultural pressures with respect to the goal of gender justice sexuality education, which effectively raises questions about certain values and norms that are culturally prescribed in learners' communities:

“...we do a lot of work around gender in our Life Orientation component and in the sexuality education and outside of it, but I do think some of the girls come from cultures where they are expected to take a submissive role that can carry on into sexual relations as well.” (Ms Cohen, principal, Highveld High)

“Well, there are always problems between boys and girls, some of the problems ... have got to do with the society, the beliefs that are there in the society, we live in a society that is still a patriarchal society where the male is the dominant figure, ... We have had here girls who are married, I don't remember a single day where I had to deal with a case where a girl is demanding to be respected as a married woman to be called “sisi”,[‡] but I deal every year with cases where boys demand respect and insist on being recognized as men, those are societal issues.” (Mr Majuba, Principal, Willowvale High)

The principals from two different schools suggest that gender equality work in LO is subverted by “cultures” or “society” in which binary gender stereotypes are woven into cultural practices. Mr Majuba cites isiXhosa[§] cultural practices that extend certain privileges to newly circumcised young men, which in the school context may reinforce notions of male power and female submission.

The challenges of teaching equality, which is constructed as undermining male power and privilege, are elaborated in the following example:

“I had a problem with a boy who didn’t want to sweep the classroom...we had to sit down and talk to that boy. That you are a boy here and you are a learner here and you are going to be part and parcel of the cleaning of the classroom. ... Because if you are going to cling onto that – girls are going to be the ones who are going to clean the classrooms – the boys are not going to respect those girls...They are going to take this thing from here at school and practice it at home and then that’s where the problem is going to emanate. Because we want to teach them here at school that women are to be respected. And we are all equal as these genders and males and females are all equal and there is no one who is above the other so that actually starts from the classroom. So this sexuality education is opening up their minds.” (Mr Majuba, principal, Willowvale High)

Reversing the notion that the social situation within which learners are located impacts on the school, Mr Majuba connects the messages learners receive in school with their actions in the home. Sexuality education may be viewed as a way of problematizing hegemonic masculinities, challenging unequal divisions of labour and promoting gender equality. In this respect, sharing of cleaning and other tasks in classrooms is drawn on as a way of challenging gender inequalities more broadly, as in the following further examples from LO teachers:

“I only have boys and girls so in class duties like sweeping and cleaning everybody sweeps..., even with food from the nutrition programme you will see boys or young men dishing food and washing plates. In my class they are all learners and they are all the same.” (Ms Mbombo, Seaview High)

“...for example you find boys adopting their home grown notions of ‘boys do not clean up’ and they expect girls to sweep the classrooms You tell them this is not your home, everything needs to be done 50/50, you need to sweep, at home you need to cook... These are some of the challenges that we grapple with.” (Ms Sonkosi, Greenfield High)

Further achievements of sexuality education are reported as successes in challenging problematic sexual practices such as unsafe sex and sexual harassment among learners, as articulated in this extract:

“We found out that over the past years we have had a problem with high pregnancy rates,... and the question of rape, many other problems that are associated with the sexuality. But now that LO is actually having its part of the curriculum... At least even boys themselves are getting an understanding as to what it means to deal with women or with girls. That on its own is really going down because we used to have problems of boys beating girls from time to time, not respecting girls, not knowing the value of girls but now our teachers are actually doing very well to talk with boys and girls and emphasize on the importance of respect for one another.” (Mr Majuba, principal, Willowvale High)

Mr Majuba highlights the school’s investment in LO sexuality education as a resource to challenge normative gender roles, inequalities and related consequences of unwanted pregnancies and sexual harassment and violence.

Gender normative lessons: “Act like a lady and dress like a woman”

Although the above cited principal paints a positive picture of sexuality education, a more critical lens on the messages that the schools are reportedly delivering to learners shows how sexuality education may reproduce and reinforce dominant gender norms, although they may be implicated in unequal and unsafe sexual practices. Studies have shown that some LO teachers’ responses to sexuality education are shaped by gendered and moralistic discourses which dominate their perceptions and engagements with learners, and which are particularly directed towards young women.^{18,19} The following narrative indicates how binary notions of femininity and masculinity are enforced as the LO teacher expects stereotypic feminine behaviour from female learners:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about some people who you feel judge you the most as a girl? Where do you feel the judgment comes from the most?

Participant: Teachers.

Interviewer: The teachers?

Participant: Because I’m always that talkative girl, and they would say, “Act like a lady, Jess”....

“When the teacher maybe says, Jessica, are you present, I’m like, yes Ma’am, I’m present [loudly]. And when the girls say, yes ma’am, I’m present [softly]...” (Jessica, female learner, Seaview High)

Prescribed femininity, which hinges on submission and passivity, was also reiterated in the narratives of other learners. In the example that follows, a male learner speaks about tactics deployed to gain control and sexual submission of female peers which are legitimized by the binary gender notions taught in the LO lessons:

“On the other side it [LO] teaches me about guys and girls that girls have a low self-esteem to guys. We always intimidate them, because we always pressure girls into doing things that they do not want to do and we always do stuff in general without fear, we add things up to make it more attractive and they fall for that.” (Luxolo, male learner, Willowvale high)

Such binary expectations of male dominance and female submission have been shown to be problematic in developing young women’s sexual agency and have been implicated in unequal, coercive sexual practices.^{20,21}

In some schools, a crude patriarchal discourse on gender was also reportedly reinforced by the teachers in LO lessons:

“We also did an activity in LO, and like Meneer (Sir) said, the man is the head – if I can put it that way – in the home. He rules over everything. So for me it’s like the man is the one that asks for sex and things.” (Candice, female learner, Woodlands High)

This extract highlights the policing of gender at school that has been widely reported and^{22,23} theorized, with the notion of the man as head of the household being equated with sexual dominance. Heteronormative and heterosexist expectations are also implicit in teachers’

understandings and responses to young women's sexual practices, as has been illustrated in a growing body of work.^{24,25} In the following extract the LO teacher reflects on young women's active sexuality and provides an example of intimacy between two girls who were found by a school caretaker:

Teacher: Some of the classes at school cannot be locked because their locks were stolen; now learners are using classes after school to have sex. ... our caretaker told us he caught a twosome doing it behind the classroom the other day. It was an issue of lesbians. In so much that I even called them, and asked them if they also have joined this thing, so now they are going around doing things and that is not how girls behave...

Interviewer: You mentioned that when you called in the lesbians in talking to them you told them that is not how girls behave, can you tell me how girls should behave?

Teacher: ...girls need to behave like girls you know, look after themselves, be neat and behave well you know, although these days we have tom-boys we can't help it but keep reminding what is expected of a girl. (Ms Macaleni, Siyazama High)

This teacher's primary response is towards the maintenance of heteronormativity. This is articulated both through a call for female sexual restraint, "they are going around doing things" and prohibition of non-heterosexual intimacies, "I ... asked them if they have joined this thing". The constructions of both sexual desire and non-heterosexual intimacy are lumped together in her reminder "that is not how girls behave". While the teacher's response may be informed by a desire to constrain young female sexual desire in general, the negative framing of lesbian relationships as "this thing" is arguably underpinned by a rejection of same sexual practices. Paradoxically, the same teacher is aware of the learners' rights within a human rights framework and the constitutional right to freedom of sexual preference, flagging the gap between knowledge and practice:

"You know these kids have rights so as a school we cannot dictate and say no gays or lesbians, as much as individual teachers have their own feelings about them which you can pick up in informal conversations, but the school as an institution is not opposed to them and their chosen lifestyles." (Ms Macaleni, Siyazama High)

Such lessons undoubtedly shape young people's positions on diverse sexualities as also evident in the following responses from a female learner:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you have same sex-relationships in your school? Like gays and lesbians?

Participant: We have lesbians at school.

Interviewer: Okay, but how do you see them?

Participant: I hate them. I hate the fact that they turn God's nature. Because if God wanted lesbians he would have created Adam and Adam and also Eve and Eve, you see? He created Adam and Eve because he wanted a guy and a girl. Not so a girl can fall in love with another girl and a boy with another boy

Interviewer: Is it not supposed to be like that?...

Participant: We all agree that it is not supposed to be that way, a girl is not supposed to date another girl, but we do speak with them when we have to. (Simphiwe, female learner, Siyazama high)

Sexuality, danger and the vulnerability of girls

Development of agency with respect to learners' sexuality, through reproductive health knowledge including HIV and pregnancy, is clearly a goal of gender justice programmes in the LO curriculum. Yet, a key finding in this study is the strong foregrounding of sexuality as something to be feared, conflated with negative, unwanted consequences, for both boys and girls. Notably, absent from the programme was a positive construction of sexuality or provision of adequate information about how both boys and girls may prevent ill-health and reduce risks while at the same time enjoying healthy and safe sexual relations:

“And I have been told that there is nothing fun about having sex while you are still in high school. It just brings down everything that you do, you know because you are gonna get pregnant at the end of the day or you might contract one of the diseases and it is just not worth it. ... Because when you are older you are gonna be like ‘Okay, I am old, I wanna go get married’ while you still had herpes and stuff like that.” (Vanessa, female learner, Kingsdale High school)

“In sex education we learnt about HIV and Ukwabelana Ngesondo [STIs] and how they are spread, sexual relations, we learnt about the consequences of having sex during one's period, that one could contract AIDS.” (Khanyisa, female learner, Grasslands High)

“What I can say is that for me most of the lessons that revolved around sex were very negative, negative in the sense that sex was portrayed as a huge monster that should be feared and not done. As far as I am concerned I wish that the priority be being safe instead of being forced to scare and directly or indirectly looking down upon those who have done it as being reckless or not respecting their bodies.” (Siya, male learner, Siyazama High)

Further, across all the schools researched it appears that the messages of consequence for sexual practice are primarily directed at young women and silent about young men. Thus, while both boys and girls are taught sexuality through a “risk” framework, messages appear to be more strongly directed at girls who are represented as the ones who will carry the burden of associated risks, inadvertently reinforcing female responsibility and vulnerability and male irresponsibility and power. Such messages not only reflect existing gendered normative practices but also reproduce, legitimize and rationalize such practices as evident below:

“It's [messages of abstinence], sort of, mostly for girls, because we are told not to have sex because we are going to get pregnant, and the boys won't get pregnant, so we are told, Don't have sex, don't have sex, because you will fall pregnant and you will...

“You will be the one with the baby.”

“And they will make you pregnant and then they will leave.” (Female group, Seaview High)

“... what we have been taught is that when you are busy with your boyfriend, there are things that you do and things that you don’t do. If I am a virgin, I must choose one person and not date this one and that one, if maybe I see that he is also dating. This spoils you as the girl and at the end you are the one that is being finished, not him.” (Nokuzola, female learner, Greenfield High School)

Learners, and particularly female learners, receive a barrage of cautionary messages reinscribing the vulnerability associated with being “women”, and the responsibility to avoid pregnancy, getting “spoiled” and “finished”. The absence of a positive construction of sexuality and failure to challenge normative gender and sexual identities are serving to reproduce the very inequalities that sexuality education and the LO programme has hoped to address.

Conclusion

This paper foregrounds the complexities that are faced in trying to apply a gender justice approach to the sexuality education in some South African classrooms. Firstly, it reveals the challenges of engaging in sexual and gender justice equality education with young people from communities and families who remain invested in patriarchal and heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality. Although in the minority, it is encouraging that some school principals apply a gender justice lens to problematize hegemonic masculinities rooted in the larger social and cultural context of their learners. While one could argue that the emphasis on particular cultural practices by some respondents is underpinned by essentialist discourses which project the blame of gender inequality on particular cultures, it is also of value that some schools at least appear to be committed to change and challenging patriarchal ideologies. It is further encouraging that some principals and LO teachers reportedly view the LO sexuality curriculum as a resource for challenging larger gender inequalities and insist on equal divisions of labour and respect among all learners, which arguably supports positive sexualities.

Conversely, analysis of the learners’ experience of sexuality education lessons shows that teachers may be both inadvertently and in some cases more consciously subverting the primary goals of sexuality education, which emphasizes the capacity of learners to make informed choices about their health and that of others. Rather, they appear to be disseminating a message that promotes dominant binary gender roles and moralistic positions on young sexuality. Female learners are reminded to behave like girls, avoid being loud, and act feminine, reflecting teachers’ own values in gender dichotomies and patriarchal relations. Heteronormative sexuality is assumed and encouraged, while non-heterosexual sexualities are silenced or resisted. The contrast between the emphasis of the sexuality education curriculum and the reported experiences of learners attests to the challenges experienced by teachers in promoting sexual and gender justice through LO. It also underlines the importance of educational work with teachers, already widely noted and being taken up in policy and practice initiatives in this sector.^{26,27}

The paper further reveals the widespread deployment of “scare tactics” in sexuality education, founded on notions of danger, disease and doom, intended to encourage abstinence. The negative representations of sexuality as inevitably associated with danger, disease and damage, have been reflected on elsewhere.^{3,28,29} The gendered nature of these cautionary tales sets up the female learner as inherently responsible, which others have termed a discourse of

“responsibilisation”^{30,31} for avoiding pregnancy, disease and being “used up”. This focus on young women seems to place a heavy burden on the learner as not only responsible for her own and others’ sexualities, but also for upholding the moralities of the wider society.

Also importantly, the paper highlights challenges with the way in which teachers engage with the goals of this programme, in this study emerging as primarily framed within negative, punitive lessons “taught” through didactic pedagogies. Arguably, more attention needs to be directed at the methodology and the contents as well as to those providing the lessons. Scholars have suggested various participatory, learner-centred, and empowering approaches to the teaching of sexuality education, condemning the chalk and talk method for putting all the pressure on teachers, thus also giving them the power to control and determine what is included and what is silenced in the classroom.^{32,33} These, together with the punitive, “risk-centred” approach documented in this study, need serious consideration in revisions of LO sexuality education.

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