

“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

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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