

“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. © 2016 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

Keywords: sexuality education, gender justice, schools, South Africa

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.^{*}

^{*}This project was enabled by funding from South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD).

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 sexuality education.^{17,10} 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

[†]Pseudonyms are used for all schools. Conventions for the referencing include: [] left out or explanatory text; underline – emphasis; ... – text omitted by author.

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