The gendered nature of South African teachers’ discourse on sex education

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Received on May 1, 2013; accepted on December 2, 2013

Abstract

In South Africa, high pregnancy and infection rates show that many teenagers are having sex, and that they are not adequately protecting themselves against undesired pregnancies and disease. Sex education is usually taught as part of the subject area Life Orientation. In a qualitative study of 25 Life Orientation teachers in the South African Free State Province, we used semi-structured interviews to explore the ways in which these teachers understand gender to be a factor in learners’ experiences of sexuality. Our analysis draws upon the conceptual framework of heteronormativity, a key aspect of which is that girls and boys are socialized into different gender roles in ways that propagate the patriarchy, and these are largely viewed as part of the natural order of things. Our data revealed a tendency for teachers to cast boys as largely predatory and girls as victims of sexual predation, either by their peers or by older boys or men. Although these assumptions reflect some of the everyday experiences in South Africa and many other countries, these expectations may be transmitted and reinforced unconsciously in well-meaning educational interventions meant to protect girls.

Introduction

In South Africa, sex education is usually taught as part of the subject area Life Orientation, one of the four fundamental subjects required for the National Senior Certificate. According to government curriculum guidelines, Life Orientation ‘applies a holistic approach to the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners’ [1]. Such comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programmes have been found effective in delaying adolescents’ initiation of sex and increasing their use of condoms or other contraceptives [2–4], issues which are highly relevant to the lives of South African young people.

A growing number of studies on the sexual behaviour of young people in South Africa indicate that the age of sexual debut may be dropping, and that some young children may be beginning sexual activity at very young ages [5, 6]. Hartnell’s [7] review of available research on the sexual behaviour of youth in South Africa shows that more than a third of adolescents are sexually active and that many have had sex with more than one partner by the age of 15. This is particularly interesting given that the Children’s Act criminalizes sexual activity below the age of 16. By the age of 17, half of all teenagers are sexually active [8, 9]. Young women who have experienced coerced first sex usually remain sexually active [8].

The high rates of teenage pregnancy remain a source of public and policy concern in the South African context [8, 10]. The 2003 Demographic and Health Survey estimated 54 births per 1000 women among 15- to 19-year-olds; an analysis of the main reasons why school-aged children are not in school indicates that pregnancy is one of the key reasons affecting 9.8% of girls [11]. An additional source of concern over the increasing rates of youth
sexual activity is the high rate of sexually transmitted disease (STI) infection; over half of the approximately 11 million South Africans infected with STIs each year are 15–20 years old [9]. Among 15- to 19-year-olds, STI prevalence is 2.7 times higher for females. This gendered difference increases even more dramatically in the subsequent age cohort, reaching 21% among the 20- to 24-year-olds, and 32.7% among 25- to 29-year-olds. [12]. Recent comments by South African Minister of Health Aaron Motsoaledi reveal the gender dimension of these social problems: high rates of transactional sex between schoolgirls and older men, child and teen pregnancies and the gender disparity in the rate of HIV infection [13].

In comprehensive sex education programmes such as the South African Life Orientation ‘holistic’ approach, the social aspects of gender and sexuality in adolescents’ lives should form part of an effective curriculum [8]. Social norms that perpetuate gender inequality must be explicitly challenged, as these contribute to the more tangible social problems such as HIV transmission and unplanned teen pregnancy described earlier [14]. However, research has demonstrated that, far from adequately addressing gender and its relation to sexuality, Life Orientation classroom practice has avoided these issues or even reinforced heteronormative assumptions [5, 15, 16].

In this article, we will analyse more specifically the ways in which Life Orientation teachers understand gender to be a factor in learners’ experiences of sexuality. As one teacher put it, referring specifically to girls’ experiences, ‘Why do you have sex? Because it’s very seldom just because you have the urge’. Such a statement reveals some awareness of the gendered socio-political context in which girls are having sex—at least in some cases, not simply for pleasure. However, we found that in general teachers did not go as far as to challenge or even recognize patriarchal and sexist norms underpinning these experiences.

To help understand these tendencies, we draw upon the conceptual framework of heteronormativity, defined as

those norms related to gender and sexuality which keep in place patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality as well as other systems and ideologies related to power such as religious fundamentalism, casteism, the class system and so on [17].

Sharma’s definition is particularly powerful in that it permits a global social analysis of how expectaions of sexuality intersect with misogyny, racism and other power-imbued social relations. In South Africa, racism, homophobia, sexism and misogyny have roots in the colonial and apartheid past [18], and violent gender relations remain widespread:

A combination of a belief in male entitlement to women’s bodies and misogyny produced a situation where half the men who participated in a national survey in the year 2000 thought women were to blame for rape [19].

Methods

The data analysed here were generated as part of a broader study involving 25 Life Orientation teachers in the South African Free State Province. As this was a qualitative study, the sample was not randomly but rather purposefully selected according to two criteria: (i) we sought teachers who claimed to teach sexuality education as part of their Life Orientation curriculum and seemed interested enough to talk about it, because we wanted to analyse what was happening in the best of cases; and (ii) we tried to represent the gender and race balance characteristic of teachers in the province, which is why there are proportionately more women (16) than men (9). The study involved White (11), African (11) and Coloured (3) participants (using historically constructed racial categories that remain salient in South African society). These demographics, as well as their related linguistic and historical characteristics, are particular to the Free State, South Africa’s second largest province. Participants have been assigned a code according to their race, sex and age, so (WF58) means a statement was made by a White, female, 58-year-old Life Orientation teacher. Teachers all identified as Christian. They were all currently teaching in grades 10 or 11 and averaged
about 15 and a half years of teaching experience, although most had considerably less experience with teaching Life Orientation, a curriculum area that has only existed for the past 13 years. The research protocols and design were approved by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee at the University of the Free State (UFS-EDU-2012-0150).

Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half and were semi-structured, following a rubric that included questions about teachers’ practices and beliefs specifically relating to the sexuality education component of Life Orientation. For example, we asked them to describe some classroom activities, what they believed to be learners’ experiences related to sex and how children responded to lessons. We asked teachers to elaborate on any differences they felt existed between boys and girls. Although the general topics of our questions were planned, we encouraged teachers to elaborate their responses with specific examples, anecdotes, etc. that would provide insight into their own understandings and beliefs around sexuality in general and the teaching of sexuality education in particular.

Interviews were professionally transcribed and reviewed for accuracy by a researcher, then printed and sent by post to teachers for their review and possible revision. The data were coded and analysed thematically using NVivo 9 software. Themes that emerged from the data and whose analyses form the basis for this article were as follows:

- Learners’ sexual learning and experiences
- Responses of learners in the classroom
- What should children learn about sexuality, and when

For the purposes of this article, we applied a meta-analysis to these three data categories with respect to gender. Within the three main emergent categories listed earlier, we reviewed and re-coded the data specifically for references concerning gender. For example, we re-coded for differences in teachers’ responses concerning what girls and boys specifically need to learn about sexuality. This resulted in the two more specific data categories analysed in this article, focusing on gendered behaviours and gender roles in sexual relationships.

We hope that a close analysis of these teachers’ comments may help to understand certain discourses around gender and sexuality. For this reason, our analysis is textual rather than statistical. As a means of enhancing ‘trustworthiness’ in the reporting of qualitative data [20], we provide exemplars of both data trends and exceptions to these in the form of extracts from the teachers’ interviews. Teachers’ responses have undergone some standardization in terms of grammar and vocabulary, as none of the teachers identified as native English speakers.

**Results**

A key element of heteronormativity is that girls and boys are socialized into different gender roles in ways that propagate the patriarchy, and these differences are viewed as the natural order of things. This particular analytic theme emerged from the data, as we noticed a tendency for teachers to cast boys as predatory and girls as victims of sexual predation, either by their peers or by older boys or men. Teachers stopped short of questioning these roles as emerging from a heteronormative society, instead feeding into the normative by casting them as natural aspects of male and female sexuality. Such essentialist gendered expectations can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, and may be transmitted and reinforced unconsciously in well-meaning educational interventions meant to protect girls.

Some teachers described female learners’ experiences of explicit and violent gender-based oppression, including specific incidents of rape and prostitution. Without meaning to diminish the impact of such experiences, we will dedicate our analysis to more subtle aspects of the different social pressures and social roles attributed to boys and girls.

**Gendered behaviour in the classroom and beyond**

A great deal of school-based research on masculinities and femininities shows that boys’ and girls’
school-based interactions tend to reflect and re-enact
gendered interactions in the broader society [21, 22].
Such gender-normative patterns were reflected in
our teachers’ descriptions of classroom behaviour:
girls were often described as shy and embarrassed
by the topic of sexuality, whereas boys were
described as loud, bossy and easily excitable:

Boys are too outspoken and insensitive. Their
comments are not very nice, especially to-
wards the girls... The girls are quiet. Boys
are outspoken. (AM54)

There’s a lot of difference, because the boys
will actually be louder than the girls, because
they call the shots. (AF54)

Boys especially will make remarks and
you’ve got to come back with the right
answer and put them in their place, because
if you start blushing and that they are going to
make you almost a sex victim and they are
going to bully you almost. (WF51)

The boys tend to be more demanding and ag-
gressive, because there are a lot of parents
who, I think, the males are the dominant
ones in the relationships. So the men... The
boys try to bully one another more. And they
want to show their superiority towards the
girls. (WF42)

There were very few exceptions to these gender-
normative classroom behaviours. Girls were
described as participating more sincerely and openly:

The boys are the ones making fun. The boy-
s... just want to, if I can say it this way, get
laid. The girls are more the ones that talk
about the emotions involved and about how
they feel. They feel used... But the boys are
just macho (WF35).

Another teacher described a similar reluctance on
the part of boys to participate in serious discussions,
although the specific behaviours are different:

Girls ask a lot of questions. Girls ask more
than boys... the boys take part, but they are
not as involved as girls... boys will be boys.
But you’ll see, when it comes to writing, they
will express their feelings in writing (AF43).

This teacher found an alternative modality of
communication, writing, that allowed boys to par-
ticipate more meaningfully in sexuality education.
Another teacher contrasted boys’ generally negative
patterns of class participation with more positive
ones taking place on an individual or small-group
basis, thus highlighting the social nature of boys’
negative behaviour:

They disrupt the class and then you can’t get
to know how much they know. They will tell
you stories... I doubt they’re true stories.
They just want to make it up, but if you get
to individuals, then you’ll get the truth, but in
a group, no (AF39).

These two teachers stand out in their refusal to
accept gender-based behaviour patterns as natural
and inevitable, although even they do not go so far
as to ascribe these behaviours to a broader hetero-
normative system. The overall tendency was to rec-
ognize and sometimes express concern over these
differences, but not to consider the potential for
challenging them.

Just as teachers were quick to clarify that boys’
excessive ‘sharing’ of sexual experiences in class
did not mean they were actually more experienced, some
teachers argued that girls’ reluctance to participate in
class discussions about sexuality did not necessarily
mean they were less sexually active than boys:

Boys are very talkative about sex. The girls, in
a way, are a little bit shy. They are doing it.
You can see they’re do it, but they are not
that... Really, if we talk about sex, they’re
really not so involved in the topic... They
don’t talk, but some of them even have two
kids. A grade eleven [girl] with two kids. But
she will never talk about the topic in class. I
don’t know. I really cannot put my finger on
why. (CF40)

As many teachers pointed out, the high levels of
teen pregnancy apparent in their own schools and
classrooms reveal that girls are playing down their own sexual knowing and sexual experience in the classroom:

When coming to the girls, for example, you teach them, ‘Okay. You don’t have to have sex before marriage. Or if you want, or if you feel that you are already addicted to sex, please use protection’. But they don’t. You can see they don’t, because of the high pregnancy rate in our schools (CF40).

Particularly interesting here is that although 14 of the 25 teachers interviewed described at least some experience with pregnant girls in their own classrooms, no one made any reference to boys as fathers, or even the possibility of this reality. This is not to say that teachers do not teach pregnancy prevention to mixed sex groups, but that when actual pregnancy is discussed, the only protagonist is the girl:

How they’re going to cope if they’d really fall pregnant and have to leave school and go find some work to do, and so on. Because a lot of them, when they do fall pregnant, they don’t, they can’t face the responsibility. They feel they’re old enough to have sex, but not old enough to have children, or... So they must know about the consequences. They must know about unplanned pregnancies and they must know about the STD’s. I feel that’s important. (WF38)

Although this teacher begins by describing the importance of pregnancy prevention in general, the father is absent from the hypothetical pregnancy scenario, and it is the girl who makes the decisions, must leave school, and will be unable to face the responsibility. Clearly boys are involved in fathering children, but this was never mentioned by our teachers, either as a specific case or as a hypothetical possibility. Such an absence of discourse around boys and fatherhood, in contrast with the extensive discourse around girls and motherhood, reinforces heteronormative understandings of pregnancy and childbirth (and their prevention) as female issues. As one teacher explains it, there is a need to talk about both pregnancy and HIV prevention, whereas at the same time her discourse reveals a subtle gendered division (pregnancy as a girls’ issue, HIV for boys), ‘Some learners are pregnant at a young age. The boys are having sexually transmitted diseases. We have to talk’ (AF39).

**Masculine and feminine roles in sexual relationships**

Consistent with teachers’ observations that boys liked to publicly share their sexual exploits (real or invented), some teachers felt sex for boys was a means of demonstrating one’s virility:

[Older peers] will encourage others that one needs to indulge in sex in order to be called a man. (AM54)

If you’re a boy and you haven’t had sex before a certain age you are a ‘moffie’ (derogatory term for gay man or boy). (AM36)

Again, teachers recognized and sometimes seemed concerned about these gendered behaviours, but none explicitly criticized such heteronormative expectations of virility and heterosexuality [23, 24], defining factors in establishing hegemonic masculinity [25]. Boys were sometimes characterized as simply wired differently, with stronger sexual urges: as one teacher put it, ‘Sex is in the front lobe’ for boys, while for girls it is ‘further back’ (WF51).

Nevertheless, this teacher, the same who argued that girls rarely have sex just because they have the urge, also attributed boys’ sexual behaviours to social forces, ‘for a boy, maybe it is more [the urge], but also he wants to prove himself, that’s the reason he wants to be sexually active, that’s got nothing to do with libido’. Whatever boys’ motives may be, this teacher considers them suspect, and girls need to protect themselves from boys’ sexual advances, ‘Be careful what boys say, if they want sex or if they want to touch you. What’s their motive?… and boys at that age are very prone to pornography’ (WF51).

Girls, on the other hand, were rarely described as having sexual desires. The one teacher who did recognize girls as sexual beings argued that these sexual desires might cloud their ability to say ‘no’ at the appropriate moment. The boy in this teachers’
imagined scenario is depicted as a sexual predator, whereas the girl remains the passive recipient of unhealthy sexual advances, and further influenced by the lack of a father figure in her life:

Now I haven’t got a dad. It’s bad in my home and here is this lovely boy telling me how nice I am. And I’m telling you this is what will happen: First, you will hold hands. Next, he wants to kiss you. Next step, he will kiss you on your neck. Next, he will try to touch your breasts. Next, he will do this and this. This is how it happens. (WF57)

Indeed, there was a strong tendency to portray the girls as sexual victims and boys as sexual predators in any kind of intimate relationship. This tendency reflects predominant heteronormative social discourses that cast male sexuality as active and female sexuality as passive, ‘young women [are] positioned as sexually vulnerable and less easily pleasured than young men, victim to male sexual gratification and more interested in the emotional aspects of physical intimacy’ [26]. Our teachers tended to depict girls as particularly susceptible to emotional harm, and easily tricked by boys’ false declarations of love:

Usually boys use ‘love’ when they lust for girls . . . I think it’s natural. I never read this anywhere, but I think it’s natural. When you tell a woman: ‘I love you’, I think it triggers something else inside . . . I don’t know what that is, but you know, I think these boys are lying to them. They don’t love them. They lust them. (AM29)

You begin to realize that these girls are being threatened by the boys. They say, ‘If you don’t do this with me, you must know that I will dump you and I will have myself another girlfriend who’ll do this’. You see? And they don’t want that, because they are still crazy about their boyfriends. (AF43)

[Some girls] come to me and say: ‘Mam, I have this boyfriend and we slept together’. Those people, their academics drop. They’ve put so much emotion into this and they say: ‘Now I feel rejected, because the boy doesn’t want me anymore’ or ‘now I’m pregnant and what’s going to happen with my future?’ (WF35)

Not only is the girl in this scenario emotionally damaged by the boy’s insincerity, but the resulting pregnancy, as we have seen earlier, is her problem to deal with now, another aspect of patriarchal society that was often mentioned but never described or criticized as such.

Another teacher characterized boys’ sexual interest as a game, ‘Girls must learn to protect themselves against the boys. And the boys . . . It’s just like a game: I had two girls that night, or five girls’. Nevertheless, she also characterized girls as the new hunters, ‘In the older days the men were the hunters. Now the girls are the hunters’. This teacher attributed this shift to the fact that girls today are more aware of their bodies as sexual commodities, an idea fostered by parents, ‘I think that the parents want their children to grow up too soon. They start with facials and all kinds of beauty-related things too early with the children. So the children get aware of their bodies much earlier in life than was previously the case’. (WF42) Such post-feminist conceptions unfavourably contrast modern girlhood with a more naive, modest and appropriately passive girlhood of a nostalgic past [27, 28], when the ‘natural order’ of heteronormative society (supposedly) reigned unchallenged.

Although this notion of girls as sexual predators (hunters) may seem at first glance to contradict the victim discourse, there is still a conviction that girls need to ‘protect themselves’ from boys. This casts the girls as hunters in the boy’s dangerous game—hunters who, if we follow the same metaphor, have only themselves to blame when their prey turns against them. Girls were sometimes depicted as viewing sex as a commodity, which only served to reveal the close entanglement between sex, gender and power in these children’s worlds [29]. One teacher described girls’ belief that they need to begin sex early, in order to hone their skills; ‘One girl said, “Mam, we have to [have sex] . . . My friend told me that if I don’t do it now, if I’m older I will not
perform well, or it will be not so interesting” (CF40). In some cases, girls were described as ‘dating’ older boys or men in exchange for money:

And the others, they are doing it. We cannot blame poverty, but most of them are doing it because of poverty. Because now the older men take advantage of them and they give them money. And some of them, they really want to be pregnant, because [their] friend had a child and she’s getting the grant. So [they think they] have to do it, to have a baby as well. (CF40)

They boys will tell you ‘These girls don’t want us, because we don’t give them money. They go to the older people, because they give them money . . . Other learners will tell you, ‘My mother said I must go and find myself a boyfriend who will give me some money. And I must bring it home’. (AF43)

Although boys’ sexual activity was seen as responding to their innate predatory sexual nature or social expectations of virility as a defining characteristic of masculinity, girls’ sexual activity was usually depicted as falling prey to boys’ sexual wiles or as a tool for social manipulation, usually for economic gain. There was a sense that girls would feel diminished by sexual experience even as boys would socially benefit from it:

If [girls] don’t sleep around, or sleep with their boyfriend, then they get a bad name. But if they do, then they also get one, because then they are sleeping around. So they’re in this situation: Do I? Don’t I? Just for the sake of their image. (WF28)

There was a girl that was date raped. [A] psychologist told her, ‘But you were probably looking for it. What did you wear?’ And she said: ‘A miniskirt’. And [the psychologist, a woman,] said, ‘But you were probably looking for that’. (WF38)

If a girl dresses up in such a way that she’s wearing a nice miniskirt and a nice top, you know, that shows off her figure and whatnot, the boys feel that this girl is a slut. (AF28)

A girl’s virginity was seen as a gift to be cherished and protected from boys, ‘I remember once a girl came to me and said, “Thanks for this talk today, because I was going to give my virginity away that weekend” . . . and what I said actually changed her mind’ (WF51). One teacher, however, stood out from this typically heteronormative gendered discourse by considering the loss of virginity as a potentially traumatic event regardless of gender, ‘If they have sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend, what if they break up six months later? A lot of them, they blame themselves. They gave their virginity to that person. They really trusted that person’ (WF38). Given the strong assumption of heterosexuality that ran through all of these interviews [16], we interpret ‘boyfriend or girlfriend’ to indicate boys’ or girls’ heterosexual partners, and see this teachers’ comment as an interesting departure from the gender-normative association of virginity with (appropriate) femininity. This teacher seems to associate virginity with trust and intimacy, with its loss being equally significant and potentially traumatic for boys and girls.

Discussion

Our data support earlier data suggesting that Life Orientation teachers need specific training about gender and sexuality, and their relevance to CSE. Many of our participants were concerned about girls’ social and physical welfare and were generally aware of some of the social practices, such as the prestige of sexual promiscuity among boys and transactional sex among girls. Like the Minister of Heath, they recognize a gendered component to South Africa’s most pressing sexual health problems. Nevertheless, teachers did not express an understanding of the broader context of heteronormativity in which these practices have been developed and maintained. Girls and boys respond to social forces that may all too easily cast them in stereotypically gendered roles of predator, victim, slut, manipulator, etc. Furthermore, teachers’ tacit
acceptance of some of these heteronormative processes as inevitable or even natural may result in simplistic and ineffective sexuality education.

Some of the unexamined assumptions expressed by our teachers, as well as some of the exceptions we have described here, may serve to provide some guidelines for teacher education. Teachers might be engaged in examining boys’ and girls’ classroom participation, particularly with respect to sexuality lessons. They might be asked to design alternative methodologies, as did the teachers in our study who provided boys with individual and written ways to express themselves. Teachers might uncover and re-evaluate some gendered assumptions that constitute heteronormativity, such as the high cultural value associated with girls’ virginity, as did another of our teachers. They might fundamentally re-conceptualize certain key concepts, such as safe sex, as described by yet another of the teachers we interviewed:

Researcher: So do you teach about safe sex in your classroom?
Teacher: I do.

Researcher: And, specifically, what aspects? What techniques, I guess? What practices?
Teacher: The one that we’re currently busy with is the one on values... What is a real man? Because real men do not rape... Real men do not abuse. What is sexual abuse? What is this thing about power that the world believes that a man is powerful? Having all the power, and even when you get into a relationship it’s an unequal power relationship, where I tell my girlfriend, ‘I want to see you tonight’. (AM48)

Although this brief excerpt is far from a concrete description of practice, it does reveal several aspects that might provide a basis for designing good practice:

(i) This teacher considers the power dynamics of gendered relationships to be an integral part of his CSE curriculum.

(ii) He directly addresses the issues of rape and sexual abuse that many teachers identify as significant forces in girls’ lives.

(iii) He defines these problems as relevant to boys, and to their sexuality education.

Interestingly, he characterized this discussion as ‘teaching about safe sex’, and we found this broader notion of what ‘safe sex’ can mean to be quite refreshing and promising. Although this teacher’s (described) pedagogical provocation is specifically addressed to boys, this kind of discourse in a mixed group will convey to girls the potentially empowering understanding that they are not solely responsible for their own sexual and emotional safety.

Instruction on how the body works or how to properly use a condom will not be enough to challenge the kinds of heteronormative contexts in which young people must live and learn to relate to one another. Our data reveal some of the complex understandings and beliefs, particularly with respect to gender, that can have an important impact on teachers’ practice. CSE programmes must take particular care not to tacitly perpetuate gender stereotypes that might disempower women, and to provide young women and men with the knowledge, confidence and social skills needed to develop healthy and satisfying sexual and emotional relationships.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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