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Life Orientation sexuality education in South Africa: Gendered norms, justice and transformation

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Introduction

Research on sexual practices among young South Africans has proliferated in light of the national imperatives to challenge the spread of HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and unwanted early pregnancies. It has been widely acknowledged that, in order to respond to these social problems, we need to understand the enmeshment of gender, class, age and other forms of social inequality, and how these are played out in 'normal' heterosexual relationships.

Life Orientation (LO) sexuality education programmes have been viewed as key locations for incorporating education to challenge negative assumptions in respect of HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancy and to promote safer, equitable and non-violent sexual practices. There is a paucity of work that interrogates the LO sexuality education programme in terms of gender norms, gender justice and gender transformation. In the handful of studies conducted on school-based sexuality education in South Africa, researchers have foregrounded a number of challenges, including the dominance of a guiding metaphor of danger and disease in the sexuality education component of LO manuals (Macleod, 2009); educators using a transmission mode of teaching to the exclusion of participation and experiential modes of learning (Rooth, 2005); educators understanding sexuality education as chiefly addressing the provision of information concerning, and prevention of, HIV/AIDS (Francis, 2011); teachers' preference for abstinence-only education taught by means of a series of moral injunctions (Francis, 2011); and the avoidance of discussions of sexual diversity, and the endorsement of compulsory heterosexuality when same-sex relationships are mentioned (Francis, 2012). Recent research

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has also highlighted the variation in how teachers approach sexuality education. Francis and DePalma (2014) indicate that, while teachers may promote abstinence as the only *appropriate* choice for young people, they also recognise the value of teaching relationships and safe sex (aspects associated with comprehensive sexuality education). In their study, Helleve *et al.* (2009) report that Grades 8 and 9 LO teachers felt confident in teaching HIV and sexuality.

This special issue of *Perspectives in Education* builds on this research by drawing together several papers that examine how LO or Life Skills sexuality programmes challenge and/or reproduce normative constructions of gender and gendered power relations. All the papers use qualitative research to locate these programmes within the complex contexts of their enactment, drawing attention to the multiple possibilities and limitations of such programmes.

In the next section, we summarise the key problematics addressed in each of the papers. What curiosities drove the studies conducted by these researchers interested in gender dynamics in schools and LO or Life Skills sexuality education? Why are these curiosities important? We then highlight the key findings that emerged from these curiosities and the nuanced data collected. Finally, and most importantly in terms of the aims of this special issue, we address the ways in which a critical gender lens that facilitates gender transformation and gender justice could possibly be incorporated into LO or Life Skills sexuality programmes.

Problematics addressed in the papers

The six papers in this special issue all draw on rich qualitative research to investigate sexualities in the context of school-based sexuality education. The importance of in-depth qualitative work in the field of sexualities is increasingly being recognised. While quantitative research can measure sexual effects and attitudes, good qualitative work allows an examination of the complex social, cultural, and political constructions of sexuality (Attwood, 2005). Tolman, Hirschman and Impett (2005) argue that, through its methodological rigour, qualitative research allows the power of stories to come into their own, thereby providing policymakers with important information on the complexity of problems regarding sexualities and suggesting possible solutions.

Four of the papers featured in this special issue, namely those by **Nicola Jearey-Graham and Catriona Macleod**; **Lou-Marie Kruger, Tamara Shefer and Antoinette Oakes**; **Andisiwe Mthatyana and Louise Vincent**, and **Tamara Shefer and Sisa Ngabaza**, use interviews, focus-group discussions and/or ethnographic work with high school learners or with Further Education and Training students to collect in-depth data on how young people talk about sexualities. Amidst public controversies over HIV, teenage pregnancy, and violent sexualities, the public-health imperative to reduce sexual and reproductive health problems, as well as the invocation of the responsible sexual citizen in sexuality education programmes, the voices of young

people regarding their sexual subjectivities are easily drowned out, as pointed out by the authors of these papers.

These four papers partially fill a gap in providing careful listening to what young people are saying. Jearey-Graham and Macleod (in this issue) report on focus-group discussions, held with Further Education and Training students in a small town in the Eastern Cape, about their understandings of high school sexualities and their memories of school-based sexuality education lessons. Kruger *et al.* (in this issue), Mthatyana and Vincent (in this issue), as well as Shefer and Ngabaza (in this issue) draw on research conducted as part of a large research project based in Eastern Cape and Western Cape schools. This project, funded by the South Africa-Netherlands research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), sought to understand how sexuality education challenges or reproduces normative gender constructions and power relations. Kruger *et al.* (in this issue) present data from interviews and focus-group discussions with young Coloured Grade 10 female learners from a school in a semi-rural, low-income, Coloured community in the Western Cape. Mthatyana and Vincent (in this issue) conducted ethnographic research that included three months of classroom observations, interviews, focus-group discussions and solicited narratives from Grades 10 and 11 learners at a former Model C single-sex girls' school in the Eastern Cape. Shefer and Ngabaza's (in this issue) paper draws on in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with Grade 10 learners in a former Model C school, three former Coloured schools and a former African 'township' school in the Western Cape.

In order to foreground fine-grained readings of young people's talk about sexualities, these four papers draw on several conceptual and methodological tools. Jearey-Graham and Macleod (in this issue) use discursive psychology, in which discursive resources are viewed as enabling and constraining meaning and allowing young people to take up various sexual subject positions. Kruger, Shefer and Oakes' (in this issue) interest is in sexual agency. Using a social constructionist conceptualisation of sexual agency that situates agency, as the capacity to define life choices, within material, social, and cultural context, they seek to understand young women's constructions of their sexualities. Mthatyana and Vincent (in this issue) deploy the theoretical concepts of 'student sexual cultures' and feminine 'community of practice' to analyse the complex and variable learnings about sexuality and gendered identities in the particular school in which they conducted their ethnography. Shefer and Ngabaza use a critical gender lens to assess how the dominant punitive response to young women's sexuality is reproduced and/or destabilised. Each of the papers carefully unpacks, through these particular theoretical lenses, the complexities of young people's sexualities.

The final two papers, namely by **Catriona Macleod**, **Dale Moodley** and **Lisa Saville-Young**, and **Deevia Bhana**, introduce new and innovative ways of viewing sexuality education. Macleod et al. (in this issue) contrast the LO manuals used in the Grade 10 classes in two Eastern Cape schools with the songs voted most popular by these

students. As two diverse forms of sexual socialisation to which young people are exposed, the comparison between the two texts provides a juxtaposition between what young people are required to learn in class and what they prefer to listen to in their free time. Drawing on discursive psychology, Macleod et al. (in this issue) seek to understand the interactive sexual subject positions invoked in the sexuality education components of LO manuals and popular music tracks.

Bhana's paper (in this issue) draws attention to a neglected aspect of research in sexuality education, namely the Foundation Phase Life Skills programme. Noting the dominance of a framework of childhood innocence that understands children as asexual and degendered, Bhana interviews a teacher, Mrs Z, about her teaching of Life Skills in Grade 2 in an impoverished African 'township' school in Durban. Bhana seeks to understand, through the eyes of this teacher, how it may be possible to teach a positive sexuality amid sexual danger and gender inequalities in the Foundation Phase.

Results and conclusions of the papers

The findings of the papers in this special edition resonate with, and serve to deepen, much of what we already know about educational responses to young people's sexual practices internationally and locally. Many of the contributions triangulate each others' findings and elaborate on key themes that have been increasingly documented in South African scholarship on young people at school, including research on gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, LO sexuality education, and pregnancy and parenting while at school. Overall, the papers presented in this issue reiterate an already-identified gap between policy intentions and lived experience and practices with respect to gender and sexuality at schools (for example, Morrell *et al*., 2002; Morrell *et al.*, 2012; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013). Thus, while sexuality education is directed towards gender equality and challenging inequalities that manifest in unsafe, coercive and violent practices, these articles illustrate not only a lack of impact, but also ways in which what is taught and what is heard by young people may even rationalize and reinforce the discourses that make such practices possible. While some teachers clearly view LO sexuality education as a tool for gender change, as shown by Deevia Bhana's (in this issue) case study of one teacher, this project is undermined by multiple factors, many of which are illuminated in these papers.

One of the strongest threads resonating across these studies is that of the *discourse of danger, disease and damage* identified in local contexts as a dominant discourse in LO educational materials (Macleod, 2009). The current studies reiterate larger concerns, both local and international, that sexuality education is primarily framed in a negative construction of young sexualities, with emphasis on a regulatory, disciplinary and punitive response to young people's sexual desires and practices. Studies unpack and provide qualitative evidence that young people are receiving messages in which the negative consequences of sexuality are foregrounded and in

which their sexual agency is conflated with an inevitable negative result – unwanted pregnancy, disease and violence. Thus, young people appear to be primarily told 'what not to do' within a framework that does not seem to reflect or represent their own experiences or desires.

Such a construction of young sexualities is further bolstered by a prevailing adult-child binarism that assumes adults as authorities on sexuality that has been documented in other work on sexuality and gender at school (Allen, 2007a; Francis, 2011). In this issue, LO curriculum for all its intentions emerges as shaped by a moralistic response, which continues to deny young sexual desires and practices, constructing children and youth as asexual and gender-neutral. Bhana (in this issue), for example, shows how the terms 'sex' and 'sexuality' are avoided in the Foundation Phase LO curriculum and offers a critique of the lack of a more explicit location of sexuality education within the broader context of gender inequitable relations at schools.

Notably, this framing narrative of consequence and responsibility in sexuality education, evident through both the voices of teachers and young people themselves, is shown in this set of work to be powerfully *gendered* at multiple levels. Thus, the consequences of young sexualities are feminized such that young women are primarily the subjects of danger, disease and damage. Within this gendered scrutiny of young people's sexualities, with young women set up as the victims, and men as the perpetrators, consequences are to young women's account. Such a narrative then reproduces a discourse of responsibility, or *responsibilisation,* which Macleod *et al.* (in this issue: 90) define as "a key (neo)liberal project that uses the rhetoric of youth-at-risk to incite youth into *individualised* management of the self". Kruger *et al.* (in this issue) unpack in some depth the complex and often contradicatory messages about how young women should exercise agency over their sexuality" that emerge in their study. They show how young women are taught that abstaining from sex is the only option and that they should take responsibility for this, while at the same time implicitly being told to follow prescribed gender practices in which the desires and needs of men should be dominant.

Linked to the notion of *responsibilisation* developed by Macleod *et al.* as well as the complexities of messages provided for young women in particular, as shown by Kruger *et al.* (in this issue), is another key thread in these articles, namely the decontextualised and atheoretical way in which sexuality education is taught, both in the classroom and in the materials used. A neo-liberal discourse, in which young people are offered individual solutions, hinging around self-discipline and being "responsible" social agents, emerges in many of the papers. Macleod *et al.* (in this issue) specifically flag how the project of LO, as articulated in LO manuals, hinges around such narratives. Mthathyana and Vincent (in this issue: 49) illustrate how young women specifically locate their learnings in LO as a call to "individualism" in response to a curriculum underpinned by "discourses of enlightened choice and rational individualism". A lack of appreciation in the LO curriculum of the

contexts within which young people are located, including their localised subjective experiences, thoughts and challenges, is further highlighted through young people's response to LO and sexuality education, in particular. Several articles specifically document a disinterest in these lessons and a sense of LO sexuality education as irrelevant to their lives (for example, Mthatyana & Vincent [in this issue], Jeary-Graham & Macleod [in this issue]). Jearey-Graham and Macleod (in this issue: 11) call this a "discourse of disconnect" which refers to "a disconnection between what young people see as habitable and performable sexual subject positions and the responsible sexual subject position that many sexuality classes and parents attempt to create" and specifically call attention to challenges in respect of communication and the inability of both teachers and parents to engage in more appropriate, less authoritative ways with young people in talking about sexuality.

A further linked and central issue explored in several papers is that of the complexity of pedagogical challenges in the teaching of LO sexuality education. These are shown to be related both to inadequacies within the normative information-based methodologies used in teaching LO and to the capacity and context of LO teachers themselves. Some local research has already called attention to such challenges, foregrounding, in particular, the failings of a didactic model of education for sexuality education and teachers' discomfort in teaching (Francis, 2011, 2013; Rooth, 2005). The *discourse of disconnect* identified by Jeary-Graham and Macleod (in this issue) speaks to the dominance of authoritative, adult-centred, non-relational mode of communication in sexualities education that is reinforced in home and community contexts. Participants in this study and in others represented in this issue continue to reiterate the lack of effectivity of such modes of communication and are arguing to be heard. Several papers call for young people's voices to be a more central part of LO sexuality education lessons and "a more critical and reflexive approach to working with young people" (Shefer & Ngabaza, in this issue: 63). This also suggests more reflexivity on the part of educators and those who write the materials for these classes, in order to avoid the range of normative discourses being reproduced in such classes, as deconstructed in these studies.

Implications and recommendations for LO sexuality education in schools

The group of papers that make up this special edition highlight the importance of a critical feminist gaze in assessing young schoolgoing men's and women's experiences of sexuality education, both in the materials used and in the response and engagement of teachers, schools, families and the community. It is evident from the data collected in these studies that the implementation of sexuality education, in this group of South African schools at least, is falling short of its goals – it appears to be failing, for the most part, to 'speak' to young people in helpful ways and to impact positively on their practices and experiences. Participants in these studies appear

to disregard and judge these lessons as irrelevant, and in some schools such classes are not valued or taken seriously by either learners or teachers. Moreover, in many instances, the lessons are experienced as disciplinary, as foregrounding regulation and punishment in a negative construction of young sexualities. Importantly, there is a great deal of evidence in the analyses presented in this issue that not only are such classes failing to impact positively on young people's practices and experiences of gender and sexuality, but they appear to be reproducing the very discourses that shape unequal gendered sexual practices, including coercive, unsafe and inequitable sexual intimacies. It is of great concern that some teachers and some materials appear to reinforce gender stereotypes and male power as well as heteronormativity and heterosexism either blatantly or in more nuanced ways. It is of further concern that educators and the material they use continue to function in a pedagogical system where adult authority and expertise is assumed and young sexualities are denied or assumed non-existent, while young people are viewed as inherently irresponsible, requiring adult control and policing.

The papers also raise some important areas for re-thinking sexuality education for schoolgoing young people in different, more reflexive ways. At a fundamental level, the goals of the LO sexuality education curriculum need inspection. If, as suggested in the papers in this special issue, the responsibilisation of young people rests in the core learning outcomes envisaged for LO sexuality education, then these outcomes, together with the underpinning pedagogical assumptions, need careful inspection. There is a growing call for a critical pedagogy of sexuality education in the context of the multiple sexual and reproductive challenges faced by youth in this country (Campbell & Macphail, 2002; Francis, 2010; Macleod & Vincent, 2014). The implications of such an approach, in terms of how LO sexuality education is envisaged, need careful analysis and need to be threaded through curriculum statements and the underpinning documentation of LO sexuality education.

The papers in this special issue emphasize the need for more work with educators and schools, as well as the materials used. These studies reinforce other work in the field that shows the way in which teachers and schools themselves are invested in particular moralities, normative expectations of gender, culture, family and sexuality (Baxen & Breidlid, 2004; Beyers, 2011; De Palma & Francis, 2014; Francis, 2012; Shefer, Bhana & Morrell, 2013). This raises the importance of facilitating self-reflexivity among educators in conjunction with a stronger gendered and intersectional, contextual and critical knowledge that would allow for more sensitivity to power relations, including that of adult-child relationships and gender and other social inequalities. Being able to reflect on one's own values and moralities and how these may shape engagement with young people in the sexuality education class, and more broadly in the school environment, emerges in this instance, as it does in literature on pregnancy and parenting at school, as an important imperative for educators who work with young people. In considering the kinds of lessons currently being 'prescribed' or at least 'heard' by young people, more reflexivity and critical analysis may assist in reshaping

the dominance of the negative construction of young sexualities (through the 'danger, disease, damage' discourse and the negation of young sexuality) as well as destabilizing the reproduction of normative gender discourses and rationalization of gender inequality.

Finally, a key implication emerging from these studies is the significance of appreciating young people as agents in sexuality education and more broadly in the school, the home and the community – to put it simply, of taking young people, their thoughts, feelings, experiences and desires, seriously. As Mthathyana and Vincent (in this issue: 61) put it:

> *A curriculum aimed at 'life orientation' cannot make sense unless it takes seriously the diverse orientations to life, priorities, meanings and desires that circulate in pupils' lived, everyday experience.*

Authors in this special edition are similarly in agreement with the value of "greater engagement with young people's own constructions of desired sexualities" and how LO programmes should allow for "dialogue in which students' own stories and experiences of sex are heard" (Jeary-Graham & Macleod, in this issue: *). The centering of young people and their subjective and dialogical meanings and experiences in sexuality education echoes a larger national and global focus on alternative, innovative, student-centred pedagogies. In this way, pedagogical practices in sexuality education would resist 'teaching' and 'telling' and focus more on active dialogue, with young people themselves leading their 'lessons'.

It is important, however, that these engagements with learner-centred stories and dialogue be framed within social justice goals. As Louisa Allen (2007b) points out in the New Zealand context, in making suggestions for sexuality education, young people may deploy dominant discourses that serve to perpetuate social inequities. She argues that the youth-centred and social justice aims may be reconciled by employing methods that allow for a diversity of voices, that encourage minority views, and that highlight contradictions and complexities.

In conclusion, LO remains a potentially valuable resource for working with young people in ways that are constructive and agentic, rather than punitive and prohibitory, that encourage critical thinking rather than prescribe and constrain, and that challenge normative discourses that result in exclusionary, violent and unequal practices. Sexualities education is similarly a potential space for young people to talk about their own desires and experiences, not only for generating awareness of how sexual practices may be shaped by inequalities and result in negative outcomes, but also for facilitating the appreciation of diverse sexualities and sexuality as positive and pleasurable.

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