

Sex, Sexuality and Education in South Africa

Editorial Introduction

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South Africa is an extremely complex society. It was forged through the ideological, normative and structural violence of colonialism and apartheid¹. This history has created a society with high levels of violence in all spheres of social life. As a result, poverty, racial and gender inequality mark the sexual landscape. There exist tensions between the sexual moralities forged during the colonial and apartheid era and the move to have more tolerant, open and sexually diverse cultures and experiences under democracy. Beyond the national political domain, sexual ideological violence holds a powerful place in the education system that seeks to shore up a view of the world that is underpinned by a Judaeo-Christian view of sex, gender and sexuality. While the education system and some educators may recognise the need for more open forms of sex and sexuality education, in the main the focus of most teaching is strongly gendered, heteronormative and framed in so-called traditional values. For many years, the ways in which young people are educated (or taught) about sex, sexuality and sexual expression have been of concern to researchers and practitioners asking how it can be possible to effect real change in how young people, and how the experiences of young people wishing to experience and express their sexualities, can be included in discussions and debates about them.

This themed issue of *Sex Education* journal on Sex, Sexuality and Education in South Africa seeks to answer some of the big questions concerning how sex, sexualities and education continue to be constructed in South Africa, given the growing need to address gender and sexual diversity and justice within the education system (Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2018; Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). In South Africa today, gender and sexual violence, coercive sexual practices, homophobia, unwanted pregnancy and HIV remain significant threats to the health of young people (Willan et al., 2019; Gevers et al., 2013). Under conditions of ongoing economic and social turbulence - underwritten by the legacies of Apartheid combined with gendered ideologies and cultural norms - sexuality is often constrained by its placement within the realm of suffering, male sexual violence and women and girl's subordination.

¹ Under apartheid, the South African population was hierarchically structured and divided into four racial categories: African, white, Indian (referring to people who originated from the Indian subcontinent) and 'coloured' (mixed race). Despite the end of apartheid, racial categories, albeit with some changes, remain important in highlighting the continued effects of race and class inequalities. Teachers and young people's experiences in some Black African township schools for example continues to reflect the effects of structural violence and inequalities intimately tied to race.

Good quality sexuality education can be a vital resource to provide young people with knowledge and information to address sexual and reproductive health and to prevent adverse social, health and educational outcomes (Aggleton et al., 2010). Scholars contend that when delivered within a human rights, gender and sexual justice framework, sexuality education has the potential to address and challenge gender equality, oppressive heteronormativity and relationship dynamics (Boonstra, 2011; Jewkes, 2010). Notwithstanding the emphasis placed on human rights and gender justice in South Africa, existing research suggests that sexuality education offered through Life Orientation (LO) classes all too often fails to meet the needs of young people (Francis, 2017; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). In South Africa today, sexuality education remains constrained, with the current emphasis being placed on disease, sexual danger, rigid categorisations of gender - all preventing the understanding and elaboration of gender and sexual identities (Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

Whilst it is important to focus on the very real political, social, health and economic challenges that exist in the country, two major problems concerning sex and sexuality education have emerged. The first relates to the exclusive framing of sex in the domain of innocence, suffering and risk, with girls - especially in working class contexts - being largely portrayed as the victims of male sexuality. The second relates to the conceptualisation of sexuality education as a domain of danger and power with little consideration being given to sexualities that encompass desire, pleasure, queer experiences, curiosity and excitement. Most education interventions continue to emphasise 'risk' over 'desire' and 'shame' over 'pleasure'. Thus, they run the risk of speaking to no-one: not to the adults who have failed to escape these constraints, nor to the young people whose bodies and experiences tell them differently.

Our primary aim therefore in this special issue was to open up sexuality education to critical discussion and debate within a variety of institutions, considering the widespread dearth of theoretical and practical knowledge in South Africa, so as to meet the needs of the people that matter. The idea of the special issue arose through our joint collaborations and conversations over the years researching gender, HIV, sexuality, young people, health and the role of education as a vehicle for intervention (Aggleton, Yankah & Crewe, 2011; Bhana, 2016). In this regard, we have pointed to the confusing role of education in addressing young people's sexual health, arguing that education can change lives but conversely, education can also leave people behind and contribute to exclusionary practices and inequalities (Aggleton et al., 2018a 2018b).

Against this backdrop, the special issue speaks to the 'state' of sex and sexuality education in South Africa. We are not the first to embark on such a project (Gacoin, 2016; Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2018, Bhana, 2014) but our intention is to build an expansive, transformative and critically driven sexuality education that could engage people in liberating and innovative ways. A chief element in sexuality education is the need to support and protect young people, empower them with skills and values to ensure sexual safety, fulfilling relationships, enjoyment and well-being (UNESCO, 2018). Through a call for papers for this special issue of *Sex Education*, we sought to stimulate more discussion about the political project of sexuality education, to understand the entanglement between power and identities and to make us more mindful of the need for a critical and challenging account of how young people (and others) engage in the construction of their sexual and social identities. Building on all that has been researched in

the past, we reiterate the need for ongoing critical and liberating interventions and reflection in the present.

Sex and Sexuality in Sexuality Education

The authors in this special issue put sexuality education to work within a Southern context, still confronting the remnants of apartheid, colonialism and the influence of 'development' practice and neo-colonialism, as they examined various negotiations of gender and sexuality in different settings in South Africa. Explicit in these nine articles is an interpretation of sexuality that provides an important barometer of broader social, political and cultural meanings and conditions underpinned by history (Reddy, 2011). This position holds that sexuality is not a biological state of being but flexible and capable of shifting and changing in and across multiple different contexts. Importantly, therefore, sexuality education is not a micro-sociological educational experience, present only in the educational setting, but is conducted and experienced in and through many differing political, social and cultural milieux. There is a history to this. In this section therefore, we provide a brief description of the context through in to situate the study of sexuality education in South Africa.

As all the papers show, sexuality education in South Africa provides a powerful lens for understanding the effects of colonial and apartheid creations of race, class and oppressed groups. Through colonisation and apartheid, underpinned by Christianity, heterosexuality and gender inequalities and identities were normalised. Conservative Christian principles were incorporated into local customs reproducing gender as binary and sexuality as shameful, both of which were to be controlled within heteronormative boundaries whilst upholding the powerful status of men. Within this strongly racialised encounter, the sexuality of Black Africans was constructed as 'other' and often as 'deviant'. Black men were constructed as being hypersexual and to be feared. African women were portrayed as victims and simultaneously shamed for irresponsible child-bearing. Gender, culture, race and class combined to define sexuality in powerful and deeply oppressive ways. In South Africa, cultural norms interacted with and coalesced meanings around sexuality, virginity and purity with long-lasting consequences. In KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa for example, virginity testing has been resurrected, albeit with contestation, as a cultural intervention to stop the spread of HIV and women's vulnerability to the disease. In the Eastern Cape province of the country traditional male circumcision has been defended as a vital cultural practice as boys transition into manhood and has important value for building a home and raising a family (Hodes & Gittings, this issue). However, as Mfecane (2018) suggests in contemporary South Africa these social values have been eroded as traditional male circumcision is now often associated with the privilege of being a man and the expectation of respect from women and sex. Christianity also worked strategically with customary practices to reinforce the claims to an exclusively heterosexual Africa formed in the colonists' image (Epprecht, 2008). Under apartheid, for example sodomy and cross-racial sexual relations were criminalised. Sexuality operated through racial separation and patriarchy whilst endorsing heterosexual norms. The legacy of these meanings around sexuality is often translated into research which sees African men as bad and violent, girls as suffering from sexuality and homosexuality as un-African.

These discourses still hold sway today but many of the papers in this issue alert us to the potential of a decolonising power-based analysis of resistance and reproduction (Epprecht, 2011). Our historical understandings of sexuality produced through gendered and

racialised discourses, intertwine with local cultural norms which allows them to mutate, and change. The articles in the special issue are located within a particular postcolonial/post-apartheid narrative that critiques and explores gender, sexualities, race and class in the operation of power. The investigation of the present 'state' of sexuality education requires that we are ever mindful to the context within which sex, sexuality and education are framed and re-produced. As Msibi (in this issue) reminds us, static and ahistorical accounts fail to account for the dynamism and strategic negotiation of sexualities and of gender in researching black African male teachers' expression of same-sex desire. In South Africa, we are developing a more nuanced understanding of the contours of sexual metamorphoses and the effects of structural forces on the meanings and boundaries of gender, sexuality race and class (Hunter, 2010; Reid & Walker, 2005). The special issue seeks further to expand understanding of how these sexual contours are shaped through education, and in the wider society.

Key themes that weave throughout these articles are the curtailment of feminine desire, the regulation of gender and sexuality and heteronormative prescription. In explaining why sexuality education in South Africa continues to require a major overhaul, Macleod (2016) suggests that sexuality is framed as a domain of suffering, is gendered, heteronormative and thereby fails to engage with young people's diverse needs:

Sex is dangerous and damaging. Men are predators. Women are victims. Only heterosexuality is acceptable. That's what learners are taking away from sexuality education classes – if they're even paying attention in the first place.

Such themes remain powerful in shaping how sex and sexuality education manifest themselves as we shall see in the articles that comprise this issue.

Papers in this issue

We begin with a paper by Nicolette Carboni and Deevia Bhana. By addressing a group of privileged, upper-middle income white and black African teenage girls in the Gauteng province of South Africa, the authors challenge static accounts of girls' sexual innocence by focusing on 'underground' sexual cultures involving online sexually explicit materials (SEM) and pornography. Beyond the familiar focus on disease and health, the girls in this study are sexual architects – they embrace a desire for the erotic and sexual pleasure. Black African female sexuality in particular is extricated from the trope of sexuality, violence and docility. Online SEM provides tantalising opportunities to increase information about pleasurable forms of sexuality (Mulholland, 2015). Yet, girls' engagement with SEM is inextricably caught in gender and heterosexual norms as young women strategically negotiated access to SEM and pleasure, whilst working hard to maintain and negotiate innocence and female purity. For young women in this study, the expression of female desire is negotiated within the context of sexual shame with masturbation regarded as a male prerogative (Allen, 2011; Attwood, 2006). Importantly the authors draw attention to the continued silence of female sexual pleasure in sexuality education. This silence suggests that girls will continue to have doubts about their right to sexual pleasure preventing them from making informed decisions about sexual pleasure, and how to experience it. By failing to meet the needs of girls, the reproduction of gender binaries will continue to promote notions of female sexuality as respectable, innocent and passive and male sexuality as active and aggressive.

The authors call for a more expansive version of sexuality education that refuses a protectionist discourse and engages with new technologies, the erotic and forms of female sexual pleasure. Race, class, sexuality, age and gender interact with digital technology to create new kinds of femininity and new demands for sexuality education. Through their use of new technology including the social media, young women start to challenge the silences surrounding their sexualities and experiences of pleasure.

In the next paper, Thabo Msibi shifts attention to Black African male teachers in a township setting who engage in same-sex sexual relations. Cautious about simply adopting western notions of naming, Msibi refuses queer or LGBTI+ descriptors - opting for the term *men who engage in same-sex relations*. Heterosexuality is interrogated by situating same-sex desiring men within the postcolonial moment at which the social, political and cultural embeddedness of sexuality arises. Without rehearsing discredited versions of homosexuality as un-African, the author shows how study participants seek to negotiate the terror of homophobic violence in South African schools (Francis, 2017; Bhana, 2014) through the display of hyper-professional conduct – bolstering their power and rank. This allows participants to both challenge heteronormativity and fight for social and sexual justice, without overtly threatening the foundations of heterosexuality, nor openly coming out. Not all the participants in the study were able to walk the tightrope between secrecy and hyper professionalism - some were forced 'out' as men who engage in same-sex relations, and some were forced to leave their schools. Msibi's paper signals the power of heterosexuality, the policing and regulation of male teacher sexualities within a homophobic environment, and the creative strategies that could uphold a sense of dignity. Hyper professional conduct may provide some level of safeguard so long as heterosexual norms are maintained, but it can also break down, threatening men's safety and livelihoods as they negotiate between the 'façade' of heterosexuality and the silence that surrounds their diverse sexual identities and modes of self-expression.

Taking up similar concerns around heteronormativity, Dennis Francis, focuses on the discursive strategies through which thirty-three teachers in the Free State province of the country understand counter-normative sexualities or sexualities that are non-normative. Francis reminds us of the contradictory role that teachers play – in teaching to uphold heteronormativity while potentially capable of addressing sexual diversity. Francis highlights some of the barriers which prevent teaching for sexual diversity including poor in-service and pre-service training, as well as the lack of emphasis on sexual diversity in teacher education and training programmes, contributing to the lack of teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge to teach about sexual diversity. Yet sexuality education, as Francis also reminds us is situated within a broader human rights policy framework in South Africa, which stipulates freedom, respect, dignity and gender equality. In relation to the empirical research, the author finds that heterosexuality remains resolutely intact as a naturalised feature of everyday schooling. Queer youth are ambiguously constructed as both innocent and hypersexual. Moralistic and judgemental discourses, which draw upon discourses of blame, are mobilised by teachers. However, even amidst these dominating discourses which privilege heterosexuality, the potential to open up sexuality education to alternative readings based on counter-normative sexualities remains present. Francis, thus confirms that notwithstanding the problems facing sexuality education, if it were done better and if teachers did not focus solely on the construction of non-normative sexualities within gender binaries, and, in a policy context that is properly inclusive of queer youth, sexuality education could work towards gender and sexual justice.

Sisa Ngabaza and Tamara Shefer take on the dual and ambiguous role of sexuality education in addressing the real-life challenges that confront young people in South Africa through a review of the growing body of scholarship in the country. Taking issue with the Life Orientation (LO) curriculum, the paper assesses the body of gender and sexuality education scholarship in South Africa and make three important points. Firstly, young people's sexual desires are near constantly under surveillance and the focus public health on disease prevention has failed to allow for the articulation of young people's sexual agency. This is not to say that young people are docile but the way in which sexuality education is conceived discards or de-legitimises young people's own points of view in what works and matters to them. Secondly, the authors reinforce that the school environment is heteronormative and exclusionary, repudiating sexual patterns and desires that lie outside the confines of normative gender and sexuality. Additionally, the authors suggest that schools proffer a version of family life based on the nuclear Western heteronormative standards, riding roughshod over the diversity that exists which includes families headed by children, single mothers and families in which grandmothers are the key guardians of young people. Finally, the authors contend that sexuality education reinforces adult authority. Hierarchical and gender/generational relations make teaching and learning about sexuality an ambiguous experience especially when the subject is regarded as taboo and young people are expected not to 'know too much', otherwise they could be stigmatised. Questioning the dominant focus of sexuality education in school-based programmes and the didactic nature of such programmes, the authors extend the boundaries of where and who might teach sexuality education. Greater effort, they argue is needed to address inequalities and this requires a multifaceted approach that addresses teachers skills, the importance of meeting the needs of young people, and the urgency of developing sexuality education that is based on gender and sexual justice.

Rebecca Hodes and Lesley Gittings take sexuality education outside the confines of school-based offerings to what they refer to as a *kasi* (township) curriculum. Kasi curriculum, according to the authors refers to what is taught and learned in the working class black African township in which they live. The authors worked with boys and men (aged between 14 and 22 years of age) using focus group discussions and participatory research methods. Their study is situated in a context in which working with boys and men to address harmful patterns of masculinity that create vulnerability for men's sexual health and poor outcomes for women is now well-established in South Africa. Criticising sexuality education for its moralistic imperatives, the authors argue that learning sexuality in the school for instance makes it difficult for young men to address their investments in sexual pleasure and in multiple partners when such versions of masculinity and sexuality are rejected, scorned and stigmatised. There exist ambiguities and tensions between formal learning and what young men learn from male peers and older men concerning township sexuality. Instead of the focus on sexual danger learned about in formal school and health settings, for instance, young men learn about pleasure from their peers and older men. Whilst dominant versions of masculinity abound, including the desire for multiple partners and their entitlement to sex, the young men in this study also draw attention to affective dimensions of sexuality concerning love, care and romance. Not all men agreed with domination and gender inequalities. Cultural norms such as those regarding *ulwaluko* (traditional initiation and male circumcision) are often upheld and these norms too offered contradictory experiences, which both address harmful patterns of masculinity whilst celebrating sexual initiation and multiple partners. The authors argue that the *kasi*

curriculum offers opportunities to go beyond the formal structures of education, and signals how resistance to dominant patterns of masculinity is worthwhile in opening up new versions of masculinity and sexuality.

The next paper by Tiffany Jones, suggests that South Africa has had a key role to play in advancing human rights and equality on the basis of sexual orientation in the African regional context. Notwithstanding the political homophobia whereby some leaders of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the National House of Traditional Leaders have insulted, denigrated and threatened same-sex relations, South Africa should be lauded as a stand out country in the protection of LGBTQI rights. UNESCO's efforts to advance a more expansive version of sexuality in the Southern African region is supported by South Africa precisely because of the country's human rights framework and policies. The author examines South Africa's contribution to LGBTQI issues through the perspectives of 102 national and international key informants recently interviewed. Breaking down gender binaries imposed through colonial discourses, the author situates the study with the postcolonial moment through which moral conservatism associated with non-normative sexualities is interrogated. Tiffany Jones argues that the value given to the human rights framework puts South Africa in a unique position to grow the field of sexuality education. South-South cooperation in this regard is part of decolonisation especially as much of Africa has experienced colonial efforts to constrain and restrict sexuality via the moralistic and conservative Christian gender binaries that entrenched race and gender hierarchies, whilst endorsing heterosexuality as normative. In this regard, the author regards regional pan-African collaboration as a decolonising moment that can move work on LGBTQI rights forward².

In their article titled, 'Learners' perspectives on Life Orientation (LO) sexuality education in South Africa', Emmanuel Mayeza and Louise Vincent take us to five former black African secondary schools in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa. Young people aged between 16 and 20 years of age were interviewed to assess their own perspectives on the LO curriculum offered in their schools. The young people live in contexts where structural inequalities, the legacies of apartheid and the heavy burden of poverty create fertile conditions for teenage pregnancy, HIV and gender and sexual violence. The authors find document how familiar versions of LO sexuality education reproduce gendered scripts based on female respectability and virginity, moralistic discourses around abstinence, and the environment of heterosexual compulsion. Additionally, the authors argue that generational/age inequalities reproduce adult-child binaries in which open discussion of sexuality is considered to support sexual activities discomfiting for teachers. To this end the authors make several recommendations, including the need for sexuality education to more closely meet the needs of young people and to interrogate the moralistic discourses which prevent open discussion of sexuality. Working with teachers to build their profiles in ways that support a gender and sexual justice framework is a vital part of these intervention.

Lisa Saville Young, Dale Moodley and Catriona Ida Macleod, extend the focus on the ambiguous role of the teaching in sexuality education programmes. Drawing from a psychosocial perspective, the authors pay special attention to teachers' emotional work. By expanding the field of sexuality education in South Africa, the authors argue for a new perspective that brings together emotion work with the social aspects of gender and

² In this context, see also Gruskin and Nicholson (2019) for a global perspective.

sexuality to understand the ways in which these aspects of life are policed and regulated. Dominant framings of sexuality are underpinned by moralistic and religious discourses which shape how sexuality education is positioned. For instance, the participant in the study draws from her history of growing up without a mother and her passion for LO, but also how the management of feminine sexual desire was policed and regulated through dominant markers of gender and sexuality. An important finding in this article concerns the regulation of adult female sexuality through shame. This harks back to issues addressed by Carboni and Bhana (this issue) who argue for an emphasis on teenage female sexual pleasure as we can see the uninterrupted pattern where adult females experience sexual shame as they do when they are young. Fundamentally, attention to the affective and social dimensions of teaching sexuality requires a focus on teachers' own biographies, not separate from their situational context but entwined with and weaving through the psychic dimensions of life. Given the invisibility of affect to date in much of sexuality education research, this is an important connection to consider. We need properly trained teachers who can question their own investments in particular standpoints but such work with teachers requires a consideration of teachers' emotional work and its gendered and sexual contours.

Finally, Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi & Relebohile Moletsane draw our attention to orphans and sexual violence. Their sample comprised twenty-seven young people aged between 14 to 17 years located in an environment of structural dilapidation and poverty. Participants had lost both biological parents and lived with caregivers. Using innovative photovoice methodologies, they were able to take pictures to tell the story of their sexual victimisation. Instead of viewing orphans as needy and docile, the authors' see participants as active subjects with the ability to 'voice' their concerns about the conditions of their own lives. The use of pictures and photographs enabled a graphic and dramatic visualisation of both their agency and the constraints they face. As sophisticated 'knowers', the article rehearses the need for basing sexuality education programmes on the views and needs articulated by young people themselves and enduring problems related to gender inequalities and girls' vulnerability to sexual risk. In this regard, the authors direct attention towards sexual violence and the ways in which agency is constrained under social and economic circumstances that reproduce race and class inequalities. Orphan status exacerbates conditions of vulnerability to sexual violence. As the authors note, in this context schools and teachers have a significant role to play in supporting orphans who lack parental guidance and resources. Once more, these findings point to the need for sexuality education programmes to be situated in and shaped by the reality of young people's lives. The status of being an orphan, a girl, poor and young in a poverty-stricken township has major consequences for the future design of sexuality education programmes.

Overall, the special issue offers an invitation to join and share the dialogue that the authors seek to open up to further the pursuit of new questions in the study of sexuality education. Together the articles included offer us the tools with which to engage with a range of theoretical and methodological issues in order to understand why efforts are needed to disrupt the dominant conceptualisations of sexuality that fail to address diversity, desire and pleasure by offering stereotypical racialised, gendered and heteronormative images of the world that is, while failing to address the world that might be – for those for whom it matters most.

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