

“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.

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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