

POLICY BRIEF

Rolling out comprehensive sexuality education in South Africa: an overview of research conducted on Life Orientation sexuality education

Authors: Jonathan Glover and Catriona Macleod



Billboard in KwaZulu-Natal: 'danger, disease and damage'. Picture: Katherine Furman

Introduction

As part of the implementation of the National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Framework Strategy 2014-2019, the Department of Basic Education is investigating rolling out comprehensive sexuality education in schools. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the current research that has been conducted on Life Orientation (LO) sexuality education in the South African context. The review examines the core findings of the studies and provides recommendations (from the research) that aim to promote justice and positive transformation for learners and educators in the roll-out of comprehensive sexuality education. Many of the articles reviewed used qualitative research methods, which help the researcher to understand the complex social, cultural and political factors inherent in LO sexuality programmes, an understanding that is of fundamental importance in honing sexuality education programmes to resonate with local context¹.

This review is structured according to five over-arching themes that have been identified in the literature: (1) LO sexuality programmes seem to bombard learners with messages of 'disease, danger and damage'; (2) LO programmes unknowingly promote rigid versions of gender, some of which underlie sexual violence; (3) the theme of 'disconnection', which refers to the disengaged and detached attitudes and feelings that

many learners experience toward LO; (4) heteronormativity' (a viewpoint that sees heterosexuality as a 'given', instead of being one of many possibilities) is unknowingly promoted and homophobia (a dislike or prejudice against people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual) is often promoted in LO sexuality programmes; and (5) teachers feel under-prepared and under-supported in teaching sexuality education and in providing support to learners who approach them with personal issues.

THEME

1

Messages of 'danger, disease and damage'

The first theme that emerges in the research on LO sexuality education is recurrent reference to a 'danger, disease and damage' model of teaching about sexuality^{1,2}. Life Orientation sexuality education seems to focus chiefly on the negative consequences of young people engaging in sex: the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, of sexual violence, and of pregnancy. As such, sex is characterised as something that is inherently risky, with little attention being paid to the positive or pleasurable aspects of sexualities. Researchers have found that young people are told 'what *not* to do' by teachers who adopt a morally authoritative stance and instruct learners about the 'correct' way to conduct themselves sexually in light of possible danger, disease and damage^{3,4}.

As seen internationally, there are two camps within South African sexuality education: one promotes abstinence and the other provides a comprehensive view of sexuality that includes safe sex practices, relationships and the complexities inherent in sexuality⁵. Although the abstinence approach relies heavily on the 'danger, disease and damage' model, even with comprehensive approaches, the danger, disease and damage metaphor remains the dominant way of approaching sexuality education.

Researchers argue that the model of stressing risk (in light of danger, disease and damage) and responsibility (to take up the 'correct' path of behaviour) is limited as it does not accurately represent the realities of youth sexuality, in particular the youth culture within which young people are immersed, the raced and classed environments in which they live and the diversity of sexual identities to which they ascribe^{6,7}. Within these environments, sexualities are often seen as fluid, as a source of conflict and of empowerment, and as promising pleasure.

Theme 1: Recommendations

1.1) Provide a positive view of sexuality to learners

Although it is important to promote responsibility and for learners to understand particular risks, it is essential that these messages are accompanied by a broader view of young people's sexuality, one that includes positive notions of sexuality such as pleasure, desire, fulfilment and warmth⁸. In this way, learners are not coerced by 'scare tactics' but are rather invited to engage with a balanced view of sexuality that includes both positive and negative aspects.

1.2) Attentiveness to cultural contexts and preferred cultural expressions of sexuality

Learners' cultural contexts and preferred cultural expressions need to be taken seriously; ways in which youth cultural expressions and the realities of learners' everyday lives can be incorporated into sexuality education need to be sought.



THEME 2

Rigid gender categories

Researchers have found that LO sexuality education frequently reinforces a fixed gendered order with prescribed roles that young women and men 'should' embody⁴. For example, men are assumed to take the lead in sexual matters, while young women are encouraged to take responsibility for their own sexuality, while at the same time identifying themselves as 'vulnerable' and 'passive'⁹. Young women are positioned as having to police male sexuality, but at the same time conform to prescribed gender practices where the desires and needs of men are privileged¹. Boys and men are depicted as largely predatory and girls as victims of sexual predation¹⁰. The contradictory messages that young women receive in LO unknowingly serve to 'undo' some of the aims of the curriculum.

Sexual violence in the South African context is intimately linked with gender inequality and the upholding of certain versions of masculinity that are enshrined in power and violence. Studies have shown that gender inequality affects the agency of many young women especially within the context of their relationships as they are unable to adequately and equitably negotiate their sexual relationships with men¹¹. Research shows that there is a persistence of sexual violence in many South African schools, with male teachers and boyfriends as primary sources of this violence¹².

Theme 2: Recommendations

2.1) LO must work toward disrupting the gender order that privileges male power and desire

Efforts must be aimed at challenging dominant patterns of masculinity and femininity in order to disrupt the gender order, in particular gender positions that lead to sexual violence. Sexuality education should move away from prescribing certain fixed gender roles to young learners, and instead highlight fluidity and empowerment. The inconsistencies in understandings of femininities, in particular, featured in sexuality education, as well as the inadvertent or covert ways in which oppressive gender power relations may be reinforced need to be highlighted and dealt with. Strategies that challenge the current gender order should be incorporated in sexuality education programmes.

2.2) Women's roles in maintaining the gender order must also be acknowledged and challenged

Although it is important that LO sexuality education works toward disrupting the gender order that privileges male rights and power, some studies provide a few cautionary notes. Firstly, the gender order should be challenged in a way that does not problematize male learners and victimize female learners; instead, programmes should create an environment of openness that incorporates all the complexities inherent in gender and sexuality¹³. Secondly, researchers point out that women are simultaneously constrained by male power but also subtly reinforce it. Work, therefore, needs to be done to aid young women in understanding and reflecting upon their role in the subtle reinforcement of gender inequality¹⁴.



THEME 3

Disconnection

A third theme that emerges within the literature on LO sexuality education in South Africa is the non-relational style in which LO classes are conducted and the irrelevant content of the LO curriculum. Firstly, many learners have reported feeling disconnected from what they are taught in LO and view the content as largely irrelevant to their lives. The messages that the learners receive in LO classes do not seem to echo the complexity of their sexualities and/or the specific behaviours in which they engage. The permeation of

LO education materials with references to ‘danger and disease’ are, therefore, far removed from the actual experiences of young people³. Other studies have found that learners often find LO classes repetitive and boring and that they learn more from their peers about sex than from the LO sexuality education⁵.

However, this may have more to do with the way sexuality education is taught than with the actual content of the LO curriculum and manuals. Studies have shown that there is often an overly authoritative and teacher-centered approach in the classes instead of a learner centred approach, where the voices of learners are more central^{1,3,10}. Learners, therefore, feel ‘disconnected’ from the content due to the non-relational style in which the classes are often conducted.

This theme of disconnection is also a result of young people being seen as asexual and as lacking knowledge. In other words, young people are seen as innocent in relation to sex and, ideally, as having little desire for it^{15,16}. Teachers, therefore, fail to see the need to engage learners in dialogue about sexualities and gender.

Theme 3: Recommendations

3.1) Learner-focused initiatives must be encouraged

Young people’s experiences and desires need to be taken seriously and their role within the education process appreciated. A learner-focused initiative that places the voices of young people at the centre of their sexuality education needs to be developed. This involves moving away from a model of ‘teaching’ and ‘telling’ and instead focusing on a model that embraces ‘facilitation’ and ‘listening’, where active dialogue is encouraged and learners are viewed as active participants in the process.

3.2) LO must provide spaces for in-depth interactions and discussions

LO programmes should provide spaces for in-depth conversations where the learners’ individual stories and experiences are heard. In this way young people will be able to talk openly about their feelings and the attitudes, behaviours and practices in which they engage. Learners should be positioned as experts in their own lives and should be addressed in a non-judgemental and holistic way.



Heteronormativity and homophobia

The fourth theme that emerges relates to heteronormativity and homophobia. Deevia Bhana’s book ‘Under Pressure’ illuminates the homophobic climate that permeates the South African schooling system¹⁷. In many South African schools homosexuality is considered unnatural, immoral, ungodly and un-African. For these reasons, the topic of homosexuality is hardly discussed in the schooling system. Other reasons for the ‘culture of silence’ with regards to sexual diversity include: the conservative beliefs of teachers and school management teams⁶, strong resistances from parents toward homosexuality¹⁸ and a lack of guidance and training of teachers as to how to conduct sessions related to sexual and gender diversity¹⁹. Added to this, many LO programmes maintain heteronormative conceptions of gender which help to ‘foster a culture of heterosexuality’ and which further marginalises lesbians, gays and bisexuals in the schooling system¹³.

According to researchers, teachers often express difficulty with integrating topics around sexual diversity into their curriculum as they are offered little guidance on how to conduct such sessions¹², or because it is in conflict with their socio-cultural values²⁰.

Theme 4: Recommendations

4.1) Teachers must be trained in issues related to sexual and gender diversity

LO teachers should be trained in dealing with sexual and gender diversity, in order to avoid marginalising lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and gender queer youth. Training should help teachers to challenge some of their own commonly held beliefs, to recognise heteronormativity and homophobia in the environment and to facilitate classes focusing on these topics. Researchers argue that this kind of training is important as it increases the likelihood that a teacher will engage in a topic that may be against their individual beliefs. The aim here is not necessarily to change their beliefs but rather to help them consider their role as educators in a democratic country that promotes equal rights for all^{15,21}.

4.2) Teachers must be encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs, cultures and biases.

Teachers are invested in their own moralities, cultures and normative expectations of gender and sexualities which infiltrate into the classroom context. Teachers should, therefore, be encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and views with regards to the material they are teaching. This self-reflexivity may aid in challenging commonly held heteronormative views and will assist in reshaping the negative constructions of young peoples' gender identification and sexualities¹.



Teachers' responses to LO sexuality education and care work relating to sexualities

The final theme emerging in the literature is teachers' responses to LO sexuality education and the care work relating to sexualities. It must be acknowledged that in teaching sexuality education, teachers are caught between contradictory values that are not always easy to reconcile: national policy and curriculum, the school, personal beliefs and social and cultural pressures²².

Teachers indicate that it is challenging to create open dialogue in sexuality education while at the same time maintaining discipline, and that the multiple roles that they are expected to play (teacher, confidante, counsellor, social worker) are difficult to manage²³. Researchers have found that teachers' confidence in teaching sexuality is positively associated with the numbers of years teaching about sexuality, having received formal training, experience in discussing sexuality with others, and a supportive school policy²⁴.

Researchers point out that LO teachers frequently engage in care work with learners with regard to issues relating to sexuality, including HIV, pregnancy and sexual violence. This kind of care work does not fall within the ambit of the curriculum, but is nevertheless very important in cushioning learners from potential trauma^{25,26,27}.

Theme 5: Recommendations

5.1) The difficulties associated with teaching sexuality programmes must be acknowledged and teachers provided with support

As the interface between national efforts to engender positive sexualities, teachers need to be acknowledged and supported. While research shows that formal training is of help, and must continue and be expanded, it is also important to provide on-going in-service support and training for teachers. In addition, peer support models and the sharing of knowledge and experiences amongst colleagues could help teachers in facing the various challenges inherent in teaching sexuality education.

5.2) Clear protocols concerning reporting of sexual violence or other difficulties need to be established for teachers; teachers need to be able to de-brief

As ‘foot soldiers of care’ in relation to youth sexualities, particularly with regard to the aftermath of sexual violence and other difficulties relating to sexualities, teachers need to be made aware of protocols concerning how to deal with these issues. In addition, as the people who may provide the first level of care, they need to be able to de-brief concerning their experiences. Clear networks of care outside of the school environment need to be established for teachers who teach sexuality education and who are often the first port of call regarding sexual difficulties.

Conclusion

Sexuality education in South Africa has, for the most part, not spoken to young people in helpful ways. From the first four themes that emerge from the literature it seems evident that LO sexuality education seems to ‘undo’ some of its own aims by: promoting messages of danger, disease and damage; unknowingly reinforcing unequal gender relations; leaving learners with feelings of disconnection from the content and the facilitation of the lessons; and maintaining a fixed view of gender and sexuality that is not sensitive to LGBTI learners and teachers. While some teachers may be confident in teaching sexualities, there are also numerous challenges. In rolling out comprehensive sexuality education, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education take heed of the lessons learnt from research on LO sexuality education and that the following are considered in implementing the programme:

- 1. Design programmes that talk not only to questions of disease, danger and damage, but also the positive and pleasurable aspects of sexualities in all their complexities;**
- 2. Incorporate young people’s preferred cultural expressions of sexuality in programmes;**
- 3. Design programmes that disrupt gender stereotypes, and particularly those that privilege male power and desire;**
- 4. Challenge young people’s roles in maintaining gender power dynamics that retain women, in particular, in contradictory positions of femininities;**
- 5. Address the disconnection that young people experience from the content and the manner of facilitation of sexuality education programmes through promoting learner-centred approaches that engage learners in in-depth interactions and open discussions;**
- 6. Undermine the heteronormativity and gendered binaries of programmes through training teachers in the sexual and reproductive rights that underpin our Constitution and much health legislation;**
- 7. Encourage teachers to engage in deep reflection on their own assumptions regarding sexualities and gender;**
- 8. Acknowledge the difficulties associated with teaching sexuality programmes and provide teachers with support;**
- 9. Ensure that teachers are aware of protocols in dealing with reports of sexual violence or other sexuality-related difficulties;**
- 10. Provide spaces in which teachers can de-brief.**

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