



## ‘... a huge monster that should be feared and not done’: Lessons learned in sexuality education classes in South Africa

*Tamara Shefer*<sup>1</sup>

Women's and Gender Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape

*Lou-Marie Kruger*

Psychology Department, Stellenbosch University

*Catriona Macleod*

Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction, Rhodes University

*Jean Baxen*

School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand

*Louise Vincent*

Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University

### ABSTRACT

*Research has foregrounded the way in which heterosexual practices for many young people are not infrequently bound up with violence and unequal transactional power relations. The Life Orientation sexuality education curriculum in South African schools has been viewed as a potentially valuable space to work with young people on issues of reproductive health, gender and sexual norms and relations. Yet, research has illustrated that such work may not only be failing to impact on more equitable sexual practices between young men and women, but may also serve to reproduce the very discourses and practices that the work aims to challenge. Cultures of violence in youth sexuality are closely connected to prevailing gender norms and practices which, for example, render women as passive victims who are incapable of exercising sexual agency and men as inherently sexually predatory. This paper analyses the talk of Grade 10 learners in nine diverse schools in two South African provinces, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape, to highlight what ‘lessons’ these young people seem to be learning about sexuality in Life Orientation classes. We find that these lessons foreground cautionary, negative and punitive messages, which reinforce, rather than challenge, normative gender roles. ‘Scare’ messages of danger, damage and disease give rise to presumptions of gendered responsibility for risk and the requirement of female restraint in the face of the assertion of masculine desire and predation. We conclude that the role which sexuality education could play in enabling young women in particular to more successfully negotiate their sexual relationships to serve their own needs, reproductive health and safety, is undermined by regulatory messages directed at controlling young people, and young women in particular – and that instead, young people’s sexual agency has to be acknowledged in any processes of change aimed at gender equality, anti-violence, health and well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Life Orientation, sex, sexuality education, young people, heterosexual practices, gender equality, violence, health, danger.*

<sup>1</sup> Please direct all correspondence to: Prof Tamara Shefer, Women's and Gender Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535 Cape Town, South Africa; E-mail: tshefer@uwc.ac.za

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that South African society is characterised by high rates of gender-based violence. It is further acknowledged that gender-based violence cannot be confronted at the level of policing alone. The role that gender inequality, intersecting with other forms of social inequality, plays in reproducing unsafe, inequitable and violent, coercive sexual practices has been widely illustrated (Abdool Karim, 1998, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Harrison, Xaba, Kunene, & Ntuli, 2001; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, 2012; Shefer, 2015; Shefer & Foster, 2009).

In South Africa, high rates of coercion and violence in intimate relationships between young people, along with HIV infection rates, have given rise to a range of policy initiatives aimed at youth. Schools in South Africa have been targeted as spaces that can play a role in challenging coercive and violent sexual and gender practices, and practices that are associated with high rates of HIV infection as well as with unwanted early pregnancies (Morrell, Epstein, Unterhalter, Bhana, & Moletsane, 2009). One prominent example is the introduction of Life Orientation [LO] (Department of Education, DoE, 2003) as a learning area which incorporates sexuality education and aims to provide learners with the tools to critically examine gender stereotypes and inequities. This emphasis is evident in the National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Framework Strategy 2014 to 2019 (Department of Social Development, 2015), in which a commitment is made to strengthening responsive policy and planning with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights amongst young people.

The LO learning area, particularly the sexuality education component<sup>2</sup>, has been seen as one way in which knowledge, skills and values directed at challenging HIV, normative gender roles and coercive and violent practices in relationships between young people (Bhana, Brookes, Makiwane, & Naidoo, 2005; Prinsloo, 2007; Van Deventer, 2009) can be promoted and disseminated by way of the formal curriculum. The aims of Life Orientation, as outlined in the National Curriculum Statement, include fostering understandings of the 'influence of gender inequality on relationships and general well-being: sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, violence, STIs including HIV and AIDS' (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 12). Specifically, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

---

2 Curriculum transformation in South Africa led to the development of Life Orientation (LO) as a new learning area, which has as its main focus equipping and enabling learners to develop skills, competencies and values to successfully navigate a rapidly changing and transforming society, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical or intellectual ability. Apart from the holistic social, personal, intellectual, emotional and physical development, a central concern of the LO curriculum is addressing inequities in society through exposing learners to confront stereotypical views on gender roles and responsibilities, gender differences, power relations, masculinity, femininity, and gender influences on inequality in relationships and general well-being.

(Department of Basic Education, 2011), highlights the content for Grades 10-12 as that which deals with gender roles and responsibilities, gender differences, power and power relations, masculinity, femininity, and hegemonic gender influences on relationships.

Yet, current research has revealed that schools may be serving to reproduce dominant gender norms rather than challenging them, with the LO curriculum having little effect on changing behaviour as intended. Authors argue that little attention is paid to sexuality education in the early years of schooling (Bhana, 2007), a trend reflected in the international arena and underpinned by schools' investment in notions of childhood sexual innocence (Allen, 2007). Furthermore, studies show that young pregnant and parenting women are highly stigmatised at schools, judged for stepping out of prescribed youthful femininity, and that LO sexuality education may be reinforcing rather than challenging such problematic responses (Bhana, Clowes, Morrell, & Shefer, 2008; Bhana, Morrell, Shefer, & Ngabaza, 2010; Ngabaza, 2011; Nkani & Bhana, 2010; Shefer, Bhana, & Morrell, 2013). Rather than a space for learners to confront stereotypes and challenge hegemonic discourses and practices, LO sexuality education has been shown to be characterised by a moralistic response hinging around abstinence and the disciplining of young sexuality (Epstein, Morrell, Moletsane, & Unterhalter, 2004; Francis, 2013; Francis & DePalma, 2014; Morrell, Moletsane, Karim, Epstein, & Unterhalter, 2002). Also of concern are findings that flag teachers' discomfort with teaching sexuality education and the use of traditional didactic pedagogies, which serve to produce and reproduce discourses aimed at disciplining and regulating the sexual practices of young people, and young women in particular, instead of facilitating the agentic and positive sexualities that are the prerequisite for young people being able to negotiate and practise sexual relationships that are free of violence and affirming, rather than threatening of their lives and well-being (Adonis & Baxen, 2009; Baxen, 2008, Francis, 2013; Macleod, 2009; Motalingaoane-Khau, 2010; Pattman & Chege, 2003; Rooth, 2005).

In this paper we present findings from a national research project on Life Orientation sexuality education, particularly interviews and focus group discussions held with learners. Our focus here is on these learners' reported experiences of LO sexuality education, which we argue depict sexuality education messages as serving to confirm and reproduce precisely the negative gender and sexual stereotypes that are implicated in the perpetuation of intimate relationships characterised by violence, coercion, feminine disempowerment and inequality.

## **METHODS**

This paper draws from a research project that applied a critical gender lens to an analysis of sexuality programmes at selected schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape

provinces of South Africa<sup>3</sup>. Framed within a feminist qualitative research methodology, the larger study data included the curriculum and materials used in sexuality education, as well as the reported experiences of learners, teachers and school authorities of LO sexuality classes through interviews, focus groups, diaries and observations of sexuality education classes.

The study was conducted at nine public schools in the two provinces which represent the diversity of the former apartheid categorisations applied to secondary schools: two formerly white schools (ex-Model C<sup>4</sup>, both single sex girl schools), four schools that were formerly designated for coloured learners and three schools that were formerly designated for black learners. While such apartheid terms are contested, they continue to be drawn on for equity purposes nationally, and we use these here since they still have salience in South African communities and continue to be markers of class and other categories of social privilege. Although some schools are more racially integrated in contemporary South Africa than they were previously, this is less the case in poorer communities which continue sharply to reflect historical divides.

The component of the study we report on drew on data generated from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with learners. Twenty-one focus groups included seven male groups, seven mixed gender groups and eight female groups. The focus group discussion addressed the following key issues: learners' reflections on their learning and experiences of sexuality education in Life Orientation classes; how sexuality education in Life Orientation classes compared with how parents talk about sex and sexuality at home; challenges in and out of school regarding sex and sexuality and how sexuality education dealt with these. In-depth, individual follow-up interviews were conducted with 21 male learners and 36 female learners. The individual interviews attempted to explore issues emerging from the focus groups in more depth and focused on reported practices of sexuality, relationships and reproductive health issues, including pregnancy and termination of pregnancy. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with the permission of participants, transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. Ethical clearance was obtained from the three institutions to which researchers were

---

3 The study was a 3-year SANPAD funded research project entitled 'Life Orientation sexuality programmes and normative gender narratives, practices and power relations'.

4 Former Model C schools are schools that were reserved for white learners under apartheid (Roodt, 2011) but which began, in a limited way, to offer places to black learners in the dying days of apartheid. White schools were given the option to select from three different models: A (the school would become private and receive no state subsidy), B (the school remained a state school but could admit black students up to a maximum of 50%) or C (the school would receive state funding only for its staff, but could raise its own further budget through school fees and enroll 50% black learners (Motala & Pampallis, 2005). The majority of English medium schools opted for Model C, while most Afrikaans schools chose Model B. (Hofmeyr, 2000). After 1994, the model system was dismantled and a single, unified state system came into existence.

affiliated at the time. Permission to access schools was granted by the relevant authority in the Department of Education in each province and researchers worked closely with Life Orientation teachers who facilitated access to those learners who were willing to participate at the various research sites. Signed parental consent was obtained for the participation of learners younger than 18. Participants completed informed consent forms and were informed that their participation was voluntary. All participants were aware that they could leave the research study at any time without prejudice.

Guided by qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analytic readings (Braun & Clarke, 2006), our analysis here presents the dominant discourse prevalent in the sexuality education that our participants reported experiencing. In particular, we draw out discourses that reveal the way in which sexuality education, while directed at the safety of young people, tends to reproduce certain narratives that undermine gender change and efforts to achieve more equitable, non-coercive sexual practices, particularly within heterosexual relationships. In this paper we present these discourses as dominant 'lessons' that learners report that they have learned in LO classes.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### LESSON ONE: YOU SHOULD BE AFRAID OF SEX BECAUSE IT IS DANGEROUS, RISKY AND POTENTIALLY DAMAGING (AS OPPOSED TO PLEASURABLE AND MEANINGFUL)

The strongest thread emerging in the stories that participants tell about sexuality education, is that they are taught that sex is 'dangerous' and risky, with the potential to have negative, even devastating consequences. The negative consequences of sexuality that are emphasised include: illness and disease, such as HIV; life consequences, such as the impact of an unwanted pregnancy; and personal harm consequences such as direct violence, including rape. For many learners in this study, and especially women learners as will be unpacked later, sex is constructed in the negative, with little association with pleasure, and inevitably linked with the consequence of unwanted pregnancy and disease:

F1: And I have been told that there is nothing fun about having sex while you are still in high school. It just brings down everything that you do you now because you are gonna get pregnant at the end of the day ... it is just not worth it ....  
(Female focus group)<sup>5</sup>

---

5 Pseudonyms are used for individual interview quotes. Conventions for the referencing include: Int – the interviewer; F1 – female participant in focus group, M1 – male participant in focus group; [] left out or explanatory text; = – speaker interrupts conversation; underline – emphasis; ... – text omitted by authors. Italics are inserted where we wish, as authors, to stress, particular phrases that emphasise the analytical point we are making.

F5: /U::hm/, some of the things they teach us; = /mhh/ = they warn us about certain things, what to do and what not to do = /mhh/ = that is why I am saying it is relevant = /ok/.

F3: I learnt that, if I slept with someone right, there are things I can do to protect myself from diseases = /ok/ = and pregnancy. (Female focus group)

F1: In sex education we learnt about HIV and Ukwabelana Ngesondo (STIs) and how they are spread, sexual relations, we learnt about the consequences of having sex during one's period, that one could contract AIDS. The teacher told us that there is a chance for one to contract AIDS if one has sex during one's period; however it's unlikely that one could fall pregnant as menstruation is the body's way of releasing waste (biological waste pertaining to the female reproductive system). We also learnt that during sex that vaginal fluid comes into contact with semen and thereafter the chance of contracting AIDS is greater.

F2: The teacher emphasised that what causes infection is that vaginal fluids mix with semen and as soon as this happens if one of the two is infected by the AIDS virus or STI then the infection takes place.

M3: It helps us with matters such as the spreading of diseases such as HIV...it advises us against such matters .... (Mixed gender focus group)

...like the Principal always tells us, ... we shouldn't have sex because it can lead to a lot of damage to you. (Female participant, individual interview)

...sex you don't learn about. ... then you got to see scenarios like [inaudible], a person maybe is raped and then that is what the media taught me basically, then you got to watch movies where maybe a child was being sexually abused by her step dad. Those things are like the basic things, otherwise every other thing you never got to learn about. (Female participant, individual interview)

Not only was there silence surrounding sex, but throughout the experiences shared, when discussions were held, young people are reportedly being taught about sex in a framework of regulation, interspersed with warnings and threats of the risks and associated consequences. The negative words associated with sex are striking: nothing fun, gonna get pregnant, warn, protect, disease, spread, consequences, contract, death sentence, danger, damage, sexual abuse.

While it has been important for feminist and health researchers and educationists to show how heterosex is bound up with male power and normative violence such as coercive sex and date rape, it is also of concern that violence and damage are a kneejerk association of sex. Clearly absent from Life Orientation classrooms was an emphasis on the complex

feelings and experiences typically associated with sex. Participants certainly do not relate being told or asked about pleasure and possible positive physical and emotional experiences that they may have during sex, an erasure that has been illuminated by other local research (Chapin, 2000; Flaake, 1993; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Shefer, 2015).

While it is also understandable that sexuality education has as its goal the prevention of unsafe and coercive sexual practices, learners in this study report that the sexuality education predominantly assumes the form of warnings with sex inevitably constructed as a 'huge monster' to 'be feared and not done'. The warnings presuppose a youth population that is not yet sexually active and also not juxtaposed with discourses of desire, pleasure and responsibility to be safe:

M1: What I can say is that for me most of the lessons that revolved around sex were very leave the research study at any time without prejudice.

Guided by qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analytic readings (Braun & negative, negative in the sense that sex was portrayed as a huge monster that should be feared and not done. As far as I am concerned I wish that the priority be being safe instead of being forced to scare and directly or indirectly looking down upon those who have done it as being reckless or not respecting their bodies cause what has happened has happened so let us rather be taught about being safe than being scared off cause you know sir with us if you say this is bad we will try to find out the truth and in that process of finding the truth we become reckless cause safety was never a priority

M2: For me I think I was like taught to be afraid of having sex, I think I said before that for me sex was scary.

M1: My experience of my LO teacher and this kind of lesson was that he was very open but he always made sure that we are afraid of having sex cause he will tell us of all the painful and bad things about sex, he even had pictures or posters that show these terrible diseases that we will have gonorrhoea. (Male focus group)

Learners repeatedly refer in these extracts to the dominant discourse by adults that instilled fear of sex, rather than one that included more positive words typically associated with human sexuality, such as joy, pleasure, desire, fulfilment and excitement. Missing, as Michelle Fine notably pointed out, is a 'discourse of desire' (1988) – or what Louisa Allen later referred to as 'missing discourse of erotics' which would acknowledge that young people have 'a right to experience sexual pleasure and desire' (2004, p. 152). Learners in the present study clearly articulated a longing for sexuality education which would provide them with safe sex options beyond abstinence. In its present form, sexuality education instead continues to reduce young women to a position of victimisation rather than as 'subjects of sexuality, initiators, as well as negotiators' (Fine, 1988, p. 30). Allen (2004) thus calls for a reformulation of the



curriculum to acknowledge young people as sexual subjects who have a right to knowledge about their own bodies and to experience sexual pleasure and desire.

## LESSON TWO: YOUNG MEN ARE POWERFUL, YOUNG WOMEN ARE VULNERABLE (AND SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE)

While the discourse of danger, disease and damage (and the absence of a pleasure discourse) was evident for both young men and young women in their experience of how sexuality and sex were addressed in Life Orientation classes, it seemed that the message conveyed and received were also gendered – both in terms of content and form. In the talk of participants, there were indications that in LO classes there was a tendency for normative gender roles to be re-inscribed and rationalised. Indeed, in some contexts gender stereotypes were directly promoted:

We also did an activity in LO, and like Meneer [male teacher] said, the man is the head – if I can put it that way – in the home. He rules over everything. So for me it's like the man is the one that asks for sex and things...Like when we girls were speaking, it was always but I don't want to have sex now like – how can I put this – a boy's thing and a girl's thing, then the teacher will always take the boys' side. He will always agree with what they say, but he never heard the girls' side of the story. So it was almost like – how can I put this – almost like we're on different sides. (Female participant, individual interview)

Striking is not only how the female participant feels obscured and silenced in this class, she views the teacher as actively 'taking the boys' side'; as we argue, reinforcing hegemonic masculine roles – in which a type of powerful brotherhood is created.

The relational aspect of gender categories (male is defined in relation to female and vice versa) 'produces and sustains binary opposites that may be invoked in stereotypical ways: masculinity/femininity; strong/weak; active/passive; hard/soft; rational/emotional' (Kehily, 2002). LO sexuality education classes do little to undo this dualism. One of the consequences is that heterosexuality is normalised while homosexual people and homosexual practices are constructed as aberrant or deviant. This 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) is, as Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford (2003) have shown, sustained and naturalised in educational institutions. On the rare occasions when non-heterosexual sexual identities are part of the sexuality education conversation, it takes the form of 'tolerance' for 'difference', occluding the fact that heteronormativity is itself a form of violence, rendering illegitimate sexual desire across a range of spectrums of sexual expression



and serving to construct an environment that allows for the perpetuation of marginalisation, exclusion and homophobic violence (Vincent & Howell, 2014).

Within this binary, heterosexual framing of sexuality, in contrast to the message that men are, and should be, powerful, women were positioned as bearing the consequences of sex and therefore as responsible for managing sexual encounters. Consequences took the form of women literally being left 'holding the baby', and of reputational damage.

F4: because we (girls) are told not to have sex because we are going to get pregnant, and the boys won't get pregnant, so we are told, don't have sex, don't have sex, because you normative gender roles to be re-inscribed and rationalised. Indeed, in some contexts will fall pregnant and you will... =

F2: = You will be the one with the baby.

F4: And they will make you pregnant and then they will leave. (Female focus group)

F4: Like, what we have been taught is that when you are busy with your boyfriend, there are things that you do and things that you don't do. If I am a virgin, I must choose one person and not date this one and that one, if maybe I see that he is also dating. This spoils you as the girl and at the end you are the one that is being finished, not him. (Female focus group; our emphasis)

The gendered nature of consequences is clear in these extracts. Boys will leave when pregnancy occurs, and their reputation will not be damaged.

As seen in the extracts above, the language of consequence is powerfully interwoven with the logic of responsibility – inevitable risk and consequence construct inevitable responsibility that is highly gendered, with young women carrying the weight of responsibility:

So we're basically, they're really trying to make us aware of those kind of things because girls they have to take on more responsibilities once they fall pregnant than boys ...Because boys you know they just go to school every day you know those kind of things, so we sort of we're more at risk than they are. (Female participant, individual interview)

F1: My mother tells me, in our house it is almost as if you may not have a relationship with a boy or so. So, my mother always tells me the dangers of what boys do, and the difference that boys do not get pregnant, but that girls can get pregnant. That is what she always tells us in the home, she tells me and my sister, and then she tells us that we must not get involved with boys because it can be dangerous and so.

F2: The girl's life is messed up [as a result of pregnancy]...but the boy goes on with his life. (Female focus group)

A wide literature has shown that youth sexuality is predominantly constructed as inherently dangerous in formal sexuality education (Burns & Torre, 2004; Fields, 2008). In multiple ways, the discourse of danger and risk gives rise to an emphasis on protection and responsibility. Strikingly though was the extent to which both were gendered, serving to reinforce a problematic gender divide, legitimising stereotypic gender roles and practices, while also reproducing a gendered construction of responsibility and blame that are central components of what Linda McClain has described as a 'conservative sexual economy', which has as its central components sexual abstinence until (heterosexual) marriage and girls and women as gatekeepers who are 'responsible for the proper regulation of boys' and men's sexuality' (2006, p. 66). In the present study, young women reported being told that they are the ones responsible for protecting themselves and their partners, but this discourse of responsibility coexists with a contradictory framing of women as passive victims. On the one hand, young women are positioned as the ones who need to exercise agency and need to police, regulate and constrain both their own sexuality and that of their male partners, lest they, the young women, suffer the consequences of young sexuality. Yet, at the same time, the dominant heterosexual framing of female sexuality depicts women as sexually passive, helpless, and powerless in relation to sexual decision making. Such lessons are fraught with contradictions between young women's agency and vulnerability – 'you have agency to protect yourself' but you are vulnerable and 'at risk'.

Not only did the young women in the study report being portrayed as responsible for their own safety and avoiding 'ruined lives', but they were also set up as accountable for the larger 'system', for maintaining the dominant moral and institutional framework of society as the following participant's narrative suggests:

... honestly speaking I feel like the whole teenage pregnancy is really, really, really bringing down our system in education and stuff because more girls are falling pregnant and STI's and stuff like you that ... Our education and uhm, uhm, there are many diseases contracted during that time and it is not going well. I think we as teenagers we need to protect ourselves and not being out there doing all this kind of stuff that put you in risk because you still got a future ahead of you and you still need to think about that and the money, I mean the money that goes into this school thing that your parents have to pay it is just not worth it. (Female participant, individual interview; our emphasis)

What was evident in learner talk was that the LO classroom did not only reproduce particular notions of sex as disease-inducing and dangerous, silencing those of pleasure and desire

accompanied by safety, but it was also the site for the reproduction and reinforcement of dominant discourses on heterosexual practices. Young women were expected to imbibe the message of self-regulation, 'self-control always' while young men could be reckless, or initiators of sex, without the responsibility to be safe. A young woman puts it this way in a focus group discussion:

Int: OK, so, you're saying that it's normal for the boy to initiate sex. The girls need to be the ones who have to wait for the boy to come and ask them.

F1: Yes, because if we girls initiate the sex, then we are going to be seen as a B I T C H [spells out the word].

F8: Sluts.

Int: OK, so, if you ask for sex from your boyfriend, you're going to be seen... or from a guy, you're going to be seen as a bitch?

Participants [in unison]: Yes, or a slut.

Int: OK, a slut, and a bitch. So, in some ways there's also pressure on the girls to be a certain way, hey? Boys have more freedom.

Participants [in unison]: Yes, it is.

Int: Is it like this in your school and community?

F2: Yes. That's how it is.

F1: Girls are more closely guarded than boys.

Int: So, girls have to watch... you have to watch yourselves?

F6: Yes. Self-control always. (Female focus group; our emphasis)

While the participants in this extract were not talking about LO sexuality education classes, but rather general social and cultural understandings, the taken-for-grantedness in their discourse was striking, highlighting the overlap of the messages that they receive in the LO classes and those referred to above.

Further evidence of the reproduction of normative gender responsibility in LO classrooms emerged through the inadvertent message that young women should be silent about the topic of sex. In other words, they should not only be silent about their desire in the context of sexual encounters (as discussed above), but they should be silent about sex and sexuality in general. The teachers seem to convey nonverbal messages that discourage open communication (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Simanski, 1998). As the participant below reported, this seems to be exacerbated when the teacher is a man speaking with young women about sexuality. Male teachers may be unaware of the extent of their own discomfort and how their avoidance of certain topics can serve to reproduce gendered norms.

We don't actually talk about it. The menere [male teachers] that give us LO, they are all shy... so they don't want to speak to the girls about it [sex]. So we mostly do exercises, play outside and so. We never have classes about sex and so. (Female participant, individual interview)

Although this participant tries to excuse the male teachers (they are shy), young women certainly got the message that they were not allowed to openly discuss their sexuality or their sexual behaviour in Life Orientation classes. The sexual desire, feelings and practices of young people seem to be taboo topics in the classroom. Gender shapes possibilities in the classroom, with male teachers being described as unable to adequately communicate with female learners due to their discomfort about talking about sexuality. The young woman in this case articulates that she finds being silenced in this way hurtful, and also indicates that she and other girls resist being silenced and do talk about sex when they are on their own:

It actually hurt me a bit, but then I got over it ...then we girls spoke about sex and things, because we don't let it get us down. (Female participant, individual interview)

Further, these participants expressed a pronounced interest in sex and a desire to have a space within which to talk about sex openly. While the young women indicated that they are not only interested in the mechanics of sex but also in sexual and intimate relationships, there is reportedly no space in the classroom to talk about this. According to them, there is no space to talk about feelings and desire.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that dominant discourses about gender and young sexuality are presented to learners in the form of direct and indirect 'lessons' in Life Orientation classes. Arguably, sexuality education reproduces certain discourses that undermine gender change and efforts to achieve more equitable, non-coercive sexual practices, particularly within heterosexual relationships. These include, as emerge here, a continued foregrounding of punitive and disciplinary messages founded on 'danger, disease and damage', which are also gendered. These messages serve to bolster the reproduction of gender stereotypes and unequal heteronormative sexualities. Such messages arguably also serve to promote a negative construction of young sexualities, which are powerfully associated with negative and punitive consequences, and are also strongly gendered so that women are set up as the ones who primarily bear the consequences and are held responsible for preventing young sexual practices. These findings concord with Lesch and

Furphy's (2013) research that shows how the discourses to which young South Africans are exposed at school are both limited and limiting.

It seems that teachers and schools in general are still invested in the belief that 'scare tactics' will steer learners away from sex and that their goal is to regulate young people's sexual activities. It is clear that these kinds of messages hold little resonance for young people and may in fact, as intimated by participants, have effects contrary to the intentions of teachers.

Sex education should rather be aimed at developing sexually agentic men and women who are able to manage their own sexual health (Macleod & Vincent, 2014). Discourses of 'danger' and silencing may work for a limited time, but they do not facilitate self-reflexivity and a sense of control over one's own body and sexuality. Young people should be empowered sexually by being offered spaces for reflection, helping them to articulate their thoughts and feelings regarding sex and sexuality. Young men and women should be allowed to consider their bodies and sexuality positively as a source of satisfaction and pleasure. LO classes have the potential to powerfully impact on how young people think and feel about their sexuality. However, if young sex is simply constructed as risky, as something to be scared of, with young men seen as powerful and potentially dangerous and young women as vulnerable and having to take responsibility, then sex talk in classrooms can in no way accommodate other constructions of sex and sexuality – those that the learners are possibly most interested in and can relate to most.

In conclusion, we argue that educational efforts to work with young people on sexuality, health and well-being will continue to flounder unless we acknowledge the importance of young people's active agency in any processes of change with respect to imperatives of gender equality, anti-violence, health and well-being. A key priority is to destabilise the authority of adults and their 'civilising' project in regulating young people's sexual desires and practices, as currently enacted in both research and practice with/on young people.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was enabled by funding provided by the South Africa Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD).

## REFERENCES

Abdool Karim, Q. (1998). Women and AIDS: The imperative for a gendered prognosis and prevention policy. *Agenda*, 39, 15-25.

Abdool Karim, Q. (2010). Heterosexual transmission of HIV: The importance of a gendered perspective in HIV prevention. In S. Abdool Karim & Q. Abdool Karim (Eds.), *HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (2nd ed.), (pp. 285-304). Cape Town: Cambridge University Press.

Adonis, B., & Baxen, J. (2009). School culture, teacher identity and HIV/AIDS. In J. Baxen & A. Bredlid (Eds.), *HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding the implications of culture and context* (pp. 35-46). Cape Town: UCT Press.

Allen, L. (2004). "Beyond the birds and the bees: Constituting a discourse of erotics in sexuality education". *Sex Education*, 16(2), p. 215-167.

Allen, L. (2007). Denying the sexual subject: Schools' regulation of student sexuality. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(2), 221-234.

Baxen, J. (2008). Using narratives to develop a hermeneutic understanding of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. *Compare: a Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 38(3), 307-319.

Bhana, D. (2007). Childhood sexuality and rights in the context of HIV/AIDS. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 9(3), 309-324.

Bhana, A., Brookes, H., Makiwane, M., & Naidoo, K. (2005). Evaluation of the impact of the Life Orientation Programme on HIV/AIDS in Gauteng Schools – Pilot Study. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Bhana, D., Clowes, L., Morrell, R., & Shefer, T. (2008). Pregnant girls and young parents in South African schools. *Agenda*, 22(76), 78-90.

Bhana, D., Morrell, R., Shefer, T., & Ngabaza, S. (2010). South African teachers' responses to teenage pregnancy and teenage mothers in schools. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12(8), 871-883.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Brock, L. J., & Jennings, G. H. (1993). Sexuality education: What daughters in their 30s wish their mothers had told them. *Family Relations*, 41(1), 61-65.

Burns, A., & Torre, M. E. (2004). Shifting desires: Discourses of accountability in abstinence-only education in the United States. In A. Harris (Ed.), *All about the girl: Culture, power, and identity* (pp. 127-137). New York: Routledge.

Chapin, J. R. (2000). Third-person perception and optimistic bias among urban minority at-risk youth. *Communication Research*, 27(1), 51-81.

Department of Basic Education (2011). National Curriculum Statement: Life Orientation Further Education and Training Phase, Grades 10-12. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

Department of Basic Education (2011). National Curriculum Statement, Grades R-12, 11 September. Retrieved 4 June 4 2012 from <http://www.education.gov.za>.

Department of Education. (2003). Revised National Curriculum Statement, Grades R-9 (Schools). Pretoria: Department of Education. Retrieved 19 March 19, 2012 from

<http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70257>.

- Department of Social Development. (2015). National adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights strategy framework 2014-2019. Pretoria: Department of Social Development.
- Epstein, D., O'Flynn, S., & Telford (2003). *Silenced sexualities in school and universities*. London: Trentham.
- Epstein, D., Morrell, R., Moletsane, R., & Unterhalter, E. (2004). Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa south of the Sahara: Interventions, activism, identities. *Transformations*, 54, 1-15.
- Fields, J. (2008). *Risky lessons: Sex education and social inequality*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 29-53.
- Flaake, K. (1993). A body of one's own: Sexual development and the female body in the mother-daughter relationship. In J. van Mens-Verhulst, K. Schreurs, & L. Woertman (Eds.), *Daughtering and mothering: Female subjectivity reanalysed* (pp. 7-14). London: Routledge.
- Francis, D. (2013). Sexuality education in South Africa: Whose values are we teaching? *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 22(2), 69-76.
- Francis, D., & DePalma, R. (2014). Teacher perspectives on abstinence and safe sex education in South Africa. *Sex Education*, 14(1), 81-94.
- Harrison, A. (2010). Young people and HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Prevalence of infection, risk factors and social context. In S. S. Adbool Karim & Q. Adbool Karim (Eds.), *HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (2nd ed.) (pp. 305-328). Cape Town: Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, A., Xaba, N., Kunene, P., & Ntuli, N. (2001). Understanding young women's risk for HIV/AIDS: Adolescent sexuality and vulnerability in rural KwaZulu/Natal. *Society in Transition*, 32(1), 69-78.
- Hofmeyr, J. (2000). *The Emerging School Landscape in Post-apartheid South Africa*. Unpublished paper for Independent Schools Association of South Africa (ISASA). Retrieved from <http://www.sun.ac.za/IF/Taakgroepe/iptg/hofmeyr.pdf>
- Jewkes, R., & Morrell R. (2010). Gender and sexuality: Emerging perspectives from the heterosexual epidemic in South Africa and implications for HIV risk and prevention. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 13(6), 1-11.
- Jewkes, R., & Morrell, R. (2012). Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practices. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(11), 1729-1737.
- Kehily, M. J. (2002). *Sexuality, gender and schooling: Shifting agendas in social learning*. New York: Routledge.
- Lesch, E., & Furphy, C. (2013). South African adolescents' constructions of intimacy in romantic relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 28(6), 619-641.
- Lesch, E., & Kruger, L. M. (2005). Mothers, daughters and sexual agency in one low-income South African community. *Social Science & Medicine*, 61(5), 1072-1082.
- Macleod, C. (2009). Danger and disease in sex education: The saturation of 'adolescence' with colonialist assumptions. *Journal of Health Management*, 11(2), 375-389.



Macleod, C., & Vincent, L. (2014). Introducing a critical pedagogy of sexual and reproductive citizenship: Extending the 'framework of thick desire'. In K. Quinlivan, M. Rasmussen & L. Allen (Eds.), *Interrogating the Politics of Pleasure in Sexuality Education: Pleasure Bound* (pp. 199-236). London: Routledge.

McClain, L. C. (2006). Some ABCs of Feminist Sex Education (in light of the sexuality critique of legal feminism). *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 15(1), p. 63-88.

Morrell, R., Epstein, D., Unterhalter, E., Bhana, D., & Moletsane, R. (2009). *Towards gender equality? South African schools during the HIV/AIDS epidemic*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Morrell, R., Moletsane, R., Karim, Q., Epstein, D., & Unterhalter, E. (2002). The school setting: Opportunities for integrating gender equality and HIV risk reduction interventions. *Agenda*, 17(53), 11-21.

Motala, S. & Pampallis, J. (2005). *Governance and finance in the South African schooling system: First decade of democracy*. Johannesburg: Centre for Education Policy Development and Wits Education Policy Unit.

Motalingaoane-Khau, M. (2010). *Women teachers talk sex: A gendered analysis of women teachers' experiences of teaching sexuality education in rural schools in the age of HIV/AIDS* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

Ngabaza, S. (2011). Positively pregnant: Teenage women's experiences of negotiating pregnancy with their families. *Agenda*, 89(25), 37-41.

Nkani, N., & Bhana, D. (2010). No to bulging stomachs: Male principals talk about teenage pregnancy at school in Inanda, Durban. *Agenda*, 24(83), 107-113.

Pattman, R., & Chege, F. (2003). 'Dear diary I saw an angel, she looked like heaven on earth': Sex talk and sex education. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 2(2), 103-112.

Prinsloo, E. (2007). Implementation of Life Orientation programmes in the new curriculum in South African schools: Perceptions of principals and Life Orientation teachers. *South African Journal of Education*, 27(1), 155-170.

Rich, A. (1980) Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, 5, (4), 631-660.

Roodt, M. (2011). *Research and Policy Brief: "Model C" is the model to emulate*. South African Institute for Race Relations, 17 January 2011. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

Rooth, E. (2005). *An investigation of the status and practice of Life Orientation in South African schools in two provinces* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of the Western Cape, Cape Town.

Shefer, T. (2015). Resisting the binarism of victim and agent: Critical reflections on 20 years of scholarship on young women and heterosexual practices in South African contexts. *Global Health Promotion*. doi: 10.1080/17441692.2015.1029959

Shefer, T., Bhana, D., & Morrell, R. (2013). Teenage pregnancy and parenting at school in contemporary South African contexts: Deconstructing school narratives and understanding policy implementation. *Perspectives in Education*, 31(1), 1-10.

Shefer, T., & Foster, D. (2009). Heterosex among young South Africans: Research reflections. In M. Steyn, & M. van Zyl (Eds.), *The prize and the price: Shaping sexualities in South Africa* (pp. 267-289). Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Simanski, J. W. (1998). The birds and the bees: An analysis of advice given to parents through the popular press. *Adolescence*, 33(129), 33-45.

Van Deventer, K. (2009). Perspectives of teachers on the implementation of Life Orientation in Grades R-11 from selected Western Cape schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 29(1), 127-145.

Vincent, L., & Howell, S. (2014). 'Unnatural', 'UnAfrican' and 'Ungodly'. Homophobic discourse in democratic South Africa. *Sexualities*, 17i(4), 472-483.