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Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series

“Sexuality in Silenced Spaces – Disability and Old Age”.

**“I never thought they do it
too...!” Sexuality and the
disabled body.**

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ABSTRACT

The idea of sex and sexuality education in schools is no doubt an intense debate, and issues of who does the teaching, where, how and who is taught; are central to the argument. Schools are important sites for the production and regulation of sexual identities both within the school and beyond. However, schools go to great lengths to forbid expression of sexuality by both children and teachers. Human sexuality is an interesting issue for the young and the old, the layman and the academic alike, even though it is still closeted in many African societies including Lesotho. In this paper I explore and describe the experiences of youth with physical disabilities and how they construct their sexual identities. Data were collected during individual interviews with grade 12 learners living with disabilities, who are members of the Phomolong Support Group in Maseru. The transcribed interviews were analyzed through descriptive analysis. Guba's measures to ensure trustworthiness were applied. Three central themes were identified from the results, namely: rejection and victimization, enforced silence, and lack of information. For each theme categories were also described. Recommendations were made to facilitate improving the experiences of the disabled person as a sexual being.

Keywords: Lesotho, sexuality education and disability.

Introduction

The idea of sex and sexuality education in schools is no doubt an intense debate, and issues of who does the teaching, where, how and who is taught; are central to the argument. Schools are important sites for the production and regulation of sexual identities both within the school and beyond. However, schools go to great lengths to forbid expression of sexuality by both children and teachers (Epstein & Johnson, 1998)). According to Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford (2003, p. 51) “sex education is always about what a particular government chooses to permit the school to say officially about sexuality and what or whom must remain silent...” This is why the curriculum has always been a battleground over which different interest groups argued. It is generally accepted that in most societies youth sexuality has very limited social acceptance. Epstein and Johnson (1998) point out that talking about sexuality and schooling in the same breath can be seen as disturbing in many societies. They suggest that this may be partly because schooling stands on the “public” side of the public/private divisions, while sexuality is definitely on the “private” side.

There are many paradoxes in the legal status of sex education (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). The prescribed approach to sex education is “pedagogically bankrupt” (Epstein *et al*, 2003 p. 50), and incapable of offering children the kind of sexuality education from which they might learn, and on which they might be able to reflect and build their own ways of understanding. Because of this approach, teachers are not sure how to deliver the lessons without endangering themselves by being too frank and open, promoting homosexuality, or problematising heterosexuality. Part of the fears of teachers is about what might happen if they ‘said the wrong thing’ and parents reacted adversely, especially those parents who have been to the traditional initiation schools who still see issues of sexuality as top secret. This increases teachers’ anxieties about parents and the government’s possible responses on their lessons. Teachers feel they are putting themselves at risk by offering sex education.

In this era of HIV/ AIDS, it has become imperative that learners be educated about sex and sexuality in relation to HIV and AIDS. The approach advocated for is a liberal discussion of issues pertaining to sex and sexuality, such that learners can be equipped with the skills to avoid being victims of the pandemic (Whiteside & Sunter, 2000). In Lesotho, HIV/AIDS education is to be infused and integrated into other subjects as a crosscutting issue. This has led to a situation where each subject teacher assumes that other subject teachers will integrate HIV/AIDS into their teaching, thus leaving nobody to do the job. Teachers are afraid to integrate or infuse HIV/AIDS into their teaching because they are expected to 'call a spade a spade'. This becomes dangerous for them because it requires the use of a language which has always been taboo. In the village where my school is situated, people still believe that HIV/AIDS is a homosexual disease. This social construction of homosexuality as a diseased sexuality makes it difficult for teachers to address sexuality education; as they might be charged with promoting homosexuality.

Because society has constructed children as innocent, degendered, and desexualised (Bhana, 2003; Block, 2001; Damasio, 1994; Epstein, 1997; Wolpe, 1988), it means that children are expected to be ignorant of any 'adult' issues such as sex and sexuality. Childhood innocence is not only an excuse for keeping young children ignorant, but it is dangerous to them (Epstein *et al*, 2003 p. 16) because it denies them the knowledge they need to make informed decisions. The school curriculum, which reflects the beliefs of the adult society, is used to maintain children's 'innocence' while preparing them to become adults; in order that they can practice adult ways of being. Sex and sexuality are supposedly 'shameful' subjects, hence teachers are not able to deliver sex and sexuality education in schools because they feel ashamed. It is dangerous and unnerving for teachers to find themselves having to be the ones to corrupt the innocent minds of children. According to society, sex is an adult issue and hence children are protected from knowing about it before they become adults. Those parents and teachers, who have been to the traditional initiation schools, become extremely uncomfortable because they have

been taught that anything sexual is for adults. This has led to a society in which sex talk is taboo between an adult and a child, no matter how old the 'child' is.

The moral traditionalist claim that knowing about sexuality constitutes the corruption of children is profoundly anti-educational. Children's previous experiences and local cultures strongly influence what they know and believe; and they bring to school all kinds of different experiences in relation to sexuality (Epstein *et al*, 2003 p. 18). Children learn from each other, not only the forms of policing their bodies, but also a variety of strategies for understanding and finding out about sexualities. This shows that children are neither ignorant nor innocent of sexual knowledge; hence the notion that not educating them about sexuality can act as a kind of protection of their innocence is wrong (Lesko, 2000; Paechter, 2004; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993).

Mitchell, Walsh and Larkin (2004) and Reddy (2005) lament the state of sexuality education in South Africa, especially in terms of the protection of the innocence of children. Mitchell *et al* (2004) argue that the awful paradox of our time is that protecting the innocent may prove fatal. As a biology teacher I wanted to find out what I can do to effectively integrate sexuality education in my lessons in an inclusive manner because I also teach learners with physical disabilities. This study thus explores the experiences of youth between the ages of 15 and 19 living with physical disabilities in the construction of their sexual identities. This research does not attempt to address the whole question of sexual identities of the youth, but provides snapshots of the experiences of youth living with disabilities in Lesotho. The research is thus particular and partial. It wishes to contribute to an understanding of sexual identities of learners who are doubly regarded as the 'other' in terms of childhood and disability, and to inform practice on sexuality education with learners who are 'different'.

Methodology

This sensitive area of research raises many questions regarding the relationship between the researcher and the participants. There are pertinent methodological questions that need to be considered, for example: how does one gain access to issues that are not just constructed as invisible, but also considered private and personal? These issues have been the focus of much feminist research methodology (Lather & Smithies, 1997). In keeping with feminist research, I have given top status to the knowledge, understanding and feelings of the participants by privileging their voices throughout the study. I have attempted to gain the input of learners on crucial issues that directly affect them and about which they are seldom consulted, and interpret and represent their voices as clearly as possible.

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the participants. This meant that the participants were selected on the basis of their typicality, location and accessibility. In this way the sample was based on specific needs (Cohen & Manion, 2000). The participants needed to be specific in terms of their physical disabilities, age and level of schooling. It is important to realize that this does not constitute a representative sample of youth with disabilities. Rather they reflect and provide snapshots of the gendered schooling experiences of youth with disabilities. The three participants, Thabo and Thuto (boys on crutches) and a girl (Tsebo, on a wheelchair) were members of the Phomolong Support Group in Maseru, where I am a volunteer. Confidentiality was assured and pseudonyms have been used. Access was not a problem because I worked together with the participants in the support group and we had an established rapport.

Since sexual identities are often privately held, are not clearly observable and often poorly understood by the participants themselves, different methods were used to elicit interview data on the youth's notions of their developing sexual identities. These included love letters, magazine samples of the agony aunt "Sis Dolly" and Dr. Ruth, newspaper and magazine clippings of couples, families, male models and female models.

The participants talked about their feelings and experiences in relation to the artifacts presented to them. Data collection was done during unstructured face-to-face individual interviews with the children (Schurink, 1998, p. 298). The children were interviewed in Sesotho, their mother-tongue. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and analysed while in Sesotho, and then translated into English.

Analysis and discussion of data

Emergent themes were selected from frequently voiced understandings and experiences as well as those that were exceptional, the often-overlooked voices from the margin. These developed into the themes within which the responses were eventually grouped. It was also apparent in the youth's narratives that the messages they received from the adult world were different for 'normal' youth and youth with disabilities.

The first emerging theme from the data *rejection and victimisation*, discusses the ways in which the disabled youth are positioned within the discourse of difference. The next theme, *enforced silence*, looks at ways in which teachers and learners through the discourse of difference enforce the silencing of the sexualities of youth with disabilities. The final theme discussed in this article, *lack of information*, discusses the implications of protecting the innocence of children through the denial of necessary sexuality information.

Rejection and victimisation

From the experiences of the participants on rejection and victimisation, the following categories were identified: rejection and victimisation by peers and rejection by adults.

Rejection and victimisation by peers

According to Varma (1993, p. 91) children are notoriously cruel towards people who are visibly different from the 'norm'. Such children who are victimized have higher levels of somatic complaints, general depression and suicidal thoughts (Cowie & Sharp, 1998, p.

104). Children's actions reflect the practices of the society they live in. Our societies do not tolerate difference from what is assumed as normal. They are regarded as half or incomplete beings. Children with physical disabilities are positioned as 'other' in social interactions by the society and their peers. This is evidenced in the following quotation from the children:

"The other boys always tease me and say that they can leave me with their girlfriends and they know that they will be safe... Sometimes they say that I am a girl" (*Thabo*)

"They say that I am a girl because I do home economics instead of woodwork. So the girls, they do not like to talk to me because they say I am not a man... this makes me sad because I like one of the girls in my class. I would like to talk to her..." (*Thuto*)

These boys are rejected by other boys and even girls because they are not able to play out the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) because of their physical disabilities. Their disability makes them effeminate as they take different subjects from those labelled as male subjects and they are not able to partake in rough-and-tumble contact sports. For the girl, she experienced 'othering' as a girl and as a girl with disabilities. She could not fit in with the other girls in terms of fashionable clothes and making herself look beautiful. She was also teased by the boys as shown in this quotation:

"They said to me that I am just another man and asked me who will marry a woman who cannot have children. I was sad because I really like having my own children but they make me feel like I am not able to do anything a 'normal' girl can do." (*Tsebo*)

These quotations show that other youth do not expect the youth with disabilities to be like them and have the same fantasies and feelings. They construct these disabled children as desexualised and degendered (Bhana, 2003; Epstein, 1997). The victimisation and rejection of youth with disabilities is also perpetuated by teachers and adults.

Rejection by adults

The participants show that the teachers do not treat them as complete people. They are often treated as if they are very young children. These quotations show the experiences of the participants in schooling:

“The teacher said that everyone will have a date for the farewell dance except me... I really felt hurt because I also wanted to be accompanied by somebody.”

(Thabo)

“When the teacher was teaching about sexual development of the human body, she made me feel as if I was not part of the class. I wanted to ask but she just ignored me...” *(Tsebo)*

“I was asking the class if someone could tell me how it feels to be kissed and the teacher, he just looked at me as if I had asked a very stupid question. He said that he does not know why I am asking because I will not have anyone to kiss. Why me...?” *(Thuto)*

In the society, other adults also tease youth with disabilities as experienced by Thabo. When he went to his home village, one of the village men told him that he will never be a real man because he does not have a chance of going to the mountains:

“He said that boys my age are going to the mountain to become men and that I will never be a man because I will never know the secrets of manhood...it made me angry because I am still a man even if I am walking on these sticks...”

Such statements from grown-ups are very damaging to the self esteem of a young adult especially one who is already regarded as different. The discourse of difference makes life unbearable for many people in our societies. This leads to ‘different’ people keeping silent about issues that are very pertinent to their survival.

Enforced silence

The rejection and victimization that these youth endure makes them question their curiosities. They feel that it is not normal for them to have fantasies and sexual curiosities because of their physical impairments:

“One of the girls in our class was talking to a group of other girls and she said ‘you lie... I never thought they (disabled people) do it too!’ I just stood rooted to the spot and I did not know if I should let them know that I had heard them or not...” (*Tsebo*)

“The teacher said in class that he can trust me with any girl in the room, unlike the other boys. Sometimes I ask myself if I am mad for having so many questions I want to ask about sex because I think I am not supposed to. I want to know, for example, how it feels like to be really kissed not just a peck like a chicken eating maize...” (*Thabo*)

“I ask myself are these feelings normal for someone my age? Are they normal for people with disabilities? My problem is I do not know who to ask because I cannot ask my father. He would kill me. I cannot ask the teacher as he will laugh at me. The other boys would laugh at me too...so I just keep quiet.” (*Thuto*)

Young people are at a stage when they are having an identity crisis. This brings them enough problems on its own without the added hassle of being sidelined in issues that affect the very construction of their identities. They need information to make informed decisions on what sexuality entails and what the implications are for them.

Lack of information

The participants pointed out that they have very little information about sexuality. They argue that their parents do not talk to them about issues pertaining to sexuality because sex and sexuality are only for adults. One of the boys shows that he tried asking his uncle about his wet-dreams and his uncle got very angry:

“I woke up the next morning with my underpants wet and sticky. I asked my uncle if I was sick and if he could take me to the hospital...he became very angry and said I had no respect for him as my elder, but I only wanted to know if I was sick.” (*Thuto*)

Schools are also not providing learners with enough information to guide the development of their emerging sexualities. The participants show that their schools only deal with the biology of sexuality and nothing about love, relationships and feelings:

“I asked our teacher what the difference is for a man having sex with his wife and having sex with a prostitute, because for me I think he loves the wife and not the prostitute... Hei! The teacher got very angry and said he would report me to the principal. He said I should focus on my school work and not such things.” (*Thabo*)

“I saw this movie on TV and it was very romantic. They talked about desire and love. I asked madam what is the difference between love and desire and she said that she cannot answer that because she is teaching only about reproduction.” (*Tsebo*)

Even though the adult world is trying to deny the youth the information they need on sexuality, the media is wreaking havoc with young people’s minds. For youth with disabilities, the media makes them even more uncomfortable because the TV programs and movies mostly show ‘normal’ people enjoying sexual relationships and this enforces the notion that relationships and sexuality are only for normal people. Even in the magazines there are hardly any questions from ‘abnormal youth’.

Tsebo made a very sad comment concerning the issue of sex: “Maybe sex is not for us...” One then begins to wonder as to whom sex is for. Many youth find themselves caught between the discursive complexities of sexual liberation and sexual regulation, and what seems to be the insurmountable boundary between the sexual identities and practices associated with each. There continues to be a proliferation of erotic and sexual messages via media and popular culture, often depicting the youth. On the other hand, youth sexuality is condemned and reduced to silence, particularly if they are at school.

McLeod (1999) explored the idea that because love is considered to belong to the private realm and is not spoken about, it is women’s business, whereas men’s business lies in the public realm. She contends that sexuality education must examine the constitutive effects of maintaining silence on the discourse of love and that students be given the chance to examine the tensions between the discourse on love and safe sex. Furthermore, despite the silence on love in sexuality education, it is clear that love is regarded as something powerful, especially by the girls. This being the case, it is important to situate sexuality education within relationships and not use as approach that discourages relationships. While there is general agreement on the need to talk openly to children and young adults about sex, this has been largely a discourse of danger.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly clear that young adults need to be taken seriously and that their feelings, understandings and experiences cannot be ignored when developing effective strategies for sexuality education. The data presented in this paper suggest that while the youth in general are sidelined in issues of sexuality, there is more sidelining for youth living with disabilities. The intergenerational dividing line between adults and the youth is strongly policed by adults where the youth are positioned more as children than as young persons, and their sexuality is denied rather than affirmed. This contributes directly to the difficulties they face in articulating their concerns and curiosities.

It appears that the adult-child context is currently an inappropriate one to manage effective dialogue about sex. Presently talk about sex is increasing. Where does this leave

the voices of the youth in the development of their own sexualities? If schools are sites for the development of identities, then this calls for measures in which teachers and adults listen to the voices of the youth in order to create programs that address those issues which are pertinent to their development. There is so much that the youth are curious about concerning sexuality, and it is only right that they get correct information so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual identities.

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