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Using Foucauldian 'discursive practices' as conceptual framework for the study of teachers' discourses of HIV and sexuality.

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Educational research conducted in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Southern Africa has produced diverse knowledge claims. A review of extant literature espoused elements of ambiguity and contradictions which have become challenging to explain, given the growing instrumentality of educational policy and institutional cultures. The research question addressed in this article is: What is the content and nature of the dominant literature strands informing teachers' HIV and AIDS discourses? Educational policy's preoccupation with efficacy and uniformity underplays the complexities in teachers' discourses. This article proposes Foucault's notion of 'discursive practices' as a conceptual lens to analyse the diversity of teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses. Discursive practices encompass social, structural and subjective elements that constitute the wide scope of discourse formation. These elements create possibilities of uncertainty and indeterminacy in educational outcomes of HIV prevention, which often counteract intended policy's expectations of uniformity and consistency. This article presents a perspective stating that a discursive practices approach offers an innovative way in broadening an understanding of the subjective nature of teachers' HIV and sexuality, arguably a weakness in policy.

Keywords: Discursive practices, education policy, Foucault, HIV and AIDS, subjectivity.

Introduction

The confounding and challenging impact of the AIDS pandemic on the educational sector requires a re-examination of teachers' understanding of HIV and AIDS prevention education. Since the introduction of HIV and sexuality education into the school curriculum (Department of Education, 1997), parents have expressed anxiety

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and apprehension about the content and values that inform sexuality education. The role of the teacher is clearly stated in educational policy:

> *…educators should be specifically trained and supported by the support staff responsible for skills and HIV and AIDS education…The educator should feel at ease with the content and should be a role-model with whom learners and students can easily identify (RSA, 1996:16).*

After more than a decade since these official promulgations, teacher education is still grappling to train teachers to engage learners meaningfully in HIV and sexuality education. Reports of school-going children's risky sexual behaviour often cause shockwaves in schools and communities and pose serious questions about learner knowledge and awareness of HIV infection and prevention of teenage pregnancies. Recently, the National Health Insurance (NHI) launched the "integrated school health policy" as a pilot project in Kwazulu-Natal, making condoms and other contraceptive services available to high school learners (*The Times*, 2012). At the launch of this project, the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, announced; "We don't need to shy away from talking about sex". However, allaying the fears of a possible national backlash against the President's statement – and in contradiction to this view – Deputy Minister of Education, Mohamed Enver Surty, announced that "there was 'no way' that condoms would be placed in dispensers in schools" (*The Times*, 2012). Talking about sexuality in public is often riddled with these tensions and contradictions, and teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses are not immune. Contradictions appear to characterise the contested nature of the HIV and sexuality education discursive landscape.

This article argues that educational policies display shortcomings and are far removed from the reality of what teachers are teaching with regard to HIV and sexuality. The article proposes Foucault's (1978) notion of discursive practices as an approach to explain the contradictory tendencies in public and educational discourse on sexuality education. Discursive practices account for social, structural and subjective contexts in which teachers' understanding of HIV and sexuality education is shaped. Studies by Baxen (2006) and Jewkes (2004) support the need to explore alternative approaches to the study of HIV and sexuality education, while recent research indicates new trends in gender power relations (Singh, 2012).

First, an exposition is given of the main knowledge strands that emerged from a literature review. Secondly, Foucault's (1978) notion of discourse as practice referred to as "discursive practices" is expounded. The article concludes with a summary, arguing for the relevance of discursive practices as a viable approach to understanding the nature of teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses – a departure from the instrumental and camouflaging generalisations which are outcomes of dominant research approaches.

Dominant knowledge strands in HIV and AIDS literature

A literature review dealing with HIV and AIDS education reveals three broad areas of research: socio-cultural studies, pedagogical research, and the role of power – an emerging strand in the literature. These literature strands concomitantly suggest three broad HIV and sexuality discourses in education.

Socio-cultural studies

During the early stages of the pandemic, people living with HIV and AIDS had to endure hardship and rejection before their rights to treatment and care were recognised. Early attitudes and perceptions of HIV and AIDS were influenced by sexually related pandemics of the past. Stigmatisation resulted in experiences of prejudice and discrimination which created major stumbling blocks in addressing HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care (Francis, 2003: 125). Stigma associated with sexually related diseases was transposed to HIV and AIDS which negatively influenced the future of the disease. Stigmatisation caused delays in testing, poor treatment adherence and greater numbers of new infections (Goudge, Ngoma & Maderson, 2009). The subsequent destigmatisation of HIV resulted in infected people's becoming an explicit educational objective for teachers to pursue (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003: 19).

The physical effects of the HI-virus on the human body resulted in the development of social attitudes and myths about the pandemic. People living with HIV and AIDS were believed to be receiving God's "punishment", which was consistent with past experiences when sicknesses were ascribed to the will of God (Baxen, 2006: 95). Images of diseases and sin have long been linked in the popular imagination (Sontag, 1988). Stigma associated with sexually related diseases of the past were inter-generationally transmitted and influenced the way in which communities made sense of the pandemic. Contradictory explanations of HIV and AIDS began to appear which were based on different experiences. Different religious, historical and epidemiological experiences provided the ingredients for these ambivalent and confusing responses to the pandemic.

While society appropriated social memory to provide (dis)information of the new disease, the need for scientific knowledge about society's experiences became vital. The social and subjective contexts of HIV and AIDS needed investigation (HSRC, 2010). Notwithstanding efforts to find a medical cure, stakeholder partnerships began to recognize the inherent role of culture in how people were trying to make sense of health issues. The establishment of the organisation Social Aspects of HIV and AIDS Research Alliance (SAHARA) by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa (HSRC) (Shisana, 2004: 17) not only attested to the importance of the social and cultural contexts of HIV and AIDS, but also accentuated the need to respond to the lack of socio-cultural studies including educational research (HSRC, 2005; Baxen & Breidlid, 2004).

Given the paucity in knowledge about the relationship between culture and the HIV pandemic, research with a socio-cultural focus began to emerge. Ahmed (2003) and Amod (2004) investigated HIV and AIDS in the Muslim communities. Despite their different approaches, these two cultural studies, albeit limited to one culture, underlined the diverse meaning of HIV and AIDS. Ahmed's (2003) study is an ethnographic demonstration of the need to explore beneath the "surface of appearance" experiences, while Amod's (2004) presents an Islamic doctrinal perspective of HIV and AIDS that reinforces notions of punishment for "sinful" behaviour. A positive lesson learnt was that the pandemic affects all levels of society. The dominance of early discourses based on myth and selective memories were gradually challenged by a counter discourse based on empirical investigation and reason.

In the quest to explain the link between society and HIV and AIDS, Vaughn and Rule (2006: 165-186) researched socio-historical conditions as a context of HIV and AIDS in a Kwazulu-Natal community. The study identified barriers to HIV and AIDS awareness lodged in the structure of the local community. Some of the structural features in the community were displaced families, alcohol abuse, commercial sex workers, drugs and poverty. The study revealed the social and economic context in which the pandemic finds expression. Human sexuality intersects with socio-economic conditions when a causal explanation is explored for the increased rate of infection among people living in poverty. Notwithstanding the need for a medical cure and amelioration of socio-economic conditions of vulnerable communities, the need to increase prevention education to curtail the further spread of the HI-virus was realised. Vaughn and Rule's study constructed an understanding of the social structural context in which HIV and AIDS occurred. The study highlighted the importance of "context" as a factor in explaining human behaviour. Because teachers are part of society, they are also infected and affected by the pandemic (HSRC, 2010). Their understanding and experiences of HIV and AIDS and sexuality become part of the content that they teach at school.

The literature shifted from an understanding of the pandemic based on mythical memories of disease to socio-cultural findings based on people's experiences of the pandemic on the ground. The socio-cultural discourses that emerged were by no means homogenous and uncomplicated. They presented a generalised view of the HIV and AIDS phenomenon experienced in diverse social contexts. Indubitably, these discourses initiated an outpour of compassion and concern that marked a significant shift from the early days of condemnation, rejection and neglect.

Pedagogical research in HIV and AIDS

The literature concerning HIV and AIDS in the educational domain expounded various aspects of pedagogy. The exploration of teachers' knowledge, attitudes and perspectives of HIV and AIDS dominated early research (Baxen & Breidlid, 2004);

however, the studies of emotions were also receiving attention. De Lange et al. (2006) explored teachers' emotional experiences associated with the pandemic, reiterating that the meaning of words without considering the contexts and subjectivities of teachers might be misleading. On the other hand, Bhana et al. (2006) demonstrated the importance of emotional reactions to the pandemic and how trauma associated with HIV and AIDS influenced teachers' perspectives on the pandemic. The interaction between the external environment and emotionality of the teacher foregrounds the role of individual subjectivity as an important dimension, one that needs to be recognised in the understanding of HIV and sexuality education. The recognition of discourse as highly emotional and sensitive is a positive shift from the broad structural generalisations of people's experiences. While Bhana's study recognises the emotional nature of teachers' experiences, it does not go so far as to offer a methodology that would make the understanding of the subjective meaning of emotional experiences possible.

Although teachers might be guided by a common professional code of conduct and curriculum policies (South African Schools Act 1997), as a social group they have different cultural and historical backgrounds and they are diversely qualified and trained to deliver a common curriculum. The South African educational sector is defined by its rich diversity which is constantly being challenged at different levels of society and by policies of inclusivity (Muthukrishna & Sader, 2004). Researchers explored teachers' professional knowledge and training levels and revealed different shades of meaning of teachers' "lack of knowledge" and "confidence to teach" HIV and AIDS education (Mabece, 2002). Teachers were often described as being selective when they teach sexuality (James-Taera *et al*., 2004). HIV and sexuality was often referred to as a "sensitive topic" that requires specialised teachers. This view contradicts the assumption that all teachers should be able to implement the curriculum based on their common training (Boler & Carrol, 2003). Teaching HIV and sexuality has also been described as being teacher-centred, which is a contradiction of the learner-centred outcome-based curriculum (C2005) introduced in 1997 (Louw, 2000). Teachers were reported to be knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS, but poor attitudes persisted (Oyeyeni, 2009). Thus, the efforts made by educational authorities to deliver a common curriculum message would be challenged by the diversity in knowledge and background of teachers.

Educational objectives do not simply translate into practice. They are mediated by teachers with different knowledge and understanding of a subject. These differences lead to often occurring contradictions between what teachers are expected to teach and what they actually teach. In this article, the argument is mooted that an understanding of the contradictions between policy and practice requires knowledge of how educational policy is mediated by the teacher in practice. As in the case of the socio-cultural discourses on HIV and sexuality, the pedagogical discourses share similar diversity, contradictions and ambivalence.

The role of power – an emerging strand

A third knowledge strand in the literature on teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses deals with power and power relations in discourse formation. In the context of the school, both genders have been exerting their personal power in different ways. Jewkes (2004) argues that sexual abuse of school girls by boys and male teachers indicates gendered power relations that are socially entrenched and reproduced. Dominant male stereotypes represent power, sex and violence, which often confuse and contradict the way some learners perceive male teachers (Chege, 2006). Notwithstanding these findings, issues of teachers' sexual abuse of female learners have been neglected as a significant factor in the implementation of sexuality education (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The acceptance of male teachers as part of the normal gender composition of the school community often conceals their potentially exploitative role as sexual perpetrators. On the other hand, to generalise that all male learners and teachers might potentially abuse their power would be inaccurate, as recent research findings recorded. The unfairness of gender expectations, for example, prompts young women to undertake risky sexual behaviour similar to that taken by males (Singh, 2012). Changing gender imbalance with regard to sexual exploitation of the female by the male has been questioned in a school-based study in Nigeria. This has led to the notion that "two can play that game" and challenges the reasons as to why society expects girls to remain virgins until marriage and not boys (Singh, 2012). Ojedokun and Balogun (2008) cited by Singh (2012: 28) reported that the traditional male-female difference in early sexual experience has disappeared and that females were at least as likely as males to initiate premarital sex. These recent dynamics in "unequal" gender power relations require research approaches that would focus on the specificity of context in which subjective decision making becomes available for analysis.

Power is manifested beyond social relationships. It is vested on the micro-level of the human body, which Foucault refers to as "bio-power" – a conception of the body as a central component in the operation of power relations (Smart, 2002: 75). The role of power as vested in the subjectivity of teachers appears as a conceptual lens in the work of Baxen (2006) who explores the role of power in shaping the nature and content of HIV and AIDS discourses of teachers. Baxen questions the view of teaching as an objective, rational act. She suggests that teachers are active rather than responsive subjects in the teaching process. She asserts that the problems associated with HIV and AIDS education are based on the assumption that teachers act as "rational, intellectual professionals who 'mindfully' educate the 'minds' of learners". This perspective on teaching ignores the impact of the human body when it is invoked – that is, when it goes into "action" (teaching). Consequently, Baxen (2006) challenges the dominant research approaches which identify either the structure of the school or the curriculum as being in need of reform and not the teacher. Teachers play an active role in education and their discursive practices provide reference

frames and possibilities which have an impact on learners in indeterminate and unpredictable ways.

Given the multiple interpretations of discursive statements and the possibilities of contradictory and inconsistent meanings that might be attached to teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses, educational outcomes are often experienced as confounding and unanticipated (Amin, 2011). As an approach to unravel these perplexities and contradictions in teachers' discourses, I suggest that Foucault's notion of discursive practices be used. As an analytical framework, discursive practices accommodate structure and agency without ignoring the active but subtle role of power and its effect on discourse. It swerves away from grand narratives and focuses on the particular. I will now explain key concepts that constitute a plausible conceptual framework to study the elusive and diverse nature of teachers' discourses as argued above.

Theorising contradictions – (re)positioning and (re)inventing "self"

Social research conducted in the field of HIV and AIDS education falls mainly within the approach of structuralism and explains the impact of external social forces on teachers' experiences and perceptions. I referred to Vaughn and Rule (2006) in the literature as an example of a structural analysis. These studies often underplay the role of human subjectivity, the locus of meaning making. Dominant knowledge claims about sexuality education tend to seek generalised explanations which, when applied to some local situations, are often meaningless. There is a tendency to treat human subjectivity in a superficial manner in dominant discourses that are grounded in a socio-cultural context, pedagogical frameworks and interpersonal relations. According to Foucault, the human subject is produced in a range of discursive practices – economic, political and social – the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). Meanings are multiple and context specific and become discourse when the individual exerts him/her "self" to give vent to expressions. When teachers articulate their discourses on HIV and sexuality, they do so from the position of personal contexts. While there might be similarities in teachers' understandings and expressions, their discourses are not homogenous or premeditated statements which convey uniform messages as policy prescribes. They are socially constructed statements produced under specific social conditions expressed heterogeneously, often unintended, diverse and contradictory. The literature under pedagogical research illustrated some examples of contradictions, namely the "level of knowledge" and "lack of knowledge".

A discursive practice approach problematises the usage of language as a representation of a textual or verbal form of social reality. When language becomes discourse, external meaning of words and phrases are employed to represent social reality. Language plays a signifying function as it opens the possibilities of different

interpretations, contradictions and ambivalence. While representation constitutes a notion of an absolute and essentialist account of what is described (Parker *et al.*, 1999: 5), signification creates more space for different explanations. An illustration of language as representation and language as signification might be understood in the following fictitious example of teacher John: If teacher John expresses his willingness to speak openly about condom use in the classroom, he might be representing his willingness to conform to policy expectations. However, on another level, John might have completely different reasons for teaching condom use. He might be contravening his personal values but out of fear of losing his job, he agrees to conform to policy. This interpretation represents one possible construction of John's willingness to address condom use while there could be others. However, to perceive teacher John's current position as fixed and permanent might be a mistake. Under different social conditions, his willingness to speak about condom use could change. In the same way, when President Zuma supported that learners should "not shy away from talking about sex" his choice of words might have opened different interpretations. For example, it might be interpreted that learners should not be shy to talk about sex but be shy of sex! We might even ask whether the President was inciting talk about sex or inciting sex. An obvious meaning could be that sexuality should be a matter of public discourse but that sexuality should also be suppressed, as the Bret Murray portrait of the President has shown. Thus, language is a representation of thought and, as such, will be open to different interpretations.

Foucault sets out to understand the social effects of language rather than an essentialist meaning of its everyday usage (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982: xxv11). In the research process, language is inevitably reduced to a textual form, which is then subjected to vigorous analysis (Parker *et al.*, 1999: 4). As such, a textual reduction of discourse contains elements of ambiguity – the possibility of multiple interpretations. Our fictitious John might have been prepared to express himself positively on condom use because a pro-condom use curriculum adviser might have been in his classroom. Perhaps if his own children were present, he might have used different words which might have relayed a different meaning. Thus, according to Foucault, for discourse to be understood, it needs to be exposed to its power relations and connections. John would express different views on condom use in a different social context. In a similar way, President Zuma's expressions of sexuality talk to learners might have been enunciated differently had he been in a province outside KwaZulu-Natal. His sexual discourse might resonate with the people of KwaZulu-Natal, which has one of the highest national rates of HIV infection and which is his home province. The President might have felt comfortable with the subject of sexuality as he could relate to "his" people whom he was addressing in his home province.

The selection of words employed in discourse to convey meaning is invariably a choice to make. Words, expressions and symbolic meanings are acquired under specific conditions during the period of socialisation, which stretches from the time of birth and is continuous. To establish causal reasons between what teachers say

and what they mean requires vigorous interrogation. According to Popkewitz, the individual plays an active role in creating the perceptions that people form about the world. In this regard, Popkewitz (1987: 27) asserts that:

> *Our world is continually offered as one of ready-made customs, traditions, and order in the things of daily life. Yet the natural order is not natural or inevitable, but constructed historically, socially and politically. Enquiry should enable us to consider the possibilities of our social conditions by exposing the fragility, to some extent, of the causality in which we live. To make our social situation problematic – not a foreordained order of things but the outcome of collective actions of men and women – is to make these situations potentially alterable and amenable to human agency.*

Foucault's notion of discursive practices takes a critical view of language and its social effects. He argues that meaning of discourse does not flow from objective analysis but rather within social and subjective environments. To establish causality between discourse and meaning goes beyond the mere inductive and deductive approaches of meaning making. What follows below is my understanding of Foucault's explanation of the nature of teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses, which have been identified as emotional, contradictory and ambivalent.

Discourse as pre-discursive, discursive and non-discursive: explaining contradictions

In a discursive analysis to understand teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses, Foucault positions the "self" as central to meaning making. According to Howarth (2000), Foucault places "self" as the key relational denominator in giving meaning to discourse. Other than the linguistic, the non-linguistic (social and relational) and the situational context, discourse analysis involves the "self" as follows:

1. the space between the self and self-reflection;
2. the self and the discursive environment; and
3. self as part of a social structure and economic processes external to self.

To simplify the above, the reader should imagine a picture of a balancing "self" in the middle of three circles that converge around "self". Each circle represents a layer of discursivity with a double-side arrow pointing to and from "self" in all directions. Such are the inter-relational networks linked to the "self" in the process of discourse formation. Diagrammatically, I propose the following illustration, positioning the "self" as dynamic and fluid with the influences of the discursive and non-discursive practices present but not fixed.

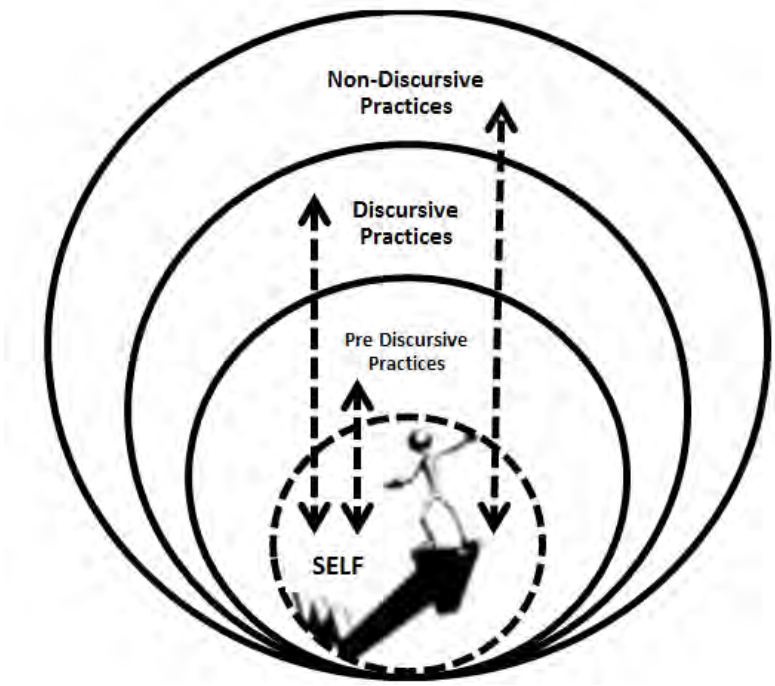

Figure 1: Discursive practices: self -in-relation

Taking the above diagram as a guide, discourse analysis seeks to explore the complex interplay between the subjective (or internal) production of discourse and its external (or objective) environment. Our fictitious teacher John's expression on condom use, for example, might have been prompted by his internal fears of job insecurity because teaching condom use might have been regarded as a compulsory measure to prevent the spread of HIV. John might also have been influenced by emotions of anxiety, which is subjective, and teaching condom use might be totally against his values. However, he might prefer to conform rather than to rebel against the expectations of policy. According to Foucault's discursive lens, John's emotions of anxiety and fear would be regarded as "pre-discursive practice" because the discourse precedes its enunciation but is nevertheless influential. John's "discursive environment" would refer to all textual and verbal influences to which John might have been exposed during his life. This would include all possible formal and informal educational exposures in which "words" made some impression on his mind. John's "non-discursive practices" refer to the relationship between discourse and those social and economic processes outside (external) of the teacher which are influential on his discourse (Howarth, 2000: 64-66). In other words, the non-discursive practices refer to the non-verbal power in society which has an impact on the individual's social practice. These would include the power of traditions, institutions, conventions, economic processes and practices (Smart, 2002: 41). The "non-discursive" practices would refer to the cultural, psychological and non-verbal processes during his socialisation that might have been

influential in shaping his values and subjectivities. According to Foucault, the scope of causality is now broadened, which creates possibilities for endless interpretations.

The question now arises: Given the multiple possibilities of discourse formations about sexuality, how do teachers produce their different discourses on HIV and sexuality and what organising principles are employed to understand their nature and content? After arguing that teachers' discourses are subjective and diverse, the enunciation of diversity could be explained by using the concept of subject positioning and multiple views on truth (Wetherell, 1998: 9). The creative power of the body to produce discourse is explained by Foucault's notion of bio-power, which recognises the body as "discourse" capable of bringing an extra dimension of complexity to the meaning of discourse (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). Baxen (2006), for example, discussed the unexpected power of the body when it evokes discourse – when the teacher becomes an active creator of knowledge and teacher in the classroom.

Taking the example of the fictitious teacher John, "self" could become potentially expressive of different identities through discourse. Thus, the "self" has the power to produce different meanings when discourse is enunciated. Our fictitious John's discursive practices would be influenced by his subject position in relation to the social power relations in which he might find himself. He might assume multiple positions that are different moments of truths. These might provide him different facades of identities which he appears to assume under changing social relations. What emerges is a notion of a teacher as a (re)producing and (re)inventing discursive subject balancing contradictions and ambivalences in a fluid social environment. (Refer to figure 1 above.)

Conclusion

In this article, I gave an exposition of the connection between dominant research literature strands and HIV and sexuality discourses in education. These discourses are often employed to describe the complex HIV and sexuality landscape expressed in generalised and essentialist terms. However, if applied to local settings, these generalisations are often found lacking and superfluous. Dominant educational research approaches have arguably fallen short in exploring the contradictory and elusive nature of teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses. As an alternative, I suggest an innovative approach by using Foucault's notion of discursive practices. I explained above how Foucault's notion of discursive practices, as an overarching conceptual framework, connects discourses of the teacher with social structure by foregrounding the complex dimensions of the subjective "self". I offered an explanation for the indeterminate and uncertain nature of teacher discourses (Baxen, 2006), but I argued that they are analysable by placing the "self-in- relation" to its discursive environment. Foucault's notion of discursive practices could, thus, explain the contradictory and unanticipatory discourse practices in a reasoned way.

Discursive practices as conceptual lenses do not seek to generate grand narratives and develop generalisable theoretical explanations of teacher practice. Its purpose is to discover different kinds of rationalities operating in the production of discourse. Wetherell's (1998) notion of subject positioning explains the occurrence of multiple discourses and how teachers' discourses could change from time to time. The way in which power operates on a micro-level offers possibilities for new understanding of teachers' HIV and sexuality discourses. While President Zuma might appear to have expressed himself unambiguously when he said, "we don't need to shy away from talking about sex" he was publicly contradicted by his Deputy Minister of Education who saw the ambiguities in what was said. Explaining the fluidity of discourse would demand a dynamic analytical approach. Using Foucault's notion of discourse as practice ensures a constant dimension of movement and change, albeit in contradictory ways.

During this time of the HIV pandemic and the public campaign to establish an HIV-free generation, teacher education will constantly face the challenge of being relevant and meaningful when engaging sexuality education. Teacher education might consider narrowing the gap between policy and practice by recognising the complex nature of teacher sexuality discourses. Shifting perspectives from promoting uniformity and homogeneity to embracing heterogeneity and diversity might go a long way in changing the course and nature of sexuality education. The official notion of the instrumentalist teacher as a "role-model" for learners' sexual behaviour is contradicted in practice. A discursive practice approach to sexuality education would bring to the classroom possibilities for new learning moments – a reprieve from the "HIV fatigue" that has paralysed sexuality education.

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