

Multiple femininities in a 'single sex' school: Re-orienting Life Orientation to learner lifeworlds

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Life Orientation sexuality education in South Africa faces many pedagogical challenges, not least among which is that it is sometimes perceived as irrelevant to learners' real interests and concerns. Learners report that the content is repetitive and that they learn more from peers than from the reiterated lessons of risk and disease avoidance that permeate sex education messages. In this article we describe the world of the study site – a 'single sex' school – as consisting of diverse informal student sexual cultures in which repertoires for the development of learner sexual identities are developed, negotiated and transmitted. The study is based on detailed ethnographic immersion in the study site which generated rich data drawn from in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and solicited narratives. We argue that even the enlightened, tolerant 'best practice' form of sexuality education that takes place at the study site fails to take diverse learner identities, lifeworlds and experiences seriously as a pedagogic starting point, but rather tends to homogenise learners and to impose on them what they need to learn. A more empowering form of sexuality education would take seriously how young people understand themselves as sexual subjects located in unequal ('raced' and classed) social contexts.

Key words: sexuality education; student sexual cultures; South Africa; Life Orientation; pedagogy

Introduction

And LO, I'm sorry! I get more knowledge from listening to my friends than actually listening to LO! (Aphiwe, Focus Group 1)

Sexuality education in South Africa is taught as a component of the Life Orientation (LO) subject area which is compulsory for all learners and is described by the

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Department of Education as a 'holistic approach to the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners,' aimed at promoting learners who are equipped to participate fully and fruitfully in a democratic society (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 8). Sexuality education in South Africa takes place in a context in which both sexuality and schooling are frequently cited as being beset by a range of crises including gender-based violence, disease and teenage pregnancy (for critiques, see for instance Macleod, 2011; Shefer, Bhana & Morrell, 2013). However, for all the sense of public crisis concerning sexuality and schooling, the voices of young people themselves regarding their own sexual subjectivities are seldom foregrounded in the public conversation surrounding youth, schooling and sexuality.

Mary Jane Kehily (2005: 1) defines 'student sexual cultures' as the 'informal groups of school students who actively ascribe meanings to events within specific social contexts'. Student sexual cultures are an important place for identity construction, because in these micro cultures learners negotiate acceptable ways of defining and talking about themselves as gendered and sexual beings. When students negotiate meanings in relation to gender and sexuality they draw on repertoires that are developed and maintained within these informal friendship circles. These informal student cultures are constructed by learners at all schools, but are seldom acknowledged in the formal curriculum as a resource to draw from in the practice of learner-centred pedagogies.

The emphasis on student sexual cultures in this study is a way of 'giving voice,' as Kehily (2005) puts it, to those who receive a curriculum which is meant to speak to their most intimate concerns, but which could be constructed and diffused with little attention to the detail and texture of their lifeworlds. Redman (1994) suggested two decades ago that research into pupil sexual cultures can provide insight into pupils' active engagement from an early age with sexual identity construction and the production of pupil sexual meanings. Based on three months of ethnographic work at one particular school, this study tries to do just that. Our sense is that, if we are to do more than pay lip service to the idea of 'learner-centred' education, having a deeper appreciation for, and knowledge of, these informal student cultures could be an important starting point for constructing curricula and pedagogies that are meaningful to learners. Rather than seeing learners as homogenous, we attempt here to provide an insight into diverse lifeworlds – cultures and practices that are meaningful to the participants in ways not immediately legible to the casual onlooker. We describe three exemplars of informal groups or communities of practice which we discovered at the research site but which, by no means, exhaust the multiplicity of such groupings at the school. We argue that these informal learner cultures are significant sites in which learning about sexuality and the construction of gendered identities takes place. A curriculum aimed at 'life orientation' cannot make sense unless it takes seriously the diverse orientations to life, priorities, meanings and desires that circulate in learners' lived, everyday experience.

The study

This study was carried out at an all-girls government high school situated in a relatively privileged, predominantly white, suburban area in South Africa. The learners at the school are between the ages of 12 and 18. 'Green Girls' High School is a historically white school which began to admit black learners for the first time in 1991. A large influx of black learners into the school followed, mostly originating from the nearby African and coloured townships. When data collection began in early May 2012, 429 learners were enrolled at the school. The majority of learners at the school are black day scholars (60 per cent). There are 29 teachers at the school, the majority of whom (22) are white. The medium of instruction is English.

The study employed ethnographic techniques in order to gain deeper insight into how learners at the school interact with one another in the diverse student cultures at the school. Our interest was in providing an interpretation of processes of meaning making within these interlocking learner communities of practice through detailed and extended engagement with, and direct observation of, participants within the physical and social context of the school. We were interested in the talk that takes place both in the formal setting of the LO sexuality education classroom, and outside the classroom, during break times and other moments of informal interaction. In some cases this 'talk' took place in the form of conversations on social media such as on BBM and Facebook to which we, as researchers, were privy.

Participants were mainly Grade 10 learners, as it is in this grade that the bulk of sexuality education is taught in South African schools. The school has three Grade 10 classes, amounting to a total of 89 learners at the time of the study. Participants included the learners themselves, LO teachers and the headmaster. Observations were conducted both during formal LO lessons and other formal occasions such as school assemblies, and in more informal spaces such as during learner break times, meal times and in the staff tea room. Observations were complemented with document analysis of learning materials and policy statements, three focus groups involving a total of 30 participants, 12 in-depth interviews (nine learners and three staff members including the headmaster, 'Mr Walker,' the LO Subject Head, 'Mr Jones,' and the school counsellor/LO teacher, 'Ms Dibakoane,') and solicited narratives from the learners.

Findings

We were interested in this study, first, in the ways in which issues of sexuality taught in the formal LO classroom are taken up, if at all, in student (micro) cultures and, secondly, the implications that the practices and forms of subject formation taking place in these micro cultures might have for approaches to the teaching of sexuality education. Our finding is that a sharp disjuncture seems to exist between the assumptions that inform formal classroom sexuality education and the priorities and concerns that animate the informal student cultures that exist at the school. We

suggest that a better understanding of the latter could usefully be seen as a resource to enrich and make more meaningful the idea of a 'learner-centred' approach to sexuality education. We argue against treating learners as a homogenous bloc, even in the context of a 'single sex' school, which is in reality a site in which a variety of femininities co-exist, and are reproduced, contested and struggled over.

We begin by describing the official school culture which aims at producing particular learner identities that are in line with the school's dominant understanding of its own identity. The data suggest that, for all its good intentions, this content is not perceived as directly relevant to learners' most intimate struggles and concerns about sexuality. We go on to describe three exemplars of student micro cultures to which we were able to gain access in the course of our fieldwork. The formal sexuality education curriculum is taken up in these informal cultures in a variety of different ways, including varying levels of refusal, resistance, accommodation and acceptance.

The official school culture

The official 'culture' of a school has to do with what is promoted and also prohibited by the school. The ideal Green Girl is, as the current headmaster put it, 'a multifaceted young woman who is willing to go out and conquer the world' (Interview, Mr Jones). One of the learners, Linda, echoed his description:

.....if you are clever ... it is like okay, you are one point for GG [Green Girls], because the school focuses more on academics. I think the most perfect girl is like the all-rounder; the one who plays a competitive sport like hockey and then netball and then they are also very clever; they are in the top 10 and they also involved in school events, like with service and stuff like helping people and all of that. So if you like have all those different qualities then you are like perfect basically for GG (Interview, Linda).

'Excellence' is central to the formal institutional culture of GGH and to how the school functions. Learners are hailed to conform to this culture, while staff is tasked with the surveillance of excellence, in part through monitoring and supervising activities and in part through the public acknowledgement of learners who do excel and therefore embody the official school culture's expectations. Conformity to these expectations is rewarded while deviation from them is sanctioned. Therefore, while it is possible to eschew the dominant school culture's expectations and normative constructions of idealised femininity, there are social costs associated with doing so.

A second dominant strand in the official culture of the school has to do with tolerance for diversity in the context of democratic citizenship which is influenced by pre-eminent discourses, circulating in the wider culture, concerning gender equality, democratic rights, human rights and the recognition of sexual diversity. The official school culture thus positions its learners not only as subjects of the new constitutional democracy, striving for personal success, but also as being in the process of becoming sexually responsible citizens who are astute, aware, enlightened and who evince respect for sexual minorities.

In this context, the approach which the school takes to sexuality is characterised by a determined commitment to being seen to be open-minded and forward thinking. This commitment is nowhere more evident than in the approach which the school has chosen to take to the LO sexuality curriculum. Current thinking among the school's leadership is that traditional approaches to sexuality education are counterproductive, failing to achieve valued aims which include keeping 'safe' through making 'good' decisions (Interview, Mr Walker). There is an awareness that some teachers experience discomfort when teaching the subject – which is also viewed as unproductive (Interview, Mr Walker). There is an understanding that traditional norms which view learners as children in need of protection and sex as a potential contaminant of youthful innocence make it difficult for the teacher/adult to speak to young people about sex. The school has tried actively to move away from ways of thinking that construct young people, and in particular girls, as passive, sexually innocent and in need of protection, and to replace this way of thinking with content that is 'relevant to the girls' (Interview, Mr Walker). The curriculum requirement for teachers to address matters of sex and gender in a full and frank manner is thus taken seriously by LO teachers at the school.

However, what is 'relevant' to learners is often informed by assumptions concerning youth culture which tend to homogenise learners instead of by pedagogical practices taking the learners themselves, and the particularity and diversity of their lifeworlds, as a starting point. As Luyolo describes, LO, even in its more enlightened form, is an imposed solution to what adults believe learners' problems to be:

Life Orientation is nothing to me, first of all the subject tries to 'know' your situation and gives you 'solutions' that for me are really unrealistic. Life Orientation to me is just an easy 'A', just a bore of a subject and waste of time (Luyolo's Narrative, May 2012).

Even when the experience of LO is reportedly positive, it is clear that the underlying goal of the curriculum is to foster the particular values that are central to the official school culture rather than necessarily interacting with the lived experiences of the learners themselves. Ziyanda, for example, reports that LO has taught her:

... the importance of individualism and like just being yourself with that open mind ... and how you can succeed more on your school career or if you like grounded and know who you are (Focus Group 2).

Liyanda aptly summed up the sense that the learners have of the distance between their lives and what they have come to expect of the formal curriculum:

Ms Andisiwe I am sure we are going to watch one of those American movies that say 'do not do drugs' (Field notes July 16, 2012).

The content is experienced as repetitive and out of touch with what learners really need to know, as the focus group participants explained:

Ziyanda: I think, the thing is in Grade 8 all the things were new to us, they were exciting to us and as years went by, it's been continuing and it's the same and that's why we are losing interest.

Sibu: We know everything! And it's like we don't see the point that

Everyone: Ja ja ja ja!

Sibu: Some of things that are going on now in our LO class, like ... we don't need that in our lives but like hey we have to go to it! It's kinda boring you know! Yes like we are too OVER this! (Focus Group 2)

In contrast, talk about sex in friendship groups is experienced as important and interesting, as Linda describes:

It's totally different! It's totally different! When we talk about it, oh! This is the time we make it juicy! ... they really really spice it up. They talk about the personal side and it makes you want to listen! You just sitting and listening to what they are saying and then you hear and you like 'Oh my gosh!' when you talking to your friends it's very more chilled and there is nothing you can't ask. You ask everything you want to ask and you are not scared and you don't hesitate to like to ask when you with your friends. And then it's like different when you with your teacher or parents cos then it's like 'this is not appropriate right now' and so then you like 'I'm not gonna ask that at all'. So ja! So with friends it's more relaxed! (Focus Group 2)

Anele commented:

So I think like an LO syllabus should be different depending on the environment that you are in ... because we are all surrounded by different people. And some sex schools will not have the same challenge, like the people won't face the same challenges as the co-ed schools. Like co-ed schools face maybe crime and drugs and teenage pregnancy, whereas we face homosexuality It is not about the LO syllabus exactly but then it is the challenges that, like different schools face at different times. And a child from Seymour Girls won't have the same challenges as a child from GG, because maybe of the financial position (Interview, Anele).

We now turn to a closer examination of three exemplars of these informal communities of practice in which learners are immersed, and which more fully reflect the diversity of their life experiences.

Hostel Bratz

Okay, I am a hostel girl and ... we are dedicated students, yes we are ... (Viwe's Narrative, June 2012).

The majority of the boarders at the school come from the Eastern Cape Province, which is one of the poorest in the country. The remainder are from other parts of South Africa with a small fraction originating from abroad. Feminine sexual identity construction at the school occurs in the context of a class mobility project that is perhaps the pre-eminent 'story' of the school. Formerly a whites-only school, now 80 per cent of the learners are black, isiXhosa speakers, 10 per cent are coloured, nine per cent are white, and the remaining one per cent are from countries such

as Pakistan, China and India. Almost the entirety (95 per cent) of the boarders are black African girls whose families have been typically denied the privileges and opportunities for class mobility that the school represents. In this overall context of class aspiration, regardless of their actual family background, the 'hostel girls' are seen as a comparatively privileged upper stratum in the school who style themselves as academic achievers epitomising both the excellent all-rounder and the democratic rational individual rights-bearing citizen prized in the official school culture.

A variety of authors have discussed the preoccupation with academic success in the production of middle-class femininities (see for example Reay, 2001; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2000). As this work shows, girls who are in pursuit of confirming, establishing or maintaining middle-classness are under enormous constant pressure to display their class attributes. The hostel girl as a middle-class girl is a cultural construction that takes place at school rather than being a simple reflection of family economic circumstances. In the hothouse environment of the hostel it is necessary to work to maintain this veneer of middle-classness '24/7':

What makes us different is the fact that we are more 'posh' so to say. We aren't as 'common' as the day girls. We are more behaved and well kind of have more money ... There are really no traditions except for making a noise. [But] we are people of double standards ... The reason of us being 'posh' is cos we live together so we have to put on these acts 24/7 ... (BBM chat 06/06/2013).

In the context of GGH, the hostel girls enact their aspirations to middle-class femininity in part through superior academic achievement, which confirms their belonging not only in the school, but also to the privileged strata of society, and in part through consumption of a particular form of urban, urbane, sexually liberated femininity – a performance for which the day scholars provide the audience which serves, in turn, to underline their exclusion from this particular community of practice.

We all are a majority of girls from the Mthatha area – we sort of all want to impress everyone. It's constant competition ... So we tend to keep our lies going, faking people and trying to fit in ... As day girls they know the situations since they are from here they can sort of let themselves go (BBM chat 06/06/2013).

The 'hostel girl' identity is meant to exude an air of worldly sophistication in contrast to the small town, ostensibly less affluent, day girls, as Viwe explains:

... other girls whom they are not cool, they talk about the typical teenage topic, boys, clothes, lame stuff, other girls' clothes and more boys. Well, the topics are not so specific like that I mean we talk about politics, the future, the past and evolution and a lot more (Viwe's Narrative, 2012).

One of the ways in which the hostel girls confirm their distinctive, aspirant, urban black middle-class femininity is through their consumption of all things 'Bratz'. Bratz is a highly successful international brand which includes dolls, clothing, accessories and a wide variety of other merchandise, even a line of mystery novels. In sharp contrast to the quintessential whiteness of Barbie, Bratz dolls are much more ethnically eclectic making them more suitable conveyors of aspiration for the black

GGH hostel girls to consume. 'Yasmin,' for example, has brown skin, braided hair and full lips (Guerrero, 2009: 188); 'Sasha' is African American, while 'Jade' is Asian American. Guerrero (2009: 188) describes Bratz dolls as embodying a 'hip alterity' to Barbie, which accounts for their successful incursion into the fashion doll market – now controlling as much as 40 per cent of that market (Talbot, 2006). The key to the dolls' identity lies in their frivolous insistence on consumption and 'having fun'. Like the hostel girls, and unlike Barbie, the Bratz dolls have no domestic encumbrances – theirs is a world of fashion, dancing, sushi bars and motorcycles. Above all, it is a world of wealth where the means to consume pleasure is the ultimate class marker – a lifestyle that McAllister (2007: 251) has referred to as 'spectacular consumption': the 'spectacular display of appearance as "being" not just "having"'. Much more than a toy, the dolls act as models for the look that their fans adopt through the purchase of Bratz-branded clothing, accessories and electronics – not for their dolls, but for themselves as they seek to emulate the Bratz lifestyle transposed onto their own person rather than merely lived vicariously through play with a doll.

The hostel girls display their consumption of the Bratz lifestyle in their long weaves and braids, clothing and accessories such as pencil cases and school bags. Like the dolls upon which they model themselves, they also insert themselves into an online media world by photographing one another and posting their pictures on Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry instant messaging and WhatsApp. In these pictures the girls depict themselves wearing different fashion styles and dressing up in the way that one might previously have dressed a doll in play, suggesting fluidity between the world of the doll and the world of the fan. For McAllister (2007: 255), there is an element here not just of commodity fetishism but commodity feminism, as shopping in groups and elaborate forms of feminine display are largely restricted to a girls-only universe in which the participants are literally 'doing it for themselves': performing their youthful beauty and desirability for one another.

In the formal setting of the sexuality education classroom these classed (and raced) underpinnings of prevailing beauty norms are never explicitly discussed or used as a reference point. The liberal individualism of the school's enlightened democratic citizenship model in some ways precludes this possibility. The equal, individual, rights-bearing subject that lies at the centre of this discourse allows little room for the development of a critical awareness of the ways in which race and class are structuring experience, including structuring the limits and possibilities of feminine empowerment through consumption. In the absence of this critical awareness, the markers of wealth are easily conflated with the markers of worth.

Green Fever Girls

For some Green learners the closeness of girls-only dormitories, friendships and sexual display shades into homosexual practice. The term 'green fever' is used by the participants to describe someone who is a lesbian – but only at the school. In the constructions which they employ, these girls are described as not born with the

'fever'; they get the fever when they arrive at GGH. It is not uncommon for girls in their final year at the primary school to be asked by Green Girls and to ask one another, 'Are you going to be a lesbian?' [when you go to high school] (Interview, Lukhona). As the term 'fever' suggests, lesbianism at the school is assumed to be an experimental phase rather than a permanent identity. Homosexual practice is constructed as a curable virus that does not completely displace the assumed 'normal' state of heterosexuality. For those who enter the Green Fever community of practice, adopting a lesbian identity is both mutable and temporary, depending on both time and context rather than being a permanent sexual identity. After matriculating from high school green fever is expected to subside and the individual is expected to return, at some future point, to being 'fine again' – that is to say, to return to the normality of heterosexual practice. As one participant put it:

Here at Green Girls we are like whatever, it's just a stage, next year she will date a man and she will be fine you know! So that's how we view it, well most of us sometimes (Interview, Mbali).

Lesbianism in the form of 'green fever' is thus normalised at Green Girls. As Akhona put it, 'it isn't something that people get surprised about' (Interview, Akhona). Drawing on the official school culture's dominant discourses of rights, choice and tolerance for diversity, the girls construct lesbianism as a 'choice' that is available to them in a milieu in which choice is emphasised as one of the entitlements that comes with being a citizen in a democracy. Engaging in lesbian practice is understood as a stage that involves decision making – another important precept of the official school culture, and is therefore seen as more appropriate in the senior grades.

You know except in Grade 8 they are like wow okay she is still new, she is so young; you know how did she come about making such a decision and stuff (Interview, Busi).

Here seniority is associated with the maturity to engage in sexual decision making while being a junior in the school is associated with innocence and diminished capacity for sexual decision making, thus making the choice to get the 'fever' less legitimate in younger girls. Some of the girls see green fever as specific not just to a particular age group, but also to the ('single sex') environment in which the girls find themselves (Interview, Tina), once again affirming the construction of heterosexuality as the default position, while lesbianism is a kind of fall-back sexual choice when boys are unavailable. The expectation as a result is that when green fever girls matriculate from the school and find themselves in environments in which men are present, they will revert to 'natural relationships' with men.

As Siviwe astutely points out, though, lesbian girls at the school do not disrupt the normative gender order and its associated binaries, but are instead involved with maintaining existing gender hierarchies through the performance of masculinised identities that can be interpreted as confirming rather than disrupting heteronormativity.

To be honest I feel there is probably only three out of the whole school who are actually lesbians [exclusively and genuinely desire women]. I say this because you find out that these girls are only lesbians here at school but when they are out and about in the real world they are suddenly straight. When they are here at school, they act lesbian and act manly. I personally don't think in a lesbian relationship there should be a manly girl and a girly girl – that is defeating the whole being lesbian thing, because you are technically showing that in a relationship there should be a man and a woman. If they truly believed otherwise, then both the women would not change their appearance into a more masculine one (Siviwe's Narrative, May 30, 2012).

Heterosexuality is confirmed as the 'normal' sexual identity and green fever is a sickness that temporarily acts as a stand-in for more socially accepted forms of sexual desire rather than being a permanent or sought-after long-term identity. However, for all its ubiquity in the everyday experience of learners at the school, 'green fever' is never discussed in the LO classroom or acknowledged or interacted with as a possible resource for the opening up and deepening of conversations about sexual diversity, sexual identity and tolerance. Instead, an invisible partition exists between the way in which homosexuality is treated in the official LO classroom (as something that 'other people' might do and which 'we' must be tolerant of) and the informal discourses and practices that circulate in student micro cultures.

Day girls

For the hostel 'bratz,' passing as more middle class than they really are involves constant labour. But even for the most aspirant day girls, as their home lives are more transparently visible at school, 'faking it' is less of a viable option. Most day scholars come from working-class backgrounds and the majority of them come from the nearby black townships. The visibility and proximity of their home circumstances makes it much more difficult for day girls to be able to pass as middle class than the hostel girls unless their background is genuinely and securely middle class. Their economic realities are highly visible, for example, in the clothing they wear on school casual days, the content of their lunch boxes, their access to money and other resources, the location of their homes and the appearance of their parents who are inevitably seen at the school from time to time.

Unlike the hostel girls whose school lives are spent predominantly in the company of other girls, the day girls are in daily contact with boys when they go home and at the weekends. Most display conventional heterosexual femininity. In sharp contrast to the official culture of the school, they share a common home and family experience in which it is completely taboo to talk to adults about sex and homosexuality is regarded as unthinkable. While many of these girls are (hetero) sexually active it would be inconceivable for this to be acknowledged by their families.

For most day girls their (very visible) economic circumstances make it impossible for them to consume anything approaching the appearance of the Bratz lifestyle emulated by the hostel girls. The day girls mostly separate into racialised groupings

with the black African group forming a close-knit alliance, spending most of their time together both in and outside of the classroom. Unlike the white girls who mostly make their way to and from school in private vehicles or on foot since they live in the (mostly white) surrounding suburbs, the black girls must all walk together to the taxi rank to go to homes that are much further removed, both physically and culturally, from the privileged milieu of the school. At home in the township they are surrounded by learners from township schools with whom they feel they have less in common and so end up spending weekends together, thus cementing their connection to one another and their distance from the hostel girls, from white peers and from peers who attend township schools.

Black day girls experience themselves as under surveillance from multiple vantage points. Their attendance of a formerly white school in a predominantly white residential area marks them as highly privileged in comparison with everyone else in the communities in which they live and to which they must return each day. The daughters of working-class parents, who often struggle to make it possible for them to attend Green Girls, are under extreme pressure to make a success of their schooling. This injunction is inevitably closely tied up with tight policing of their sexuality which is viewed as a potential threat to their successful negotiation of entry into the world of middle-class financial and career success, as Tina describes:

It is always like, 'Tina do us proud,' you know. 'We pay all of this money just for you ... to get a good education and come out there. It is not about the boys, it is not about everyone else. It is about you at the end of the day you know. So remember whatever you do it is also going to affect you, it is just going to affect you. So it is all about you, you are there to study' (Interview, Tina).

Enormous hopes ride on the township child who makes it into a school environment like Green Girls – still perceived as a world apart by parents who grew up in a milieu in which these schools were reserved for the white minority and which represented impossible, unattainable privilege. Parents constantly emphasise the opportunity that the girls have to make a future for themselves and to come good on the sacrifices that are being made for them. For girls from this context to be revealed as sexually active is a disaster threatening to undo the precarious possibility of a future that is better than the lives of their parents, thus rendering them particularly susceptible to the idea that sex represents a very real threat to their chances of a life free of poverty, however, pleasurable it might feel.

At the same time as representing, in the milieu of their families and township communities, impossible privilege, at school they are a shunned class, looked down upon by the hostel bratz who are themselves determinedly fashioning themselves as a cut above the rest. They are a highly visible community both in the public spaces of the township and in the context of the school. They are the audience for whom the hostel bratz perform their fragile middle-classness. For these learners, who must return each day to a milieu in which they are both vulnerable and highly visible, the playful sexual display implied by conspicuous consumption of the Bratz lifestyle

represents a much riskier prospect. These girls' day-to-day experience is far removed also from what the overwhelmingly white teaching staff has ever experienced. They often commented on how little of their own lived experience they found echoed in the generic LO education lessons drawn from a social imaginary of rights and choices, of tolerance for sexual diversity and the celebration of individual achievement and self-expression, but in which abstinence remains the unwritten expectation.

And when they tell you about sex it's always in black and white and it's like this happens and this happens like you don't get to hear the emotional part of it which is why when most teenagers have sex go into it emotionally and that's when things, problems and implications and we don't get that from our parents or school and also like no one tells us anything if you have to be emotionally ready or not. Like no-one tells us anything ... We don't know (Focus Group 2).

The day girls' primary challenge is to manage the deep dissonances between these two worlds and, since that dissonance is seldom directly acknowledged or confronted, there are scant tools on offer that are meaningfully 'oriented' towards the realities of their lives and the forms of sexual decision making, choices and pressures that they face.

Conclusion

For some learners, Life Orientation, even the open-minded, tolerant version offered at this particular school, is irrelevant to their lives, because they feel it adopts an approach that informs them of their problems and provides solutions to their problems rather than soliciting their views on what those problems might be and inviting them to find solutions that make sense to them in the light of their own experiences and desires. In contrast to the diverse challenges, values and experiences that we encountered in the informal communities of practice observed at the school, the content of sexuality education assumes that learners are all the same and does not take into account their most intimate concerns. At present, the fact that the curriculum does not take the diverse raced, classed and sexual identities of learners as its starting point, means that it does not meet their needs and invites a variety of responses from the learners. Sleeping, laughing, 'zoning out' and protesting ignorance of sex can all be seen as forms of resistance to the formal curriculum.

This resistance, boredom and dissatisfaction is in sharp contrast to the many animated discussions about sexuality and gender witnessed in informal student sexual cultures in the course of observation at the research site. This points to the need to take the latter seriously in order for the formal curriculum to be able to succeed in its aim of being meaningful to learners. While learners seem to desire to know so many things and to be eager to participate in discussions that are relevant to their lives and experiences, they find in LO sexuality education repetition and little that challenges them to think in new ways or provides them with genuinely new insights. The content of the formal sexuality education curriculum is often ignorant of, or blind to, the detail of student sexual cultures. And even the enlightened form of

sexuality education practised in the school's interpretation of the curriculum does not take these lived realities as its starting point. Yet, it is these student sexual cultures that offer an entry point into understanding young peoples' sexuality – a starting point from which LO sexuality education can be approached in a more meaningful way. Rather than being restricted to the classroom, learning about sexuality takes place in unrecognised peripheral spaces, and as Wenger (1998: 11) notes, it is this unofficial learning that ought to be accessed and acknowledged in order to inform the educational systems that we design. The recognition of these informal dimensions of sexuality education can help us understand that what young people need from the curriculum is learning that speaks to the specificities of their experiences and challenges.

Alongside the dominant culture of the school, with its particular precepts and expectations, there exists a variety of student micro cultures and diverse communities of feminine practice. The particular groups which learners form part of both define their members and are defined by their members. As we have shown, however, membership in these communities of practice is not entirely a matter of individual 'choice' but is, rather, socially circumscribed. At the same time, participants in these communities of practice develop shared identities – shared assumptions and ways of being, shared interpretations of what they see and experience both at school and in wider social interactions. The values of the official school culture which the formal sexuality education curriculum seeks to transmit to learners are refracted through group membership. Some learners take part in more than one group, which lends further fluidity and complexity to their forms of identity construction – a complexity which is seldom acknowledged or referenced in the formal setting of the sexuality education classroom.

An approach which is attentive to such cultures gives us insight into how young people understand themselves as sexual subjects in a given local context and how they construct themselves as gendered subjects. In this article we have shown how the 'single sex' school is, in reality, a site for the production of multiple contested femininities. Moreover, school cultures are shown not to be isolated from home environments which are constantly interacting with how students construct their school identities. The recognition of student sexual cultures by the formal curriculum would be a starting point for the construction of a more relevant learner-centred sexuality education which realises that discourses of enlightened choice and rational individualism take little notice of the classed and raced realities that structure choice.

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