The price of innocence: teachers, gender, childhood sexuality, HIV and AIDS in early schooling

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Drawing from data collected during interviews with grade 2 teachers who work in a black working-class township school, this paper explores the meanings that teachers attach to HIV and AIDS education. It is argued that the relationship of many teachers to the subject of HIV and AIDS is inscribed within regulatory forces based on the notion of childhood sexual innocence which uphold and construct a particular version of childhood which is racialized, ‘classed’ and gendered. Despite the urgency of addressing young children’s right to HIV and AIDS education, teaching discourses mobilize a notion of innocence which culminates in fear and anxiety around expressions of sexuality in early childhood. Throughout the paper shows that while teachers’ constructions of childhood are formidable, they are not irreversible since teachers point in contradictory ways to young children’s sexual agency. The significance of starting early with young children together with the calamitous effects of HIV and AIDS in South Africa indicate that we must begin confronting the HIV and AIDS pandemic and start to develop HIV and AIDS reduction and prevention programmes appropriate to the early years of schooling. The findings reported herein have implications for teachers’ work in the development of such programmes.

Introduction

The learner in the Foundation Phase [early years of formal schooling-grade 0–3] is exposed to communicable childhood diseases. Therefore the learner should have knowledge of these diseases, as well as of HIV and AIDS.

(Department of Education, 2002, p. 9)

Since the learner in the early years of formal schooling (Foundation Phase) should have knowledge of HIV and AIDS, this paper seeks to understand the significance that teachers in this phase of schooling attach to HIV and AIDS education. To prevent and reduce the risk of infection among young people is critical (UNFPA, *Faculty of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus, Private Bag X03, Ashwood 3605, South Africa. Email: Bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za

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The premise in South Africa is that education, even early childhood education (as the above quotation shows) is a ‘vaccine’ against AIDS (Kelly, 2000). This has led to a number of school-based investigations into the efficacy of education to help curb the spread of HIV and AIDS. Overwhelmingly, research on school-based investigations in South Africa focus on secondary schools. Here research on life skills and HIV and AIDS education indicates that many teachers are not sure of what to teach, and how to teach it (Pattman & Chege, 2003). HIV and AIDS interventions in schools appear to be missing the message, ignoring boys’ and girls’ different responses to knowledge about HIV and AIDS and be blind to the construction of gendered and sexual identities (Morrell et al., 2001). Teachers and learners find it difficult to communicate about sexuality and gender and this limits the possibilities of addressing important issues relevant to HIV and AIDS. Little research attention has been paid to HIV and AIDS education in the early years of schooling; this is perhaps so because sexual activity is not considered appropriate to young children.

While the HIV and AIDS epidemic has become an emergency and an extraordinary kind of crisis (UNAIDS, 2004) there is a growing realization that HIV and AIDS can be confronted in early childhood where children can learn and integrate appropriate risk avoidance behaviours (Bhana et al., 2006). In early schooling sectors this requires that teachers work with young children to instil, for example, habits and behaviours appropriate to their continued health and well-being in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. As this paper will show, teaching discourses involve contradictory ways of relating to young children’s right to knowledge about HIV and AIDS in their upholding of the notion of the innocent child and in their reproduction of gender inequalities. Children are assumed to be immune to (if not victims of) sexual knowledge and representation. Appeals to protect innocent children, especially their sexual innocence, wield a great deal of emotional power (Irvine, 2002). HIV and AIDS education triggers feelings of fear and disgust amongst teachers and the emotions are deployed ambivalently, as will be shown in this paper, to reproduce the innocent child.

The research study explores the impact of HIV and AIDS on the ways in which gender and sexuality are articulated against the backdrop of race and class-specific contexts. The data and analysis derived in this paper are drawn specifically from interviews collected from three grade two teachers in a black working-class township school.

The AIDS pandemic has made significant demands on teachers, particularly in township schools. It has been argued elsewhere that schools that serve most disadvantaged communities—schools with a majority of black, working class learners—are confronting massive social issues associated with HIV and AIDS, violence and poverty.

Over five million people in South Africa are infected with HIV, mainly black and female (UNAIDS, 2004). It is especially true that women and girls are highly vulnerable to infection since their relationships may be controlled by violence, cultural expectations or economic dependence. In KwaZulu-Natal (where this study is located) the prevalence rate is in excess of the critical threshold of 20% (Gow & Desmond, 2002). The teachers in this study work at KwaDabeka Primary School (not its real name) where poverty, gender and sexual violence, HIV and AIDS and fragile family structures are common.
Teachers, gender, childhood sexuality, HIV and AIDS in early schooling

HIV and AIDS is a pressing risk for boys and girls in South Africa but it is not their only sexuality-related threat. They are also in danger from the traditional normative conventions in early childhood education that authorize the suppression of their sexuality. Despite the urgency of addressing HIV and AIDS and young children’s right to HIV and AIDS education, I argue that the discourse of childhood innocence works to divorce HIV and AIDS from sexuality. Teachers, as this paper will show, draw contradictorily on affective conventions of fear and anxiety in which sex is taboo and sexuality too dangerous to be countenanced in early childhood (Tobin, 1997). The contradiction is the desire to uphold sexual innocence but also a recognition that young children are sexual agents otherwise why bother about the fear of sexuality. It must be noted, too, that teachers can be easily stigmatized by their perceived associations with sex, should they be known to talk about sex, and such associations in relation to young children can be seen to be highly suspect by parents and the wider community. In South Africa the seriousness of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the efforts to contain and prevent its spread has opened up the possibility of dealing with sexuality in early childhood and including it within the life skills curriculum in early childhood but teachers’ responses also tap into what Kincaid (1994) calls ‘hard-core righteous prurience’ about sexuality and children. Childhood sexuality functions to produces shame, contempt and disgust by teachers (and adults) and this is a strategic advantage held by teachers to prevent the possibility of linking HIV and AIDS to sex and sexuality and constraining efforts to teach more comprehensively about HIV and AIDS and prevention in the primary curriculum.

Instead of being able to respond to, and participate in, HIV and AIDS prevention programmes, sex and sexuality are excluded based on adult monopolistic narratives of childhood innocence. Heinze (2000) suggests that adults often draw upon the discourse of childhood innocence to uphold particular images of childhood, producing and protecting the ideal child as innocent, asexual and degendered. In this study, too teachers’ responses to HIV and AIDS education reproduces gender inequalities by constructing and legitimating boys as bad and as sexual predators and girls as needing protection from dangerous forms of sexuality.

A growing number of studies on the sexual behaviour of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2004) indicate that the age of sexual debut may be dropping. The most socially and economically disadvantaged young children appear to be especially at risk. In South Africa some young children may be beginning sexual activity (by forced, tricked into this or willingly) at very young ages (Jewkes et al., 2002; Richter et al., 2004). There is serious concern about rape and sexual violence against young girls even aged nine months (Richter et al., 2004). UNAIDS (2004) states that working with young children to change behaviour patterns from the start is easier than changing risky behaviours that are more entrenched. HIV and AIDS education needs to begin with the youngest children as the revised national curriculum in South Africa indicates and teachers need to make the subject a more comfortable one for discussion (Silin, 1995). With the dearth of detailed work on young children and HIV and AIDS in South Africa, this article encourages a closer
examination of the teaching discourses that militate against including sex and sexuality in HIV and AIDS education.

The study: researching and theorizing constructions of childhood sexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS

The data presented in this paper are derived from a research project which examined how teachers and young children in grade two aged between eight and nine, construct knowledge of HIV and AIDS and the ways in which gender and sexuality are imbricated within this process. The focus in this paper is on the teachers alone. The fieldwork for this paper was conducted during from 2003 to 2005 in a primary school. Unstructured group interviews were the main method used to explore teachers’ constructions of HIV and AIDS education and its links to childhood because this method maximized the teachers’ ability to talk about sexuality and HIV and AIDS. I did not deliberately set out to study teachers in the context of HIV and AIDS education. When I first embarked on this ethnographic study, the chief focus was on young children’s constructions of gender and sexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS (Bhana & Epstein, 2006; Bhana et al., 2006). However, as I worked with young children I found myself talking to teachers and asking them questions about HIV and AIDS in very informal ways. Their responses suggested that young children were ‘not yet ready’ for sexual knowledge. Recent research has suggested that practicing teachers asked to teach about HIV and AIDS may experience considerable embarrassment and anxieties about sexuality (Pattman & Chege, 2003). In the context of early childhood, where sexuality is unequivocally taboo, teachers may be drawing on familiar and taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of a teacher in early childhood. In other words, what teachers say about sexual innocence and young children is not random or spontaneous but the articulation of childhood innocence is manifest in the social and political context of early childhood in which the status of young children as sexually innocent is often upheld (MacNaughton, 2000). Childhood innocence is profoundly gendered (Jackson, 1999). It is girls who are most often sexualized and who are required to retain their innocence. These are powerful discursive cues and ones to which teachers are extremely responsive.

Despite this notion of innocence, playful sexuality amongst very young children has received attention in the South African literature. Sex play amongst young children is often discarded as an example of childishness and frivolous play. Kelly and Parker (2000) report on how black South African children, aged from seven years, in deep rural areas engage in undize (hide and seek) which involves sexual play but these children learn not to mention, or even hint at, sexual issues in the presence of adults because of the constraints of hlonipha (respect behaviour). Young children play at sex and teachers know this, as will be shown in this study.

The HIV and AIDS and sexual emergency in South Africa has resulted in massive sexual representation in the media. Young children are exposed to these messages. Teachers in this study acknowledge this. Research on young children’s response to sexual representation shows that they have considerable knowledge about personal
and sexual issues. Yet despite all of this, teachers privilege knowledge about AIDS over knowledge about sex which, I argue, is damaging to the education of young boys and girls. While I was beginning to witness the daily transgressions of sexual innocence by young children (through kiss chase games and through everyday conversations about sex), I began understanding better the regulatory force of a belief in childhood innocence evident in the teachers’ talk and actions.

As Foucault writes if children had no sex, adults (teachers) had ‘nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 4). The presumption of innocence means immunity from sexual knowledge and this imbues the adult with knowledge and power in the need for children to be protected from the supposedly pernicious influences of the adult sexual world.

Many writers such as Renolds (2005) in the new sociology of childhood have criticized assumptions of childhood innocence on the grounds that young children are seen as social (gendered and sexualized actors) shaping as well as being shaped by their circumstances. In the South African context a growing body of research in this area has begun to examine young children as active sexual and gendered agents (Bhana & Epstein, 2007). In this study childhood sexuality is understood as more than simply sex. Following Weeks (1986), sexuality is seen to be a range of social practices, techniques and habits that govern our identity. The strategy to erode the early childhood curriculum of sex and HIV and AIDS work to uphold an image of childhood. Childhood sexuality can only be understood as part of the social and political context. In South Africa the high rates of HIV and AIDS prevalence cannot be understood without its gendered, raced and classed context. Poverty, geographical location, lack of housing, public amenities and other infrastructural supports contribute to high infection rates. Prevalence rates in informal township settings (the setting for teachers in this study) where the poorest sections of the urban community are located are higher among Africans—who are more likely to be amongst the poorest members of society—than amongst other racial groups. Yet the recourse to innocence is thus contradictory since children live in contexts where they see sex (Richter et al., 2004) and experience the effects of HIV and AIDS.

KwaDabeka Primary School is situated in and serves an informal settlement. Homes are generally insubstantial structures, often in the form of tin shacks, poverty is endemic, family structures are weak, with many single parent (usually female) headed families and a significant number of families in which children themselves head the households. While all children are affected by HIV and AIDS some children are more affected than others. In resource constrained situations like KwaDabeka the impact of HIV and AIDS is more severe with greater number of orphans, fewer resources for care and development and high levels of emotional consequences due to bereavement (Gow & Desmond, 2002). It is within this context that teachers’ views on HIV and AIDS education are being constructed.

The three teachers Thusi, Shange and Sishi are all black females who have several years of experience in the Foundation Phase of schooling. The preponderance of female teachers in the early childhood sector is a feature of South African and Western schooling. Shange is the head of department in the Foundation Phase, has
22 years of service and has been at KwaDabeka Primary School for the past eight years. Thusi has sixteen years of service and has been at the school for eleven years. Sishi has 16 years of experience, all of which have been served at the school.

The assumption in this study like that of Epstein and Johnson (1998), is that it is ridiculous to assume that children do not draw conclusions from the visible and invisible sexuality of adults and children around them. Epstein and Johnson add that sexual innocence is what adults wish upon children. In fact, along with Watney (1991) we should not be debating whether or not children are sexual beings but we should be concerning ourselves with the ways in which adults respond to childhood sexuality. The next section of the paper concerns itself with this matter by focusing on the ways in which teachers recognize, regulate and ultimately construct a version of childhood sexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS.

AIDS, not sex

Silin (1995) argues that too much of the contemporary early childhood curriculum brings a deadly silence to the being of childhood and not enough of it speaks to things that really matter to children’s lives. HIV and AIDS matters in early childhood and so does sex. When teachers in this study were asked about the importance of sex in HIV and AIDS education they constructed themselves in ambivalent ways. The ambivalence is evident in the ways respect to children is meant to by denying and/or limiting reference to sex but at the same time use the discourse of innocence to construct and perpetuate their authority and power over children:

The culture is respect, respect. If you respect children you can’t talk to children about sex. I’m not deep about sex. We can talk about AIDS, not sex. I say you can get infected and you mustn’t sleep with somebody but no further detail.

(Thusi)

The distinct marker between adult teacher and child is respect and this is achieved and guaranteed by making sex off limits. Sexual silence signals respect. The focus on AIDS, not sex, reflects the recourse to the notion of childhood innocence. This recourse does not happen in automatic ways. Thusi says ‘you mustn’t sleep with somebody’ thus hinting at sex, but she can’t or won’t say the word ‘sex’. By invoking respect for children she identifies herself and orientates herself in particular ways in relation to children which privilege her role as their protector against dangerous sexual knowledge:

No I won’t be comfortable to talk about sex; I will be comfortable to talk about AIDS. I’ll speak freely without boundaries without recognizing their age I will talk freely. This disease is around and there is nothing to hide but when you speak about sex … ai, it will give me trouble. Once I spoke about sex, I never get straight. I gave them fear. I said that ‘if you do this, you’re going to get AIDS. You’re going to get infected with AIDS. Have you seen people with AIDS?’ They’ve got diarrhoea, maggots to make them fear. That’s why I say I cannot teach sex because I know what I’m going to say to them.

(Sishi)
Talk about HIV and AIDS and sex provokes silence, denial and shame. Sex in the context of HIV and AIDS is being produced as a negative domain of danger and fear. Sishi reinforces the AIDS not sex discourse—in disassociating HIV from sex she articulates her own anxieties (‘trouble’) in relation to sex and young children. When she spoke of HIV and AIDS, on the other hand, she constructed herself as free and as without fear and anxiety, ‘This disease is around and there is nothing to hide’.

Research on secondary teachers and HIV and AIDS education points out that the biomedical model—or the information-based approach—is based on teachers presenting facts (Campbell, 2003). This factual approach has been seen to be unsuccessful because children’s lives and realities are of peripheral concern. In contrast to the information-based approach, Sishi resorts to imparting misinformation, thus inducing fear and disgust by using inflammatory images (maggots) to evoke powerlessness amongst young children and she thus hides sexuality behind fear and danger. Sishi invokes images of evil, contamination and dirt which are seen to be on the markers of the diseased HIV and AIDS body (diarrhoea and maggots). Sishi’s comments thus work to secure a distancing from the disease through psychologically manipulative mechanisms, including fear. Sex is constructed as dangerous, something to be feared, taboo and forbidden, and punishable by disease: ‘if you do this, you’re going to get AIDS’. The result of sex is AIDS, diarrhoea, maggots and death. This fosters ominous fantasies and these fantasies are a marker of both individual and social vulnerability. There is the wilful dissemination of misinformation about the disease in order to maintain distance from the guilty and thus protect the innocent child from corruption (Mayall, 2002). The result is thus not only to control or eliminate sexual discussion but also to construct sex as evil/bad and that which necessarily produces HIV and AIDS. Sishi cannot talk about sex as pleasure because this equation cannot be reconciled with the rhetoric and promotion of childhood innocence. She speaks of sex but in terms of terrible consequences. Childhood sexuality is thus regulated and policed through a system of opposition: sex is constructed as danger/germs/death and innocence as purity and freedom from these horrors. Yet there are implicit assumptions here that children are indeed sexual beings, otherwise why bother with AIDS education which is framed around warnings about the dangers of having sex? And of course Sishi is clear when she talks about young children having sex though she constructs these as the ‘naughty’ ones, thus making it clear that children do know about sex. The construction of the naughty/innocent opposition serves to uphold innocence as normal and naughtiness (with sexual knowledge) as pathological. This is discussed in the next part of the paper.

Naughty/innocent children

HIV and AIDS is embedded within a system of representation that is constituted by ideologically defined dichotomies such as good/bad. Fuss (1989) says this best in her observation that ‘identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other’ (103). The naughty/innocent dichotomy is illustrative of the exclusion of the other-naughty who has sexual knowledge:
There are naughty ones in the class. They talked about sex play. Sex is ‘hide and seek’. They play ‘hide and seek’. They say ‘Blekimapatile, where are you?’ This play is play sex. When they play there are some naughty ones then they will do sex … 6, 7 even 5 year olds even in this school. There was another teacher here and she had a child in the preschool then she said ‘mummy I saw somebody doing sex at school’. They see this from their parents. My daughter I never wanted her to mix. When she was young I knew there is something bad you cannot take away from the kids so I sent her to Thomas Moore [private school in Kloof]. I knew that kids experience this game. I knew that children reported sex to me.

(Sishi)

Sexual innocence is not the domain of young children but that which is wished upon them by teachers. The above extract clearly indicates that childhood innocence is a myth: children play sex and have even reported sexual activity to Sishi.

Advocating AIDS education but not sex education was an important means through which teachers identified and defined themselves and through which a version (or illusion) of the innocent child was sustained. Yet sex play and sexual activity in the school enters the teacher’s conversation and this triggers tension and anxiety about the fact of children’s sexual curiosity. Children’s sexual agency while recognized (and repressed) is regulated under the category ‘naughty’ while other children (and her own child, too,) are constructed as innocent. Sishi decries naughty children — those with sexual knowledge — but sees this as endemic to the township school. Not only does the dichotomy work to position innocent and naughty children but it works, too, to position good and bad schools. Her knowledge of sexual activity amongst young children and her desire to distance herself from this meant that she uprooted her child from the township school to send her to Thomas More—a private, elite and predominantly white school in Kloof. Sexuality becomes a negative domain of danger and immorality in the township school regulated through race and class constructs. Her daughter becomes the representation of the very state of purity from which she must never be removed and which must be protected so she is sent to a private school. Working class black children with sexual knowledge are seen to be threats to childhood innocence. KwaDabeka Primary School and Thomas More become disreputable and respectable, respectively, and naughty children are constructed as unhealthy and infectious. This reinforces the regulatory system controlling childhood through the mechanism of the notion of innocence. Implicit in this conversation is disgust and contempt for the naughty child. These affective conventions of sexuality, which guide thinking about young children, reinforce sexual shame and attempt to preserve innocence. By invoking moralistic injunctions, Sishi has presented her innocent child in contrast to those who engage in sex play and sexual activities. Not only are these other children the bad versions of childhood but she is someone who is morally and socially superior to the naughty children in her classroom. By extension Sishi presents herself, as the child’s parent, as occupying a similar position:

It’s because they are young. Even their parents don’t talk about sex. Young, very young. They should be told but the parents should help because some parents say that sex should not be taught to our kids. They never got contact with different kids. I have now sixteen years of experience. I know kids. No one can tell me about kids. If you talk about sex you
have to be aware of their age. I’ve heard from our department that there should be levels of development but our kids even 9 years know something above your age. If you’re 25 years old, they know more than you but now the department restricts you but now it cannot work in that way. They already know. Parents don’t care. Kids are neglected by their parents. Some of the kids enjoy sex. There was a little girl in my class now she’s in grade 5. She has been involved since grade one. Can you imagine? I heard the story from other kids and from the granny. This one was abused by the uncle and this uncle was sent to jail and then I said to her ‘why didn’t you tell me?’ and she said ‘I was afraid, I was afraid’

(Sishi)

Defending sex education and talk about the subject in early schooling can be extremely dangerous especially in the context where parents and the department of education do not provide support for HIV and AIDS education in schools and sex education. Sishi makes clear the regulatory forces both from the department which guides teacher’s work, and from the parents. Significantly, there are strong resonances in this conversation of theories that relate early sexual experience to cultural deprivation. Children who engage in sex are seen as coming from bad homes with bad parents who don’t care and are who are irresponsible. ‘Some of the children enjoy sex’ is articulated against assumed sexual innocence by drawing upon an emotional performance associated with disgust and contempt in relation to naughty children. Sishi’s comment on children who enjoy sex serves to stigmatize and exclude them because of their non-conformity to the ideal. Sexually precocious children are seen to be naughty and this is problematic. Recognizing that children ‘already know’ is a powerful contradiction, in some ways, to the force of assumed innocence. Childhood sexuality is thus being thought about in conflicting and contradictory ways: children do not know and they already know. These contradictions occur within the set of emotional responses which guides conventions about appropriate forms of childhood. For example, childhood sex is linked in Sishi’s mind to the abuse of children and to bad parenting. Her recounting the response: ‘I was afraid, I was afraid’ is a powerful emotional response to the innocence of young children—girls in particular—and their need for protection and it works, too, to induce panic about children’s sexuality. Very often in South Africa, the only discussion of children and sexuality takes place in the context of child abuse. Because of the high rates of child sexual abuse there is certainly a need to address this issue in South Africa (Richter et al., 2004) but this must be done without demonizing childhood sexuality (as this teacher is doing) and associating it necessarily with abuse. Sishi laments the grade 5 child’s loss of innocence in her trying to uphold the romanticized version of sexual innocence. Actually it is precisely because childhood sexuality is so taboo a subject that children are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse.

**Polarizing boys and girls in HIV and AIDS education**

Childhood innocence is deeply gendered with girls’ innocence being eroticized (Walkerdine, 1999). In South Africa, young virgin girls have been raped given the myth that having sex with a virgin will cure the HIV and AIDS disease. It is the eroticization of little girls that provokes adult concern for their protection and the price of their
innocence is too high. The teachers in the study placed a great deal of significance on gender with girls’ innocence being an important concern in HIV and AIDS education:

Sometimes they get raped. They have to run away from adults because they can rape them especially the girls. They can get AIDS and we have to tell them about AIDS. I tell them that AIDS is a disease that you get from having sex with others.

(Thusi)

In her statement, young girls are made vulnerable, are victimized and are constructed as defenceless. Adult men are homogenized and described as predatory. Masculine sexuality becomes emblematic of male power and is expressed through sexual violation. While rape is part of the harsh reality of present day South Africa where many girls continue to be vulnerable, the effect of seeing girls as quintessentially defenceless victims is to construct them necessarily as existing without power or agency. Moreover, knowledge about sex and HIV and AIDS is premised on the dangerous force of sexuality. Young girls are thus homogenized as being the innocent victims of adult men who have AIDS rather than active participants in their gender and sexual identity. The emotional template in this instance operates to produce the poor girl victim. Threatened rape and imagined dangers to girls produce a climate in which anxiety and fear are produced. This is not to deny that girls are raped and that women and girls are victims of sexual violence, but her comments reinforce only the sexual vulnerability of girls and they assume that girls who do go around with boys are bad girls. Her comments construct boy–girl relationships as inevitably sexual and they deny the possibility of boys and girls mixing as friends.

When asked if boys and girls can work together in HIV and AIDS education the teachers focused on gender differences and the polarization of gender identities:

The boys know that I’m a boy and the girls know that. Even if you mix them they want to be boys only and girls only I just say that you have to mix just to kill that stereotype. If they are outside in the break they separate. You get the rare case of the boy playing with the girl. Girlish boys. There is a boy in my class who is girlish. He is friend to girls. The other boys say ‘you are this, you are this’-isitabane’ [sissy]. There are four boys who are bullies. They hit everybody, they take others’ belongings, and they make fun of others. If someone teases them there is a fight.

(Shange)

Shange refers to the problems of boys. Shange shows how boys are the problem and this is based on their less-than-satisfactory behaviour. Her own beliefs about sissies reinforce gender polarities. The polarized description of boys and girls works to constrain teachers in exercising power and in ensuring a more gender-harmonious classroom that benefits all. Shange’s focus on bad boys serves to legitimate masculine power, thus disempowering her as far as changing gender relations in the classroom in concerned: the possibility for dialogue and friendships across the genders is erased and, with it, the possibility of change. While Shange refers to varied forms of masculinity in her classroom, for example the isitabane, boys are lumped together as violent beings and this serves to reproduce unequal gender power relations:
Our culture, I don’t know how if I love you as a boy I’ll always ill-treat you I don’t know.
I always see boys ill-treat girls that they love, he grabs her, and he kicks her I don’t know
why. If he loves you he will ill-treat you. The young ones they know that. Boys know that.

(Thusi)

The effects of these constructions of boys and girls are deeply problematic since the
implication is that boys are monsters and that girls should keep away from them.
Heterosexual love is dangerous and it has violent effects. While there are certainly
high rates of gender violence in South Africa, there is also the pathological positioning
of girls as victims and a sense of resignation that boys (even young boys) who know
their power and status in heterosexual relations are necessarily violent. Within the
particular context of KwaDabeka the specific discourses on ‘culture’ and particular
practices are appropriated and reworked thus having an impact on the nature of social
relations in the classroom. A central issue here is that Thusi inscribes boys with power
by engaging with cultural forms which validate asymmetrical heterosexual relations of
power. Here it is assumed that neither boys nor girls have the power to change their
positions in society because of cultural discourses and practices. Girls and women are
rendered as passive, unprotesting victims of culture and thus as powerless victims. In
this way particular positions are inhabited based on the cultural practices which
marginalize others, and is particularly damaging to girls.

Conclusions

Relatively few studies have attempted to examine the relationships between and
amongst HIV and AIDS, gender, sexuality and early childhood (Silin, 1995). This
study has educational importance in its provision of new understandings of the
discourses that teachers deploy in understanding their role in HIV and AIDS educa-
tion. The paper began with the question of the significance that teachers in a South
African township school attach to HIV and AIDS education. As it has shown, teach-
ing discourses deployed in understanding HIV and AIDS and early childhood present
significant hurdles to the establishment of early childhood programmes aimed at
increasing young children’s knowledge of HIV and AIDS. One of the most significant
barriers is the notion of childhood innocence and the negative effect of cultural beliefs
and attitudes associated with childhood sexuality. HIV and AIDS education and sex
education are already significant areas of controversy in early childhood. In South
Africa there is an unprecedented boom in sexual representation to include sexually
explicit billboards suggesting safe sex and the dispensing of free condoms. The
increased sexual momentum underpinned by safer sex messages and instructions on
the one hand, and the reality of young children’s lives on the other coexists uneasily
with teaching discourses attempting to shut down sexual knowledge. There is a
danger that the sinister allies—gender inequalities, HIV and AIDS and the romanti-
cized notion of childhood innocence—will harm children, if not now then later
(Bhana et al., 2006, p. 19). When teachers in this study were asked about the impor-
tance of sex education in HIV and AIDS education, they tried to shut down the
discussion by appealing to the discourse of innocence and respectability, ‘If you
respect children you can’t talk to children about sex’. Talk about HIV and AIDS and sex as the teachers in this study illustrate, incited ominous fantasies, silence, danger, denial and shame. Yet there is the implicit assumption throughout these teachers’ constructions that young children are indeed sexual beings in their framing AIDS education around warnings about the dangers of having sex. The notion of childhood innocence, as this paper has illustrated, is not only formidable but is also resisted and reversible. The claim that children are young and innocent contrasts with Sishi’s comment that ‘they already know’. So we need to ask, now, about the potential of undermining the power of innocence.

Success in combating HIV and AIDS must be measured by its impact on children

Are they getting the information they need to protect themselves from HIV? Are girls being empowered to take charge of their sexuality? These are hard questions we need to be asking ....

(UNICEF, 2002, p. 67)

New understandings of children as active sexual agents (claimed by teachers even if contradictorily) make it necessary to re-imagine the role of the early childhood teacher. Instead of attempting to privilege the notion of children’s innocence, teachers might begin reworking dangerous narratives based on developmental approaches which encourage a ‘hands off’ approach to children’s sexuality and their gender performance.

It might be possible for teachers to intervene in creating opportunities in the new revised curriculum to raise critical and ‘hard’ questions about the sex, gender and HIV and AIDS relationships. The basis of working with early childhood teachers in this area is to challenge the culture of shame, stigma and fear that regulates HIV and AIDS education in early schooling. It also demands that the Department of Education which ‘restricts you but now it cannot work in that way’, be more responsive to teachers’ work in HIV and AIDS education. Teachers in the study were aware of the damaging reactions of parents. Parents are particularly vulnerable to the idea that HIV and AIDS education could be mental molestation (Irvine, 2002). Teachers in this study are aware of the regulation of their work, ‘They should be told but the parents should help because some parents say that sex should not be taught to our kids’.

I have shown in this paper that the notion of innocence contains various contradictions and is inflected by teachers’ anxieties. The image of the child as innocent is highly exploitable by teachers and by parents. In this study the social realities which mark the daily existence of young children is ignored through the construction of sexuality in HIV and AIDS education as undesirable. We need to begin to redefine childhood in ways that meet with the contemporary demands of the South African reality. We need to think of an image of childhood in which innocence and a need for protection do not depend on the renouncing of sexual understanding. What is clear though is that:

We’ve not even taught our children the very basis. And I feel that we have tried ignorance for a very long time and it’s time we tried education.

(Irvine, 2002, p. 1)
Note on contributor

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References


