



Teacher positioning on the teaching of sexual diversity in South African schools

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In South Africa

- issues relating to homosexuality and bisexuality fit into the broader outcomes of the Life Orientation (LO) learning area.
- The Revised National Curriculum Statements for LO (Department of Education 2002) and Departmental LO Teacher Guidelines (Department of Education 2006) remain silent on issues of sexual diversity.
- There are no educational policies requiring schools to become safe places for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth or where both teachers and the curriculum address homosexuality (Richardson, 2006).
- Little has been done to equip teachers to challenge and teach issues related to homosexuality and homophobia in class (Francis and Msibi 2011; Richardson 2006).

The teaching of issues related to homosexuality in South African schools faces a challenge for three reasons.

- First, according to Helleve et al. (2009), teachers' cultural perceptions often mean that basic sexuality education content such as safe sex is not delivered effectively as teachers' are more concerned that learners are sexually active than that they are practising unsafe sex.
- Secondly, teachers often view homosexuality as deviant or immoral and are reticent to deal with this issue in their classroom due to cultural and religious opinions (Deacon et al. 1999; Francis & Msibi 2011).
- Thirdly, Francis and Msibi (2011) report the slow shifts in attitude among South African in-service teachers attending a module on heterosexism and education.

teacher positioning

Positioning theory a triangle of interrelated concepts: storyline, positions and speech (Harre´ and van Langenhove 1999).

When a teacher takes up a particular position as his/her own, s/he inevitably views the world from that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story-lines and concepts that are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies and Harre 1990).

During a conversation a person may use a storyline to make his/her words and actions meaningful to themselves and others.

A particular interesting form of positioning, in the context of this study, is the intentional self-positioning of teachers teaching issues related to sexual diversity.

There is a need for such frameworks as positioning theory for analysing teacher discourse in terms of what they say and do.

research design

- Qualitative methods - Classroom observations and in-depth interviews
- 11 LO teachers from schools in Durban, South Africa
- Observation of three lessons with each teacher in the sample teaching grade 10 lessons on sexuality education,
- The interview schedule was structured around five focus areas, namely biographical information, LO, the teaching of sexuality education, sexual diversity and sexuality education within the school.
- Interviews lasted between 55 and 90 minutes.
- The small but diverse sample was selected by means of purposive sampling and networks of contacts to provide insights in the form of 'close-ups' rather than largely generalisable findings.
- Data collection and analysis often take place simultaneously (Merriam 1998).

‘What assessment standard is that?’

Questions come up in the classroom . . . talk about gay sex and the questions are usually posed in a demeaning fashion rather than genuine inquiry. I usually try to handle those sorts of questions sensitively and help the students to gain insight into their prejudices around that. (Ms Gray, 24)

I was dealing with a group of Grade 10s and there was this issue of picking on a boy and calling him gay. . . . It came to my ears and I brought this up in the classroom as to how this affects relationships, learning in class and difference. (Ms Jarvis, 27)

When I discuss sexuality, they would ask, how would this be different for gays and they would even answer. . . . [T]he other learners would ask them questions like ‘who is the man and woman in the relationship’ and ‘whether anal sex is painful’ and that sort of thing. I allow the questions and discussion as the other learners seem really interested. (Ms Ngcobo, 26)

We don’t address issues that children really want to know about because the policy doesn’t open it up for us to. You might really want to discuss it, but if it’s not in the policy . . . someone might say to you ‘what assessment standard is that?’ (Ms Mdunge, 41)

At the time . . . I didn’t know how to approach it, because I felt that I didn’t know much about it for me even to tackle it because sometimes it’s a bad idea to start a conversation with children when you really don’t know how to talk about it. I didn’t want to make any statements or assumptions or create some kind of impression that might be wrong . . . but the only thing that I was really clear about with my learners is this thing of choice . . . not even specifically homosexuality, but just allowing ourselves to be who we want to be without putting ourselves in boxes and labelling them. (Ms Ngcobo, 26)

teaching *it*

At the moment you can see that [learners] . . . don't want to talk about *it*. They don't want it included in their lesson ... if you talk about *it* they will laugh, if you talk about like *it* they will laugh or howl or do those certain noises which shows that they are not interested or they're mocking them anyway. (Mr Hlangu, 26)

Learner 1: Miss, what about gays and lesbians and how do they have sex? [laughter and sounds mainly from the boys at the back]

Ms Anderson (46): That is a good question. Our constitution is very clear on this. No one shall be discriminated on the basis of the race, creed, gender, religion and their sexual orientation. [she repeats louder] No one will be discriminated on the basis of their sexual orientation. [more laughter. Teacher stares at learner 2] It is a person's choice and no one will be discriminated. Do you all understand that? No one will be discriminated against.

Learner 2: Miss but we know this man and he is gay. [again laughter]

Learner 3: [to learner 2]: You must be gay. [laughter]

Ms Anderson: [to learner 2]. Stop that. Now class what did I just say. No one will be discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Learner 3: Yes miss but they say . . .

Ms Anderson: [to learner 3] Now enough of these types of questions. It's a person's choice . [Even louder] no one...

Ms Razak (55): . . . And these are ways HIV is transmitted.

Learner1: Yes mam. How do lesbians get HIV mam?

[laughter from the class]

Ms Razak: In the same way everyone can get HIV by performing unprotected sex.

Learner 1: Can lesbians get HIV mam? [laughter from class]

Ms Razak: [to learner 1] Have you taken this down in your workbook? Why are you asking silly questions? All you need to know is how HIV is transmitted. Now stand up and read this from the worksheet aloud.

Learner 1: Yes mam . . .

'I didn't study homosexuality

I think sexual diversity means we have people who are different . . . in their inherent interest of different sexes. . . . We have people who are interested in different sexes in a way that we normally know that a guy will be attracted to a girl or a girl attracted to a guy . . . then it's not like that anymore . . . we are learning that we should . . . accommodate the diversity which is happening. (Mr Hlangu, 26)

Interviewer: Do you teach about homosexuality

Mr Maistry (43): No, I don't. **It's** not in the syllabus and there aren't gay children in the school. I won't feel comfortable teaching about homosexuality because I have not studied **it**, but I teach about heterosexual relationships.

Interviewer: What do you understand by sexual diversity?

Mr Manning: Are we talking there maybe about gay?

Umm, well that is not a subject that has been approached at all in my experience of teaching.

Interviewer: What do you understand by sexual diversity?

Mr Manning: I'm not sure actually. Yes. Well . . . what would have seemed to be considered a normal heterosexual relationship isn't the norm necessarily. You know, people have the right to make choices

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‘God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’

I won't teach about something I believe is wrong . . . the bible is clear on that. One of the boys in my class said that God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. I agree with him. As a teacher I want to teach what is right. I believe **it** is a sin and **it** is wrong. (Mr Maistry, 43)

Do I do what the department wants, what the community wants or what I feel comfortable doing. I live in this community . . . how do you think the parents and elders in this community will look down at me if I talk about gays and lesbians and talk to their children about all of this stuff. I cannot do it as I don't agree with it. (Ms Mazibuko, 35)

How can I teach young children about something that I believe is wrong? . . . **It** is wrong. (Ms Anderson, 46)

I just do the basics, but it is embarrassing for me to talk about homosexuality and stuff like that to the young learners in Grade 8 . . . I am not trained to teach it. I am trained to teach Phys Ed . . . (Mr Maistry, 43)

I am a religious person and I don't like discussing things like that. **It's** not part of my culture. So I do find it uncomfortable. (Ms Ngcobo)

I find it hard, shouting out the concept, maybe even the process of sex and also maybe some of the concepts like gay, lesbian, penis, vagina . . . because the way you're raised, you don't want to lose . . . that dignity with your learners. (Mr Hlangu, 26)

'I will not be supported'

I feel very careful about what I say in the sexuality education class because I know if I say something that may be perceived as inappropriate I will be in the principal's office. . . . The community around the school is very conservative and many do not believe that children should be taught about sex. I live here and I have to interact at my church with parents. They will ask me. 'Why are telling my children about how to have sex'. In fact once one of the parents brought the pastor from the church to speak to the principal about my LO class in which we discussed using of condoms. The principal called me in and asked me to explain to the pastor what I was doing. I left the meeting explaining that I will be more cautious when I teach such things and that my principal will be monitoring my classes more closely. . . . Can you imagine what response I would get if I mentioned homosexuality? (Ms Mazibuko, 35)

I was having a lesson on sexually transmitted diseases with my grade 8s. The principal called me and asked me whether it was necessary to be discussing such issues with such young children. He asked for me to show where in the syllabus this was reflected. I showed this to him. . . . He said I must show more discretion when teaching young grade 8s. I got the sense that he thought I was making that part of the syllabus up and I was just being irresponsible. (Mr Manning, 29)

What do these storylines reveal about how teachers position themselves on the teaching of sexual diversity?

None of the 11 teachers initiated or planned a lesson addressing the issues of sexual diversity.

These issues were raised by learners' questions, revealing a need for a more defined framework within the curriculum.

When such issues were raised, teachers were reluctant to encourage discussion on homosexuality, opting to be cautious rather than risk controversy and conflict.

In most cases, teachers ignored or avoided talk on homosexuality and bisexuality.

In fact, they presented heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation.

In instances where teachers enabled discussion on homosexuality, their positions endorsed the idea of choice: each person has the right to choose a sexual partner, be they of the same or of different sex.

The data reveals four key reasons for teachers avoiding the inclusion of issues related to sexual diversity.

- such issues are not made explicit as a policy task in the LO curriculum.
- the LO teachers lacked uniformity of training.
- teachers must also understand their own background and its implications for identity and practice as a teacher in the classroom (Masinga 2009).
- teachers did not teach about sexual diversity because they believed that if they did and there were objections from parents, they would not be supported by the school management.

Conclusion

- First, it is difficult to integrate lesbian, gay and bisexual issues into the curriculum without a policy framework and direction.
- Secondly, given the strong reaction from parents and school managers for the inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual content, teachers must be enabled to articulate a clear rationale, within and beyond the classroom, as to why issues related to lesbian, gay and bisexual need to be integrated into the curriculum.
- Thirdly, LO teachers in the majority of South African schools lack, uniformity of training and come from a diverse range of fields, which do not always adequately equip them to teach homosexuality confidently and effectively.
- Fourth, results from this study, make explicit the lack of training of LO educators
- Finally, from the small number of South African research studies available, it is obvious that the field is under-researched.



Francis DA (2012): Teacher positioning on the teaching of sexual diversity in South African schools, *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, 1-15



- To approach lesbian, gay and bisexual issues through the framework of sex education may seem heterosexist in that it equates homosexuality solely with sex. Some argue that to continue to do this may suggest that lesbian, gay and bisexual issues are being 'kept in the sex education closet' (Petrovic and Rosiek 2003, 165) or 'ghettoized in ancillary health education' (Irvine 1997, 580). I respect that argument.
- Yet, given the high levels of heterosexism (Butler et al. 2003; Deacon, Morrell, and Prinsloo 1999; Francis and Msibi 2011) and HIV prevalence in South Africa (Richardson 2009; UNAIDS 2008), there is a clear argument for including issues related to homosexuality and bisexuality within sexuality education.
- Indeed, a number of authors have indicated that lesbian and gay youth do face specific risks and therefore need awareness and prevention efforts (for example see Irvine 1997; Richardson 2009; Telljohann et al. 1995).

introduction

- Students desire to learn more from sex education about homosexuality and to experience more honesty, interactivity and practical work from sexuality education (Kirby and Michaelson 2008).
- In South Africa, approximately 10% of both Black and White youth, experience same-sex attraction with most discovering their attractions around puberty (Richardson 2009).
- Most lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are coming out at younger ages. (Holmes and Cahill 2003; Richardson 2009).
- While most of the learner population who experience themselves as heterosexual have the support of the dominant sexual culture within and outside school, for those who identify as homosexual or bisexual, the resulting message is that homosexuality is something to be hidden and kept separate from teaching, learning and daily school life.
- The effect of this invisibility of homosexuality on gay and lesbian youth means that they become isolated, further marginalised and vulnerable to prejudice and attack.
- Their heterosexual peers, on the other hand, are at risk of creating meaning around same-sex attraction that is based on stereotypes and prejudice (Griffin and Ouellet 2003).