

Heading: Sex in schools: the bullies, the moffies and the sugar daddies

Many parents heaved a sigh of relief when sex education was introduced to schools in 1997 as a school subject, as part of Life Orientation. Now the sticky questions like: 'Where do babies come from?' and 'Why is that man wearing pantyhose and carrying a handbag?' could be diverted to become someone else's problem.

But are schools in South Africa today equipped to deal with these 'embarrassing' issues, and are teachers the right people to introduce these topics to impressionable youngsters? And what, really, is going on behind the toilet block?

For the first time in South Africa, this subject has been comprehensively opened up for debate. The University of the Free State convened a colloquium this week that dealt with the field of sexuality and education in South Africa, how sexuality is taught and how it should be taught. And it came up with some disturbing conclusions.

Entitled "Sexuality, Society and Pedagogy," the colloquium was addressed by leading researchers in the fields of education and sociology, and covered topics such as: how to teach sex education most effectively; how teachers should deal with their own preconceptions and values when dealing with sensitive topics; how school children view sex, gender, disability, homosexuality and homophobia; the implications of teaching the subject incorrectly; and the role that educators could and should play in forming the gender-based world view of their young charges.

The presentation that caused the most shock and discussion was a hard-hitting exposé of young girls and their sugar daddies. Five young women between the ages of 18 and 24 told how they enjoyed an affluent lifestyle sponsored by sexual favours. "It's almost like prostitution, but it's not prostitution," one of the participants explained. Young girls had relationships with much older and married men, and were 'paid' with airtime, branded clothes, expensive accessories and a good life of restaurants, gifts, parties and alcohol.

The paper entitled: "Female youth in 'sugar daddy' relationships in the context of HIV/AIDS" presented by Cheryl Kader of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and Naydene de Lange of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, focused on the increase in the 'sugar daddy' syndrome and its implications for young women. Kader said that the five women cited poverty as the reason for their choosing relationships with older, wealthy men, and they admitted to asking for sex when they wanted something, like a new handbag.

Worryingly, these were not the only relationships that these women were involved in – they also had boyfriends (who often helped them spend their 'earnings') and had casual sex on weekends at parties with multiple partners. They admitted to having unprotected sex and said they were too scared to negotiate safe sex with their partners.

"These women know what is expected of them and they enter into these relationships knowing very well what the terms are," Kader said.

The women were eager to flaunt their gains – the material rewards of their relationships – but not the relationships themselves. The study showed that the 'sugar daddy' syndrome

was a complicated cocktail of vulnerability, power, economics, self-worth, education, aspiration and exploitation.

Another paper, presented by Prof Deevia Bhana from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, showed how learners used religion and cultural beliefs to justify homophobia in South Africa.

The paper, entitled “Moffies, gays, isitabane: Learning ‘straight’ and the implications for sexuality,” showed that schools could create awareness and combat homophobic trends that could lead to gender violence. She wanted particularly, Bhana said, to address the notion that homosexuality was ‘unAfrican.’

According to the research, boys were more outspoken about their opinions of homosexuality, saying that they would ‘tolerate’ gays and lesbians as long as they did not ‘flaunt it.’ The study found that boys had very strong homophobic attitudes; religion featured greatly in homophobic attitudes; girls were more accepting and tolerant; and ignorance about gender issues was high.

“We have to do a lot more to develop this field of teaching,” said Bhana, adding that no evidence was found that the Department of Education was actively pursuing gender education. “Such work is underdeveloped, and addressing this is a matter of urgency. Educators have an ethical obligation to make sure that gays and lesbians – the so-called ‘other-gendered’ – are treated with respect.” She argued that heterosexual domination seeped through sex education and is influenced by culture, religious bigotry and gender norms.

A particularly controversial topic was addressed by Lebo Moletsane from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In her paper “Teaching sexuality in South African Higher Education: An autobiography of the question” she argued that the idea of ‘going back to our roots’, or ‘reclaiming our culture’ (which was a concept made popular by people like Julius Malema and President Jacob Zuma) was creating one of the biggest challenges to successful sexual education in the country.

“This yearning for the past perpetuates gender inequality, and it fuels gender-based violence and homophobia by reclaiming cultural practices such as virginity testing, polygamy, forced marriages or ukuthwala,” Moletsane said.

Moletsane said these notions of ‘our culture’ and the doctrine of ‘our’ religion are often invoked in these days to re-assert pride in identities that are deemed to have been lost during colonialism and apartheid. It is also used as a response to difficult modern social challenges such as homophobia, or to explain and justify inequalities in families and communities.

“This practice condemns free debate on issues that are considered controversial or taboo by those who see themselves as custodians of this new trend,” she said. “This means that unequal gender relations and gender-based violence between young men and women cannot be challenged or opposed because they are regarded as ‘truth’ by those who hold them.”

Moletsane said the focus should perhaps change from 'restorative nostalgia' (which yearned uncritically for the 'good old days' as a way of coping with an uncertain present) to 'reflective nostalgia' which uses the same triggers of remembrance and symbols and frames of reference, involving individual and cultural memory, but instead allows for debate and different stories to be told.

"In South Africa, we are currently witnessing more and more cases of people, mostly men, citing 'culture' in defence of sexism, racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. This has brought to the fore patriarchal and hetero-normative discourses of sex and sexuality, which demand loyalty and conformity, often through violent and undemocratic means," she explained.

The two-day colloquium covered other topics such as looking at how teachers' own values and norms could influence their teaching of sexual awareness, how incorrect notions and conceptions could take root as a result of improper teaching methods, how important it was for teachers to take this subject seriously in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the youth in South Africa, and how important it was that Life Orientation teachers were properly trained and supported. Special attention was paid to the question: "Is girlhood in crisis in South Africa?" with reference to the risks that young girls run in South Africa of rape, unwanted pregnancy, HIV and death. It was urged that the empowerment and socialisation of young girls should be dealt with in schools as a matter of urgency.

"You cannot teach sexual education in schools without taking into account societal issues like rape, HIV, teenage pregnancy and gender violence," said convenor of the colloquium, Prof Dennis Francis. "In South Africa we have huge societal problems linked to questions of gender and sex. So I want to ask – how does teaching engage with societal issues? Research has shown that gender violence has increased enormously, and there is a decreasing sexual debut (children are having sex younger and younger). We, as educators, need to ask more from education, in fact, we need to demand more from education, to make sure these worrying problems are addressed."

...ends/

For more information, or for further information, please contact Prof Dennis Francis, Dean: Faculty of Education, UFS at 083 706 9543

If you have received this mail in error, or if you have any problem with contacts or further information, please contact nikimoore007@gmail.com or telephone 083 758 4483.