Homophobia in South African township and rural schools: Understanding the nature and scale of the problem

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**Introduction**

* Data drawn from a MAC AIDS-funded interventionist project known as the We All Count Educational Project (WECEP), geared towards challenging homophobia in South African township schools, as well as a PhD study exploring how black township and rural male teachers who engage in same-sex relations construct their sexual and professional identities.

* Paper explores the experiences of queer youth in South African township and rural schools.

* Townships and rural areas in South Africa still largely remain poor and black, with violent masculinities regulating sexuality (Selikow, Zulu, and Cedra 2002).

* Context laws: incoherent message when it comes to issues of same-sex desire (constitution vs individual government members).
Research questions: How do South African queer township learners (as well as those perceived to be queer) experience schooling?

Argument: Meaningful change in addressing homophobia in South African township schools can only be achieved in part through teacher-focused and context-specific interventions.
Overwhelming evidence in the literature of the negative experiences that queer learners are faced with in schools across the globe (Greene 1986; Nichols 1999; Renold 2000; Athanases and Larrabee 2003; Graziano 2004; Sears 2005; Richardson 2006; Nixon 2010).

These experiences may be social, emotional and also cognitive.

Language plays a particular role in the discrimination and harassment of queer youth. Smith (1998) notes that “Everyday practices of ‘fag-baiting’, such as poking fun, teasing, name calling, scrawling graffiti on lockers, insulting and harassing someone, produce the ‘fag’ as a social object. The language intends a course of action isolating the gay student and inciting to physical violence. Verbal abuse both is and initiates attack.” (p. 310)

Teachers often complicit in the abuse and victimisation of those who engage in same-sex relations.

Easy to see queer youth in negative light with these experiences. However, queer youth can be highly resistant and positive (see Denborough, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1994).
Great disconnect between policy and reality.

Dearth of literature highlighting the experiences of queer youth in South African schools. Problem more pronounced on black, township queer youth.

Richardson (2006) has engaged on pioneering work in this regard, but cites access as the key challenge.

From the little literature that exists, there seems to be a powerful connection between sexuality and gender (Bhana and Pattman 2009).

Butler and Astbury (2005) note that queer learners in South Africa experience discrimination, rejection, isolation, non-tolerance, marginalisation and harassment from peers, teachers and school administrators.

Experiences differ according to race.

Polders and Wells (2004) found that white youth, apart from sexual abuse, generally experienced higher levels of physical and verbal abuse than their black counterparts; a key contention of this work.

Richardson contends that “gay white boys are more likely than black boys to behave in “masculine” ways; they pose a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Black gay youth tend to be more readily accepted by others because they conform to the stereotypical belief that gays want to be ‘like girls’. Richardson (2006, 136)
interventionist project geared towards the improvement of queer learners’ experiences in schools.

Eight of the participants were learners from schools (between the age of 15 and 18), four were university students (between the age of 18 and 22; one of the university students was in his final year and was already teaching part time) and two were teachers (in their late 40s).

Range of sexual practices

Participants through teachers; Ethics

Five workshops of four hours each during weekends were scheduled for the training and discussion in August 2009 to October 2009.

A further three sessions of over 2 hours each were organised with teachers to discuss curriculum issues in 2009 and 2010.

DVD has been produced, and curriculum is currently being developed through funding from HIVOS
### Methodology: Study 2

- Life history research: rich, personal descriptive data (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).
- 8 Participants, snowballing
- Range of sexual engagements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Frequency per participant</th>
<th>Total amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Conversations</td>
<td>Four to eight meetings of two to three hours for each session, using semi-structured conversations</td>
<td>Total of 43 sessions of 2-3 hrs per participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time-lines</td>
<td>Participants inputted experiences and memories after each session in preparation for the next session.</td>
<td>8 completed sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal documents</td>
<td>Brought by participants according to need</td>
<td>Diaries, newspapers excerpts</td>
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Study 1:
- Participants cited various forms of discrimination and harassment in schools, often at the hands of teachers.
- Challenges from peers often resultant from misinformation about same-sex relations.
- Participants also noted various resist-stances they employed to challenge and subvert oppression.

Study 2:
- Participants cited various observed abuses, often at the hands of colleagues.
- Protection of learners has very little to do with the ‘out’ status of the teacher, but more to do with the comfort of teachers who engage in same-sex relations in their teaching contexts.
- Participants argued strongly against targeted interventions as this would alienate learners: queer learners perceived as highly resistant.
Male learners reported that words like ‘isitabane’, ‘moffie’ and ‘ongqingili’, which are all derogatory isiZulu and Afrikaans words with a meaning similar to ‘faggot’, being used in schools to refer to them.

Learners saw male learners as effeminate and wanting to be like girls, often referring to them as ‘osis-bhuti’. Mandla, a student in the project, noted that:

“They call me names all the time. I’m used to being called usis-bhuti now. It doesn’t bother me anymore. They think I’m a girl because I hang around with girls. I am usis-bhuti because I’m not like them [other boys].”

Girls noted similar abuse, although not to the same extent as boys. Girls noted that teachers often tell them ‘to stop being tomboys’ (Nomsa).
One of the ways in which heterosexism is maintained is through fear: such fear becomes pervasive and irrational, thus ensuring that the status quo is maintained. Fear of being infected by the ‘homosexual’, with teachers playing a central role in promoting this. Nomusa notes: “I was at school and Mrs Nhleko called me to the staffroom. She started shouting at me and was telling me to stop acting like a boy. She said I need to stop this lesbian thing because I will start making other learners like me.”

Gcina, another girl participant in the project, noted that “Other learners don’t like us walking with them. Boys don’t like it when we walk with their girlfriends, they say we are going to take their girlfriends away. But then when me and Zinhle are walking together, they always ask us whether we are going to do to each other.”

Result: isolation and marginalisation

Learners who walked with queer learners also risked being called names as they were perceived as gay. Musa, the ‘straight’, male learner in the project, noted that “I get called a ‘stabane’ too because I hang around gay guys. For me they are also my friends. I don’t see a problem with them, but other people think I’m also gay because I hang around gay people. This gets me angry because I know that I am not gay.”
Very little support from administrators as a result of fear. Mbuso, a gay participant in the study, noted that “Teachers don’t support gays. They like shouting at us and tell us that it’s these rights that are making us like we are. The other day, someone called me a ‘stabane’ in class and Mr Msomi just laughed with the other kids. I felt like crying.”

Those supporting ‘queer’ learners are assigned these learners: Mr Kubheka, the student teacher/part-time teacher, noted that “I’m tired of being assigned gay children. Whenever Mdu (a gay learner participant) comes into the office (staff room), other teachers just look at me and say your person is here . . . talk quickly to him so that he can get out here.

Similarly, Mrs Dlomo noted the same sentiments: “I’m used to it now. Whenever these children come to the staffroom the other teachers just look at me. I’m the one expected to help them. I’m sure if I was not married they would also think that I’m gay.”

The use of the fear of rape used to detract queer youth from claiming this identification. Mrs Mkhize noted that “Teachers are scared that these kids are going to be raped if they don’t stop being lesbians. We all know how bad these rapes are. Teachers often tell learners to stop being lesbians because if they don’t, they will be raped.”
Violence is used to enforce and regulate sexualities and in turn works to maintain patriarchy and heteronormativity in place. Teachers key in executing this violence: Bheki, a gay participant in the study, highlighted this violence “I am used to it now . . . like this week. Mr Mncube dragged me by my neck and told me to stop bothering them in the staffroom. He had done this to me before. He likes pushing me and shouting at me in front of other teachers whenever I go to the staffroom. He always says he doesn’t like ‘izitabane’. Other teachers just laugh and do nothing.

Culture and religion seen as barriers which prevent teachers from supporting queer learners: Mrs Dlomo noted that “Our culture does not approve of this and also our religion. It is very difficult for us who support gay and lesbian children as we are seen as challenging our cultures and God.”

Her sentiments are supported by Mr Kubheka who noted that “In South Africa it is difficult to talk about gender issues, how much more when it comes to gay and lesbian issues. The Bible doesn’t support it. Parents and teachers find it very hard to talk about sexuality. We must not forget that teachers are parents too. It’s just difficult.”

Lack of understanding also key in the homophobia.
Very confident, assertive queer learners in the project. The learners expressed great pride in themselves and their abilities. This pride largely had to do with self-acceptance.

Most had found profound ways to invert the discrimination to their advantage by portraying a positive outlook of queer people.

Mandla noted that “I am gay and proud and am not going anywhere. It’s either they accept me or deal with it. I’m not worried at all. Most guys in my class are failing, but I’m passing above them. Gay people are clever and have money.”

Mdu communicated similar feelings: “They are used to me now. I am not going anywhere. I walk and talk the way I want. I used to get very upset when I would pass other boys and they would call me sisi (sister), now I just laugh and greet back. I ask them how are you doing sweet heart. They usually don’t respond.”
*Queer learners being seen as not needing any support:

Teacher participant:
Do they need support? I don’t think they need support because it’s them who are supportive towards other kids. They are always there. They are caring. Like... they are caring in all aspects. It’s not them who need to be supported... At school the only way you can deal with people or silence them, is if you beat them in school work; then they care... Even if you are homophobic as a learner, in the end you are here for education... You don’t have time to hate a person who passes. They have that thing. That helps them a lot. Although they are too forward and everything, when it comes to school work, they excel. It’s therefore not easy to abuse them.
The findings of both studies show that teachers are actors either caught up in or challenging homophobia.

While queer learners experience too homophobia from peers, it’s mostly out of ignorance ... need to education.

The improvement of queer learners’ experiences in schools can be achieved in part through teacher-focused and context-specific interventions. Such interventions would need to take into account issues of internalisation and intersections particularly between gender and sexuality and religion and/or culture.

By focusing on teachers, we not only ensure that homophobia and sexism are disrupted, but also ensure that new opportunities for growth and learning occur.

By challenging homophobia in schools, teachers are not doing queer learners a favour, but rather do this as part of their professional duties.

A re-education of teachers needed, with modules offered for pre-service teachers and training for in-service teachers.

Use allies!

Interventions: looking on