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Intersections of class and gender in learners' conceptualisations of sexuality education at a private, all-girls school

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In this article I explore the role that class, and its intersections with gender, play in shaping the way that learners at a private, all-girls school in South Africa conceptualise their sexuality education. Drawing on data from focus group discussions with 2 friendship groups of Grade 10 learners, the evidence reveals the multiple, intersecting and contradictory ways in which middle-class young women navigate class and gender. Firstly, learners, in drawing on a discourse of middle-class excellence, reproduced class difference in their discussion of attending a private school. Secondly, they drew on this class capital to position themselves as immune to many of the issues dealt with in sexuality education, particularly teenage pregnancy. Finally, a discussion of the gender exclusivity of their school revealed that this class capital was not always available to them, as they prioritised a discourse of heterosexual desirability over middle-class excellence in speaking about their interactions with boys. The findings reveal the complex and changing ways in which young middle-class women discursively reproduce, resist and navigate the intersecting classed and gendered systems of power that shape their particular schooling context.

Keywords: class; gender; intersectionality; private school; sexuality education; South Africa

Introduction

Sexuality education in South Africa, as a part of the life orientation (LO) curriculum, is intended to equip learners with necessary skills and to promote values of social justice and inclusion in relation to gender and sexuality (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011:4). The content of these skills and values is not, however, stipulated in the national curriculum, making the teaching and learning of sexuality education a complex and contested task. The flexibility with which teachers are able to implement the aims of sexuality education has acted as a catalyst for research into both the teaching and learning of sexuality education. Research conducted with learners about their experiences of sexuality education has shown young people to be dissatisfied with and frustrated by the content and pedagogy of their lessons. This is due to the moralistic and didactic approach to teaching (Mayerza & Vincent, 2019), the heteronormativity prevalent in their lessons (Francis, 2019), and the exclusion of positive aspects of sexual relationships from their curriculum and classroom discussions (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). While this research is extensive, an overview of the literature reveals that the data are based primarily on the experiences of learners from coeducation public schools, and particularly learners from Black township schools (Kruger, Shefer & Oakes, 2015; Mayerza & Vincent, 2019; Msibi, 2012). The sexuality education studies that have focused on single-sex, predominantly middle-class schools have also by and large taken place in state schools (Mthatyana & Vincent, 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). There is a gap in the literature regarding sexuality education which leaves middle-class learners outside of the gaze of research.

The significance of the lacuna around schools that are “private” and therefore predominantly middle-class goes beyond indicating a gap in the literature; it suggests that learners at private schools are not vulnerable to the issues dealt with in the sexuality education curriculum. The lack of research about middle-class learners and sexuality education invisibilises and, by virtue of their dominant class identities, normalises their experiences, pathologising those who are typically involved in sexuality education research, that is, learners at black township schools. When middle-class learners are not included in sexuality education research, their experiences are framed as unproblematic and, therefore, not in need of research to understand. This mistakenly constructs middle-class learners as beyond reproach – a construction which I seek to disrupt.

In this article, a focus on class influences on the learning of sexuality education in South Africa is used to address the gap in the existing literature. An intersectional perspective is used to frame class not as an identity that is constructed or experienced in isolation but in conjunction and intersection with other identities. In this article I ask how learners at a private all-girls school experience their sexuality education specifically and how they construct their identities as private all-girls school learners more generally. Furthermore, I explore what theoretical insights these experiences can offer into the intersectionality of class, gender and sexuality among young middle-class women. While I focus specifically on the South African context, the question of how gender and class are invoked in the reproduction of inequality is one that is relevant internationally (Allan & Charles, 2014; Kenway, Epstein, Koh, Fahey, Rizvi & McCarthy, 2017; Ringrose, 2007).

Literature Review

Learners attending elite private schools in South Africa such as the one in this study are caught up in a context of post-colonialism, post-apartheid, new democracy and egalitarianism (Bhana, Crewe & Aggleton, 2019). Despite the legal desegregation of schooling, and the emergence of a wealthy Black middle-class elite, elite

private schools continue to reflect historical inequality in the predominantly White, middle-class make up of their learner bodies (Chisholm & Sujee, 2006; Kenway & Prosser, 2015; Soudien, 2010). The legacies of class and racial inequality are further reflected in the continued dominance of White, middle-class culture. In her ethnography at a private, all-girls school in Cape Town, Epstein (2014) found that the school disciplined learners according to a racialised (read White) and middle-classed ideal – an ideal which the young women themselves were active participants in (re)producing. While changes in the socio-political context of post-apartheid has opened up the cultural and educational capital of elite private schools to the Black middle-class, the fundamentally racialised and classed culture of these institutions remains unchallenged.

That elite private schools continue to normalise and reproduce Whiteness does not mean that they have been unaffected by broader socio-political changes. Rather, what it means to be “elite” is being reworked within the particular context of present-day South Africa (Kenway et al., 2017; Kenway & Prosser, 2015; Soudien, 2010). Caught between the project of maintaining elite status by drawing on tradition and the need to engage at least somewhat with post-apartheid values of inclusivity, diversity and egalitarianism in an effort to stay relevant, elite private schools perform a simultaneous “class avowal and disavowal” (Kenway & Lazarus, 2017:265). Elite private schools and their students thereby carefully position themselves as elite but not elitist by drawing on a discourse of meritocracy in conceptualising their class privilege.

The tension between tradition and egalitarianism is also seen in the ways that learners at elite private all-girls schools construct femininity. Co-existing in the dominant culture of elite girls’ schools is a form of colonial femininity – respectable young ladies who perform a dutiful and decorative habitus – and a more modern, neoliberal form of “girl power” (Epstein, 2014; Fahey, 2014; Kenway et al., 2017). In conceptualising the empowered form of femininity produced within the context of elite all-girls schools, Kenway et al. (2017:240) highlight the intersection of gender with class. They argue that the kind of feminism underlying these notions of women’s empowerment is one which is “individualistic and careerist, not critical and collectivist” and which “does not cross classed lines.” Not only is the dominant culture of elite private schools racialised and classed, then, it is also gendered.

In this article I question how this classed and gendered culture of private, all-girls schools, and the multiple femininities within this context, shape the everyday lives of young women in an effort to trouble the invisibilisation of middle-class learners in research. Carboni and Bhana’s (2019) work, exploring private school young women’s

engagement with sexually explicit materials (SEM), follows a similar line of inquiry. What they found is that these young women used SEM to exercise their sexuality and desire privately while maintaining a public image of middle-class female respectability, and that it was their material class position and consequent access to internet and personal devices that enabled them to do so. Clearly, class and gender feature significantly in the ways that middle-class young women navigate their sexualities. This article shifts the focus to class and gender influences on the ways that private all-girls school learners conceptualise their sexuality education.

Theoretical Framework

The literature shows that elite private all-girls schools are powerful mechanisms for the reproduction of (middle-) class and class privilege. Furthermore, the dominant culture within this particular schooling environment is not only classed, but racialised and gendered too. In her seminal work on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1990) conceptualised the way that various systems of power interlock to shape individual experiences of identity. This article utilises an intersectional framework to understand how the classed and gendered systems of power operating within the context of a private all-girls school shape learner experiences of sexuality education. While the literature shows the continued dominance of Whiteness in the culture of elite schools in South Africa, this article is specifically about intersections of class and gender. This is not to suggest that race is unimportant or does not feature in the lived experiences of the learner participants in the study. I rather made an epistemological choice to centre gender and class within the context of a private all-girls’ school specifically. How race features in class and gender research is a topic that I will address elsewhere.

In her conceptual analysis of intersectionality, Gouws (2017) highlights that critics of intersectionality have questioned whether privilege should be included in intersectional analyses, given the term’s origin in Crenshaw’s work on the oppression of African American women in the law. Neglecting how privilege intersects with oppression, however, goes against the very premise of intersectionality, which is to acknowledge the multidimensional and interlocking nature of identity and power. In this article I use an intersectional framework to understand how a particular form of privilege – that is, class privilege – and a particular form of oppression – that is, gender inequality – co-exist and operate in the lived experiences of middle-class young women.

Given the explicit focus on class influences in response to the lack of research conducted with middle-class learners within the field of sexuality education, Bourdieu’s (1986, 1990) work on class,

and more specifically his concepts of habitus and cultural capital, are used to supplement intersectionality as a framework. Bourdieu argues that through the (re)enactment of classed habitus, that is, embodied ways of knowing, doing and being “middle-class”, cultural capital is generated for the dominant class and class inequality is reproduced. The literature shows how elite girls’ schools work to mould their learners according to a White, middle-class, feminised ideal, and that learners themselves are often active participants in the reproduction of this ideal. I use Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital to conceptualise the classed and gendered discourses that middle-class women perform, and the various forms of capital or class privilege that these discourses afford them.

Methodology

In this article I analyse data from two semi-structured focus group discussions with Grade 10 learners at St Helen’s – a private, all-girls school in KwaZulu Natal. Two learners, Kendall and Zendaya, were randomly selected from an alphabetical list of Grade 10s at St Helen’s to be the founding members of each focus group and, once agreeing to participate, were asked to invite four friends each to join them. Only two of Kendall’s friends, Mary and Danielle, were able to attend, and together they comprised Group A. Zendaya invited Alisha, Yara, Molly and Anele to participate with her, and together they made up Group B (all names mentioned here are pseudonyms). All participants in Group A were White¹ and all participants in Group B were African. These groups were selected by the initial participants on the basis of friendship. The racial homogeneity within each group points to the continued racial segregation in social interactions and associations in legally desegregated schools.

Focus group discussions have become a popular and valuable methodology for engaging with young people about gender and sexuality in participatory and participant-led ways (Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). I employed focus group interviews in an effort to gain insight into the way that learners talk about sexuality education, and gender and sexuality more broadly, as a group of friends outside the classroom. The focus on “talk” implies a group context – a conversational exchange between learners. Focus group discussions allow such talk to be recorded as data; they allowed me first-hand access to the ways that these learners speak about gender and sexuality with one another and offered insight into their collective construction of class. Like all methodologies, focus group discussions come with merits and challenges, both of which are well-documented (Pattman & Bhana, 2017; Phoenix, Pattman, Croghan & Griffin, 2013; Romm, Nel & Tlale, 2013).

Part of the participant recruitment process was to form focus groups consisting of friends. In their study looking at student sexual cultures at a public all-girls school in South Africa, Mthatyana and Vincent (2015:54) found that while sexuality education lessons were experienced as boring and personally irrelevant, “talk about sex in friendship groups is experienced as important and interesting.” This highlights the setting of friendship groups as an important context for high school girls to talk about topics relating to relationships, desire, gender and sexualities, and points to such a setting as a potentially data-rich context for research. The participants’ familiarity with one another helped them feeling more comfortable, allowing them more freedom to make jokes and to agree and disagree with one another. The selection criterion for focus groups to be comprised of friends was not based on the assumption that friendship implies homogeneity in opinion. Rather, the familiarity between learners allowed for greater participation and disagreement.

The focus group discussions took place on school grounds, in a movie viewing which is part of the library. This location was convenient for participants but also suited the purposes of the research which were to explore the experiences of the learners outside the classroom, but still within the school context. I posed general and open-ended questions to both focus groups, asking participants how they came to attend St Helen’s and what it meant to be a St Helen’s learner, how they experienced their LO classes generally and their sexuality education lessons specifically, and whether and how they spoke about gender, sexuality and relationships outside of the classroom. The content of the discussions, however, was largely directed by the stories, opinions, agreements and disagreements of participants, allowing the participants to lead the discussion in ways that they saw fit, thereby producing data that were learner-driven and learner-focused. Both focus group discussions lasted approximately 50 minutes, and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher.

Important to consider here is the researcher’s influence on the dynamics of the group. While the participants all knew each other well and were all dressed in their school uniforms, I had minimal, if any, interaction with the participants prior to the focus group discussions and was dressed in “everyday” clothes, which positioned me as an outsider. At the same time, however, I am a St Helen’s old girl and was introduced to the learners as such. It was this common identity that positioned me as an insider with regards to the two concepts in focus here – class and gender.

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University and permission to access the school by

the principal of St Helen's. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents, and participation was on a completely voluntary basis. The principal of confidentiality was explained and emphasised to participants. All names for participants and the school are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

The data collected were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as proposed by Fairclough (2013). This analytic approach seeks to connect the micro – i.e. the focus group discussions – with the macro – i.e. broader systems of class privilege and gender inequality. In the first reading of the data I focused on how participants spoke about their sexuality education lessons specifically, and what discursive patterns emerged within and across the two groups in doing so. Here, existing literature on sexuality education in other schooling contexts was a useful point of comparison. In a second reading I examined broader ideas about gender and class expressed by participants and how these were discursively produced. Lastly, in a third reading I sought to understand how, why and under what conditions different discourses about gender and class were prioritised at various points of the discussions. It was this process that enabled connections between text, discourse and systems of power to be made, thus achieving the primary goal of CDA.

Findings

The findings are presented in four themes, each of which represents a recurring idea and related discourses that emerged in participants' talk about their sexuality education. The themes are: (1) the private partisan; (2) immunity of the middle-class: the exclusion of sexual disease in the formal curriculum; (3) immunity of the middle-class: the learning of sexuality education; and (4) the heteronormative performance.

The Private Partisan

The participants have attended St Helen's for varying amounts of time, ranging from 10 months to 11 years, and most have close family members who also attended St Helen's or an elite private all-boys schools in the area. The prevalence of private school attendance within the participants' families demonstrates a commitment to the private school ideal – the idea that a private school provides something that a state school cannot. The name of this theme – the private partisan – points to the perception of private schools to which families within the private school community are deeply committed.

In asking participants about their motivations for attending St Helen's, the theme of excellence emerged as prominent. Academic excellence was identified as central to the image of the school, with Anele referring to St Helen's as “the top IEB

[Independent Examinations Board] *girls' school in the country.*” Alisha expressed not wanting to attend St Helen's, but her mom insisted “*because of the academics.*” The diversity of interests catered for and opportunities provided was also highlighted as a central feature of St Helen's, and one which enabled each girl to “improve” herself. Molly expressed that at St Helen's “*there are people to help you and boost you, to make sure you get to that level.*” The use of language such as “that level”, “a good standard” and “prestigious” refers to the standard of excellence promulgated by St Helen's. Included in this diversity of interests were sporting excellence, particularly hockey, and cultural activities such as playing musical instruments. Kendall highlighted the community outreach club at St Helen's in which girls visited an orphanage every week to play with the children there. This aspect of what it means to be “a St Helen's girl” aligns with the inclusion of service in the school's motto. Significant here is the gendered nature of the image of success constructed by the learners. There is a physical habitus represented by hockey and a dutiful habitus represented by service to others that is not only distinctly middle-class but also “feminine”, revealing a significant intersection of class and gender. While the participants made no explicit reference to private boys' schools in describing their own, implicit in their definition of a private school girl as one who plays hockey and engages in community service is an oppositional relation to private school boys. The “brother school” of St Helen's, for example, has no mention of community outreach in their motto or core values, and their sporting prowess is measured by their achievements in rugby. Middle-class capital is, therefore, not homogenous but rather gendered.

The Teaching of Sexuality Education: Silences Surrounding Sexuality Diversity and Sexual Disease

In speaking about their LO lessons, Group B put gender and sexuality diversity on the agenda almost immediately. Zendaya explained that “*we focus too much on stuff that doesn't affect us*”, listing teenage pregnancy, depression and anxiety as the most talked about topics in LO. Molly then shifted the conversation to what they would like to learn about instead:

Molly: *Like I would rather learn more about the transgender community, the LG- [all: BTQI] [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex Community] it would be really nice cause I don't actually know about it I just hear about it. I mean I'm not going to say I won't google it but I don't really have time to so it would be nice to learn about it at school, have everyone's opinions and everything.*

Alisha: *Most of the time, like we were talking about it at break but some other girls in the grade aren't open to that kind of conversation so it'd be*

interesting to get other girls' opinions but we don't really get that kind of exposure.

Yara: People base it a lot on stereotypes, especially because this is an all-girls school so everyone assumes like okay you're straight.

Group B highlighted the heteronormative nature of their sexuality education lessons as well as the sense of compulsory heterosexuality characterising their broader schooling culture. While Molly, Alisha and Yara all expressed wanting to learn about gender and sexuality diversity in the sexuality education classroom, Anele suggested that LO was not the right context because *"there are a lot of close-minded people who would make their opinion known, so people who are like homosexual, they're gonna keep quiet."* The other participants agreed with Anele that while they would like to learn about sexuality diversity in LO, they were uncertain of whether the sexuality education classroom was a too heterosexist space to have open and inclusive discussions. This aligns with the existing literature in other schooling contexts which highlights how, in practice, sexuality education naturalises heterosexuality while invisibilising and pathologising same-sex attraction (Francis, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019).

Group A was not as quick to identify sexuality diversity as a topic of interest. Nearing the end of the discussion, however, when I asked once more whether there was anything missing from their LO curriculum, Danielle suggested that *"sexuality, like knowing if you're lesbian or gay"* would be a valuable addition. Both Mary and Kendall agreed, with Mary saying to her friends, *"imagine being a girl in our grade and being lesbian, how she must feel, cause we've never spoken about it."* Group A pointed to the silences surrounding sexuality diversity at St Helen's; not only by identifying same-sex attraction as missing from their formal curriculum, but also by considering, for what seemed like the first time, the kind of marginalisation and invisibilisation that sexually diverse learners at St Helen's may experience.

A theme that stood out by virtue of its absence was that of sexual disease. When asked about the content of their LO lessons, particularly those pertaining to sexuality education, Group A did not mention sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) at all, while Group B identified the former but not the latter specifically. When I pointedly asked about their coverage of HIV/AIDS in LO, the participants emphasised the briefness of their LO lessons in this regard, explaining that *"they didn't really go into the detail."* When probed further about the precise content of their HIV/AIDS education, Kendall explained that *"it just fitted into teenage pregnancy like don't do it cause you'll get AIDS"*, with *"it"*

referring to unprotected sexual intercourse. The participants in Group A conveyed a great degree of uncertainty regarding HIV/AIDS, expressing the unanimous sentiment that they *"still don't know what it is."* This stands in stark contrast to the existing literature on sexuality education at coeducation state schools, which identifies topics of sexual disease and danger as particularly prominent (Francis, 2019; Reddy, 2005; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Having attended St Helen's since Grade 0, Group A's only school-based exposure to HIV/AIDS would be that provided by St Helen's. Their lack of knowledge further emphasises the failure of St Helen's to educate their learners about HIV/AIDS – a particularly pertinent issue in the South African context.

The Learning of Sexuality Education: The Immunity of the Middle-Class

While the LO teachers position learners at St Helen's as necessarily heterosexual and immune to sexual disease by excluding sexuality diversity and HIV/AIDS from the curriculum, it is the learners themselves who position themselves as immune to teenage pregnancy. The participants identified the topic of teenage pregnancy as that which they had focused on most – not just within sexuality education – but LO in general. The participants described one of their lessons about teenage pregnancy as being engaging, involving various debates such as the pros and cons of abortion and adoption, and whether a pregnant learner should be allowed to continue to attend St Helen's or not. Mary shared that when her class had this debate, *"it caused a lot of discussion [because she's] got a lot of strong opinionated people in [her] class."* Danielle added to this explaining that *"someone has a different opinion and then we talk about that, and then someone else disagrees."* In describing this back-and-forth between learners, Danielle presented her LO teacher as an objective mediator in class debates who encouraged both sides to reconsider their positions. Despite this active and engaging discussion within the classroom, however, the learners still maintained that the issue of teenage pregnancy, while important, was not personally applicable to private school learners like them. They voiced their frustration with the extensive coverage of teenage pregnancy on the basis that *"it doesn't really happen at a place like this."* This idea was reinforced on multiple occasions in both focus group discussions, with participants making statements like *"I don't think that scenario is very relevant here"* and *"it doesn't happen at private schools."* Teenage pregnancy, unlike HIV/AIDS, has been deemed by the LO teachers as relevant to the young women at St Helen's, but it is the learners themselves who have disregarded it as a possibility in their or their peers' lives.

When pressed further about their thoughts on teenage pregnancy, Group A framed the issue moralistically:

Danielle: *I think because we do get educated about what's wrong and right, we know that you shouldn't, you know, have sexual intercourse. Obviously like we know that cause we learnt it from like Grade 7, Grade 8, Grade 9 and now 10 and probably 11, so we know that you shouldn't, so it's [teenage pregnancy] not really relevant for us.*

Kendall also suggested that while she did not view teenage pregnancy as relevant at St Helen's, it was still an important issue and "*people should be taught it's wrong.*" These participants were not only framing unprotected sexual intercourse as "wrong" but sexual intercourse itself as well, indicating that it was not a pragmatic issue of sexual intercourse being risky in terms of health or educationally inadvisable, but rather a moral concern that schools do and should warn against. This discourse of respectability is one that is well-documented in the literature and which young women are shown to powerfully reproduce (Bhana, 2016; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Group A were suggesting that teenage pregnancy was not relevant at St Helen's because learners at St Helen's had been taught that engaging in sexual intercourse was wrong and consequently prohibited. Group B framed teenage pregnancy differently, although still maintaining that it was not applicable to St Helen's learners. In speaking about teenage pregnancy, the participants in Group B identified the following causes:

Zendaya: *whether it's rape or it's because someone has a boyfriend that's pressuring them.*

Molly: *Sometimes girls don't have a father figure, like they pay more attention to boys because they never had a father figure.*

Alisha: *So they find comfort in them.*

There is a strongly gendered discourse here which positions a pregnant teenage girl as the victim of male power or the absence of male power, a discourse which is prevalent in the existing literature exploring young women's experiences of (hetero)sexuality in South Africa (Bhana & Anderson, 2013; Kruger et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). It is this power that the participants in Group B felt immune to, thereby making them immune to teenage pregnancy as well. While Group B's resistance to the "women-as-victims" discourse may appear as a challenge to patriarchal power, their framing of that resistance as classed aligns more with the kind of elite feminism described by Kenway et al. (2017). The two focus groups conceptualised the reasons for the irrelevance of teenage pregnancy differently, but both communicated a strong sense of immunity to teenage pregnancy by virtue of their middle-class identities.

The Heteronormative Performance

When asked about gender in the LO context, Kendall explained that "*we never really talk about gender.*" Moreover, neither focus group placed gender or feminist issues on the LO or sexuality education agenda, except for Group B who expressed a desire to learn more about the transgender community. While the participants did not explicitly identify their own gender as an important issue, their opinions about and commitment to the gender exclusivity of St Helen's suggests that gender does in fact hold great significance in their lives.

When asked what might be different about their experiences of St Helen's if boys were to attend, the participants immediately asserted that "*girls change*" in the presence of boys. Participants voiced that girls would "*make sure they're all pretty*" and "*care about what they look like and care about what like they say and be careful how they act*", identifying "*shorter dresses*" and "*make-up*" as key changes in appearance. Molly humorously told of the extent to which girls' behaviour changes in the presence of boys:

Molly: *Laugh differently, eat differently, and it's like, girl I've seen you eat chicken with your hands now you eating with a fork and knife what are you doing [all agree and laugh].*

The accounts offered by the participants of marked changes in how girls dress and act around boys emphasises the performativity of femininity. They are drawing on a discourse of hetero-femininity in which young women are highly regulated in terms of how they present themselves when under the male gaze. Looking pretty, having shorter dresses, and eating in a way typically characterised as "lady-like" all represent a kind of femininity that is highly performative and heterosexualised.

In explaining how girls would be different if boys were to attend St Helen's, the participants indicated the possession of (hetero)sexual desire on the part of the girls. Danielle voiced that she "*would get distracted*", which the other focus group participants agreed with, and Molly explained that "*some people go crazy when they see boys like you know [laughter] like they just lose it.*" The idea that girls would be distracted by their sexual attraction to boys in the class, and the depiction of girls as having uncontrollable sexual desire resulting in them "*los[ing] it*" positions them as sexual agents to a certain extent. This agency, while limited, is significant, especially in lieu of Group B's conceptualisation of teenage pregnancy as a product of male power and young women's lack of agency.

While most of the changes identified by participants related to the performance and expression of heterosexual desire, participants also

suggested that the presence of boys in the schooling context would affect girls' ability to fully engage and participate academically. Danielle proposed to the group that girls would "act more dumb", consequently reducing learners' class participation. Kendall echoed this notion, voicing that within the all-girls context of St Helen's, "everyone expresses themselves to their full potential." Similarly, Zendaya expresses that "there might be people who are uncomfortable with being themselves." The idea that girls would not be able to participate academically or express themselves fully speaks to the regulation and suppression of young women by male power. The idea of girls at St Helen's acting "dumb" or not participating in class stands in stark contrast to the participants' accounts of the image of excellence characterising St Helen's. It would seem that the middle-class success available to these learners is dependent on their separation from boys in the school environment.

A final note regarding participants' constructions of gender relates to a point brought up by Zendaya. While she agreed with and contributed to talk of how girls would change in the presence of boys, she later reflected on why this might be:

Zendaya: But I feel like also, it'd be easier like for us to interact with boys 'cause some people just don't interact with boys 'cause they just don't go out and see boys and so when they get the opportunity then it's like hands on whereas if you see them all the time it's much easier and you get used to it like okay I see this person every day

Yara: [they're just people] ja, it's just like, whatever.

This instance of self-reflexivity is significant in the way that Zendaya tries to question how and why the presence of boys brings about changes in girls' behaviour. She proposes to the group that the way they think about girls' reactions to boys attending the school may in fact be a product of their separation. Yara's contribution to this notion, saying that attending school with boys may help girls to realise that boys are "just people", can be understood as a way of denaturalising the heterosexualisation of relations between adolescent boys and girls.

Discussion

Prominent throughout the findings is the way that the learners define St Helen's as a symbol of excellence and how they work to distinguish the school as prestigious. To be a "St Helen's girl" is to be successful, and that notion of success is both middle-class and feminine. This highlights the distinctly classed and gendered nature of the schooling culture at St Helen's; it is a culture that (re)produces its learners at middle-class young ladies, and which reproduces not only class difference but a binary conception of gender as well. The learners themselves also draw on the reputation and resources of their school to position themselves as elite. They draw on the class capital and privilege

that their school provides, and which they and their parents are committed to, to distinguish themselves as elite. The excellence and distinction of their school becomes their own, and it is this classed and gendered discursive resource that the participants draw on when conceptualising their sexuality education and its relevance to them as middle-class young women.

In speaking about their sexuality education, the participants positioned themselves as immune to the gendered risk of teenage pregnancy, attributing this to their elite private school context. In explaining this immunity, one group drew on a moralistic discourse, constructing young middle-class women as morally superior and, therefore, immune to the risk of teenage pregnancy, simply by virtue of their class identity. The other group drew on a heteronormative discourse of women's vulnerability to male power, positioning young middle-class women as exceptions to this gendered construction, again because of their class identity. While the discourses that the two groups drew on in explaining their immunity to teenage pregnancy were different, both groups used the middle-class capital and elite status that comes with being a learner at a private school to reproduce class difference among young women.

This middle-class immunity is not, however, consistent throughout the findings. There is a disjuncture between the middle-class image of success that the learners construct when speaking about St Helen's and the ideas they put forward when imagining their school as co-educational. In the presence of boys, the gendered power dynamics between boys and girls is something that the learners' class identities cannot overcome. Their performance of middle-class success and excellence is suppressed, and it is their performance of femininity and (hetero)sexuality that is prioritised. That the ways in which learners construct and perform their class and gender identities shift at different points in the study points to two important and related theoretical findings. Firstly, the content and performance of gender and of class are not only shaped by their intersection with one another, but the spatial and temporal context of that intersection too; it is not just the intersecting systems of power, in this case of class and gender, that shape individual experience, but also the particular context of that experience which shapes the ways that systems of power intersect.

Secondly, the changing ways in which the middle-class young women in this study conceptualised their identities demonstrated the complex intersection of dominance and oppression in particular. Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality, and much intersectional research that has followed, uses intersectionality as a framework for understanding multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. In my study,

however, I investigated the intersections between gender and class, but more specifically, young women and middle-classness. This can be understood as the intersection of a form of oppression with a form of dominance. The middle-class young women featured here did not conceptualise themselves as either dominant by virtue of their middle-class identities or subordinate by virtue of their gender identities. Instead, they drew on these positionings in changing and innovative ways. This particular application of intersectionality as a framework highlights its analytical utility in understanding the way in which these seemingly contradictory positionalities are experienced. While rooted in a South African context, the role that elite private schools play in the reproduction of gender inequality and class privilege globally (Kenway et al., 2017) renders these theoretical insights relevant across geographical and socio-political contexts.

Conclusion

An overview of the literature pertaining to sexuality education in South Africa as indicated earlier reveals that such research is conducted predominantly in co-educational state schools, and more specifically Black township schools. With this study I have shown that this lacuna in the literature mistakenly assumes that sexuality education is not pertinent in the lives of middle-class learners attending private schools. The robust and engaging discussion among participants about topics related to sexuality education highlighted the vested interest that these learners had in such conversations and the importance of sexuality education in the private school context.

While I aimed to address the literary lacuna regarding sexuality education in private schools, it could not be done single-handedly. Further research exploring the teaching and learning of sexuality education in private schools in South Africa is necessary. The findings highlight the importance of middle-class positionings in private school learners' conceptualisation of sexuality education, but further research is needed to understand this fully. In this study I only looked at learners attending a private all-girls school. The influence of class and gender and the intersections thereof on the learning of sexuality education in private all-boys' schools is an area of research that requires attention. My study also focused exclusively on the intersections of gender and class in learners' conceptualisations of sexuality education. There is a need for research that deals with other intersectional considerations such as race and sexuality.

The need for further research aside, the findings in this study are sufficient to draw some conclusions and make recommendations regarding sexuality education in the private school context. The findings reveal various gaps in the sexuality

education curriculum at a private all-girls' school. Much like sexuality education in other schooling contexts, the curriculum at St Helen's was found to be deeply heterocentric and heteronormative. The topic of sexual disease was also found to be absent. This is a concerning finding given the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Knowledge of what HIV/AIDS is, its prevention and its treatment is vital to South African learners regardless of class. The failure of private schools to teach learners about sexual disease leaves learners confused and uncertain which can lead to risky sexual practices, but also contributes to a classed stigmatisation of sexual disease and those affected by it. There is a need for LO teachers at private schools to recognise the personal relevance of sexuality diversity and sexual disease to the lives of private school learners, and to teach about these topics in a way that acknowledges this relevance.

While teenage pregnancy was found to be extensively covered in the sexuality curriculum at St Helen's, the learners themselves framed it as personally irrelevant by virtue of their middle-class identities. This highlights the importance of class identity in shaping the learning of sexuality education, and the need for LO teachers to acknowledge class influences in their teaching. The perception that private school learners are immune to teenage pregnancy is one that needs to be addressed directly and discussed in sexuality education lessons at private schools. Failing to do so leaves private school girls with a false sense of security regarding the risk of pregnancy and contributes to the stigmatisation of teenage pregnancy.

The participants spoke about gender with great enthusiasm and interest but reported that gender had not been spoken about in their LO lessons. The exclusion of gender from the formal curriculum stands in stark contrast to its inclusion in the hidden curriculum. The detailed constructions of what it means to be a St Helen's girl and the gendered discourses drawn on in these constructions highlight that while gender may not be explicitly taught in LO, the school is teaching its learners about what it means to be a girl, and more specifically a middle-class girl. Thinking about the significance of the all-girls categorisation of St Helen's, what that means and why it might be important, proved to be a conversation that the learners were interested in and one which generated critical discussion about constructions of gender, particularly within group B. This study serves as an example of the kinds of conversations about gender that should be included in the sexuality education curriculum, and one which LO teachers can incorporate in their teaching. Recognising the significance of gender in the lives of private, all-girls school learners needs to translate into the inclusion of discussions about gender in the curriculum.

The call for LO teachers to include sexuality diversity and sexual disease in the curriculum, to consider class influences on the learning of sexuality education, and to facilitate critical discussions about gender is not one that falls to LO teachers alone. Specifying the content of sexuality education in the national curriculum and improved training for LO teachers are necessary developments in supporting LO teachers. The engagement, interest, and at times criticality shown by participants in the focus group discussions is promising in thinking about the potential of sexuality education lessons for learning about sexualities in a way that challenges classed and patriarchal power. However, without the necessary curricular and training resources for LO teachers in private and state schools alike, this potential will go unrealised.

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Notes

- i. The terms “White” and “African” are used to refer to the racial identities of participants in my research, not in a way that reinforces ideas of racial essentialism but rather to reflect the continued social significance of these racial categories in South Africa
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 17 February 2020; Revised: 13 October 2020; Accepted: 20 January 2021; Published: 31 December 2021.

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