Homophobic violence in South African township schools: Beyond heteronormative discourses of violence

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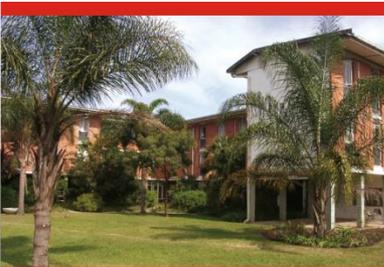
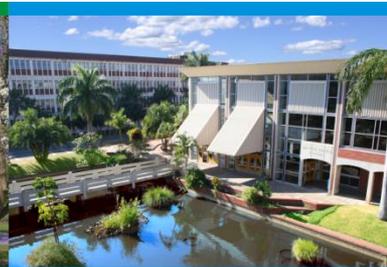EDGEWOOD CAMPUS   HOWARD COLLEGE CAMPUS   NELSON R MANDELA SCHOOL OF MEDICINE   PIETERMARITZBURG CAMPUS   WESTVILLE CAMPUS

UKZN – INSPIRING GREATNESS

Violence and schooling

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- Schools seen as unsafe spaces for both learners and teachers (Netshitahane and Vollenhoven 2002; Herr and Anderson, 2003; Harber, 2004; Smith and Smith, 2006; Meyer-Adams and Conner, 2008; Ngakane, Muthukrishna and Ngcobo, 2013).

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- Much work in South Africa has focused on physical violence as experienced through corporal punishment (Morrell, 2001), sexual harassment (Bhana, 2005) and intimate partner violence largely due to HIV/AIDS (Jewkes et al, 2010; Jewkes et al, 2013).

- Russell et al found in a study of 549 grade 8 learners that of the 78.5% of the participants who had intimate partners, 10% of the boys reported forcing partners to have sex with them while 39% of the girls reported having experienced physical violence from their partners.

Incidences of violence in South African schools

- In two very recent national studies of violence and schooling, the problem of school violence emerged as among the most key challenges facing the South African education system.

- In a 2012 national study school violence consisting of 5,939 learners, 121 principals and 239 educators. Burton and Leoschut found that 22.2% of high school learners have been threatened with violence or had been the victim of an assault, robbery and/or sexual assault at school: 12.2% had been threatened with violence by someone at school; 6.3% had been assaulted; 4.7% had been sexually assaulted or raped; 4.5% had been robbed at school. Cyber bullying was also reported to be among the key issues, with one in five learners reporting having experienced some form of cyber bullying.

- The study also found that violence was not simply limited to learners, but that teachers and principals were also implicated. "More than a quarter of principals claimed to have received reports of verbal violence, and more than a tenth received reports of physical violence in which educators were the aggressors." Importantly, educators were also often victims of verbal violence (52.1%), physical violence (12.4%) and sexual violence (3.3%) perpetrated by learners.

- Similarly, in a recent report, a national research study led by Mncube and Harber (2013) found that 55% of learners responded that they had been victims of violence in schools, with most violence occurring on a weekly basis (28%). This points to a serious problem of violence in our schools.

- However, while much of this work on school violence has been important for understanding the nature, dynamics and challenges of violence in schools, this work has often missed an important analysis focused on gender and sexuality, and when present such analysis has failed to sufficiently analyse the complexities presented by gender and sexuality. In particular this work has failed to understand how heteronormativity may be implicated in the experiences of violence.

Homophobic violence

- Homophobia is the fear or hatred of homosexual people. It also refers to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices (Flood & Hamilton, 2008).

- In the context of violence, homophobic violence refers to violence which occurs "when its victims are chosen because they are believed to be homosexual" (Mason, 1993, p. 2). This violence may be sexual, physical or verbal, sending a powerful message of hatred and intolerance.

- Homophobic violence has been highlighted as a major issue in countries such as the UK, US and Australia, with very little work done in developing contexts (Warwick, Chase & Aggleton, 2004; Leach & Humphreys, 2007).

- Of the international studies that exist, it remains clear that learners perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or intersex (LGBTQI) continue to experience negative schooling experiences. In a national survey of LGBTQI learners in the US, 40% reported having been physically harassed at least once due to their sexual orientation, 64.3% reported feeling unsafe in school (Birkett, Espelage & Koenig, 2009).

- Linguistic harassment has also been noted as a key challenge, with 82% of LGBTQI youth in the US reported to have verbally harassed (Rivers, 2001).

- Homophobic violence has also been noted to lead to drug and alcohol abuse, self harm, depression and suicide attempts (Davies and McInnes, 2008).

SA

- In South Africa, work focused on homophobic violence directly has been scarce.

- Richardson (2004, 2008) has engaged in pioneering work which has focused on providing interventions for learners who engage in same-sex relations in South African schools.

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

Focus of paper

- Experiences of homophobic violence among black, township learners perceived to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- Paper based on a MAC AIDS funded intervention study which sought to address homophobia in South African schools.
- The paper shows that violence directed at school learners who engage in same-sex relations not only continues to be pervasive, but that teachers continue to be among the key instigators and perpetrators of this violence
- Arguments: interventions on school violence need to take into account how heteronormativity is implicated in the experiences of violence among learners and teachers.
- Framework: Queer Theory

Methodology

- 14 participants in this project (including teachers, learners, and students).

- The participants also involved a wide range of sexualities.

- All the participants were black and taught, learnt or are currently learning in township schools around the Durban.

- Participants accessed through teachers, learners and partnerships with community organisations.

- Data comes from 5, 4 hour workshops and individuals interviews lasting approximately an hour each with all members.

Findings

- Lesbian and gay learners often have negative schooling experiences largely due to the explicit, visible violence experienced in school as well as other more covert 'injurious' forms of violence. Such violence is often deeply embedded in heteronormativity and patriarchy.

- Teachers are heavily implicated as much as learners in the violence experienced.

Language as an injurious form of violence

- Male learners reported that words like 'isitabane', 'moffie' and 'ongqingili', which are all derogatory isiZulu and Afrikaans words with a meaning similar to 'faggot'.

- Mandla noted: "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).

- Language is a powerful tool in which homophobia and heterosexism are entrenched. Such an entrenchment is often coercive and is maintained through hegemony and collusion (Morrow & Torres 1995).

Fear as covert violence

- One of the ways in which heteronormativity is maintained is through fear: such fear becomes pervasive and irrational, thus ensuring that the status quo is maintained. Teachers were reportedly viewing homosexuality as contagious, with 'straight' learners being encouraged to stay away from gay and lesbian learners.

- Nomusa, a girl participant in the project, noted that: "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. . ."

- The fear of being infected often found expression in the responses from other learners, with gay and learners reporting isolation and discrimination, especially when it came to toilet use.

- Those who were friends with gay and lesbian learners also reported injurious linguistic discrimination: 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. (Musa, learner participant)

- Supportive teachers were assigned gay learners.

Physical violence, patriarchy and heteronormativity

- Homophobia is a weapon for sexism (Pharr 1997).
- Renold (2006) suggests that it is the hierarchical and oppositional organisation of sexuality that works to consolidate discourses of homophobia and (hetero)sexism.
- Physical violence is often used to enforce and regulate sexualities and in turn works to maintain patriarchy and heteronormativity in place.
- Physical, overt violence including shoving, threatening to expel and beating gay and lesbian learners was found to be key in the negative experiences by gay and lesbian learners.
- 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.

- Often the violence was gendered, with lesbian girls told not to wear pants as this was encouraging their lesbian interests.

- Perhaps it is the insidious manner in which 'lesbophobic rape' (Diesel, 2011) was used to deter learners from claiming lesbian identities.

- 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."

Religion, culture and misinformation

- Study found that homophobic violence is largely driven by three forces: religion, culture and misinformation.

- Participants stressed for instance that homosexuality was against both their cultures and religions, hence the continued violence. A concerning point is the continued positioning of violence as a solution to disagreements and/or differing viewpoints, something that needs serious addressing.

- Additionally, it became evident in the study that often homophobic violence is not driven by malicious intents, but largely by misinformation: some teachers and learners generally have very limited information about same-sex desire.

- Mrs Mkhize noted: "It's not that teachers want to be nasty. You can't blame them. They don't understand how it happens for girls to find other girls attractive. They just think that the children are going through a stage and if they are discouraged, they will stop and become like normal children".

Conclusion and way forward

- Studies of violence need to seriously consider how heteronormativity (and by implication masculinities and patriarchy) are implicated in the study of violence.

- Approaches towards addressing violence in schools need to focus not only on learners but on teachers too.

- A policy framework which explicitly identifies homophobic violence as a concern, therefore by extension fully protecting gay and lesbian learners needs to be pursued. Such a framework also needs to explore curricula issues.

- Schools can only be safe spaces for gay and lesbian learners when the broad and complex manifestations of violence are fully acknowledged.