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(S)exclusion in the sexuality education classroom: young people on gender and power relations

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive sexuality education which includes discussion about gender and power is increasingly seen as an effective way of promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights. Yet all too often the potential of good quality sexuality education is not realised. This study engages with young peoples’ evaluation of a sexuality education programme in Ethiopia. Using data from ethnographic field notes, focus group discussions and interviews with students, teachers and sexual and reproductive health workers in Oromia region, it reveals the existence of gendered practices in sexuality education. Three forms of exclusion were evident: first, exclusion through selection to participate in the programme; second, exclusion of the views of young people through gendered interpretations and practices; third, exclusion of the views of young people through the omission of discussion on topics that are relevant to them, such as love, relationships and sexual intercourse. As a result, the programme’s potential to contribute to questioning gender relations and improving the emotional and sexual health of young people is undermined. The programme reproduces a gender order in school and arguably broader society, which is a source of frustration and alienation for young people.

Sexuality education for young people is gaining increasing attention in the fields of education and international development. In recent years, strong debate has taken place about what and how to teach young people about sexual and personal development, and what goals it should achieve (Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Jones 2011; Lesko 2010; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). However, the voices of young people themselves are not always included in these discussions (Allen 2007, 2011; Jones 2011), and critical discussion of the gender and power in sexuality education is rare (Rogow and Haberland 2005). In line with the need for the proper representation of young peoples’ views in sexuality education debate, and the relevance of these needs to programme development, this study engages with young peoples’ views about a sexuality education programme in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. The programme aimed to contribute to sexual health of young people by providing them the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions. The objective of this paper is to

KEYWORDS

Gender; sexuality education; exclusion; young people; Ethiopia
reveal how asking young people about their needs with respect to sexuality, and their experiences of a sexuality programme in school, can shed light on gendered practices and practices of exclusion. Findings argue for closer engagement with the role of gender, power and culture in interpreting and providing sexuality education.

Sexuality education: debates and discourses

In the context of increasing debate about sexuality education, what it should teach and to whom, several approaches can be distinguished (Jones 2011; Lesko 2010; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). Most prominent is the debate between abstinence-only sexuality education and more comprehensive forms of provision (see e.g. Lesko 2010). Abstinence-only sexuality education is one of the most conservative types of sexuality education (Jones 2011), promoting fear-instilled abstinence of sexual intercourse until marriage. It is often justified by traditional, religious or moral values, although the (sexual/reproductive) health benefits of complete abstinence may also be used as a rationale for discouraging pre-marital sex. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), in contrast, is often linked to the promotion of positive ideas towards sexuality, attention to diversity and a clearly defined gender sensitive approach which includes discussions of power (Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2015). CSE is gaining increasing popularity among a variety of actors in the field of international development, and is argued to be the most effective way to addressing the issues in school (Braeken and Cardinal 2008). However, as recent attacks on CSE by more conservative actors show, this consensus is by no means universal (see, e.g. Family Watch International 2016).

Aiming to better understand debate about the provision of sexuality education to young unmarried people, which is not uncontentious in any given society, Miedema (2013) distinguishes three approaches that identify the motivations of the providers of sexuality education – morality- health- and rights-based approaches to sexuality education – conceptualising education as a means to instil certain moral values, provide scientific information or encourage the right to self-determination respectively (see also Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). Additionally, the centrality of developing respectful relationships and associated emotional development and life skills has gained increasing attention in the growing literature on sexuality and relationships education (Rogow and Haberland 2005) and respectful relationships education (Ollis 2014). These programmes may contribute to tackling gender-based violence, and transforming gender unequal norms through schooling (Ollis 2014). Finally, critical discussion of gender and power, and the need to integrate this into education programmes that teach about sexuality is receiving growing support. To successfully promote gender equality in schools, a feminist approach to research and interventions needs to be taken in which the questioning of gender and power relations is central (Rogow and Haberland 2005).

The programme of study this paper focuses on is an extra-curricular programme implemented in selected schools in Ethiopia with support of a national and international NGO. The programme defines itself as a rights-based CSE programme in that it pays explicit attention to love, friendship and relationships, and issues of gender and power in Ethiopian society (see also Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2015). It seeks to operate with aspects of health-, rights- and morality-based approaches to sexuality education (see also Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). It is a computer-based programme, in which students interactively study the material, and teachers act as a facilitator of education.
The lived realities of young people

To complement debates and discourses about what sexuality education should teach and how, it is essential to embrace the view of young people themselves (Allen 2011). It is worth asking to what extent students experience school sexual education programmes as supportive of developing values and attitudes about their personal and sexual development. Not doing so, and only focusing on for instance health outcomes and behaviour change, fails to recognise young people as sexual beings, and arguably as meaningful citizens with social, economic or political agency (Allen 2005; Braeken and Cardinal 2008; Ingham 2005; Jones 2011; Rijssdijk et al. 2013).

Jones (2011) argues that inherent in different approaches to sexuality education are attempts to ‘save’ assumedly innocent and asexual children from sexuality problems through education. However, as she points out, sexuality education should respond more encompassingly to the ‘actual child,’ which is why there is a need to listen more fully to children’s voices in this respect. Moreover, including the voices of young people who receive the education can lead to unexpected and refreshing insights, which evaluative measures defined exclusively by adults tend to overlook (Allen 2005; Bayer et al. 2010).

The lived realities of young people may contrast with what is taught in sexuality education. Studies have revealed that young people often evaluate their sexuality education as too ‘scientific,’ neglecting emotional and relational aspects of sexuality, and detailed real life sexual knowledge (Allen 2005). Sexuality education often fails to engage with young people’s lived experiences, is largely prescriptive, and sometimes even contradictory (Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011). Furthermore, sexuality education is often strongly feminised, focusing on girls’ sexuality problems at the expense of young men’s interests, needs and experiences.

Gender, power and sexuality education

A relational approach understands gender as a social structure, and explores the practices that are shaped by it (Connell 2002, 2011). It considers multiple dimensions, levels and types of relationships as key to gender relations: power, economics, emotional relations and symbolic relations. Schools, within such a framework, are sites where these types of relations are constantly re-negotiated, transformed or reinforced, for instance in the sexuality education classroom.

CSE is often viewed as an opportunity to address and transform gender inequalities. It has been said to question existing gender relations and encourage more respectful relationships between girls and boys in Ethiopia (Le Mat 2016). However, at the same time in this and other contexts, the sexuality education classroom can be site of conflicting messages about gender relations, resulting in confusion, fear or cynicism, and reinforcing gender unequal regimes in school and societies (Le Mat 2016; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011). Critical thinking, encouraged by discussion of gender and power (Bajaj 2009; Rogow and Haberland 2005; Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2015), has been shown to be central to gender equitable practices and relations in schools. It is best achieved through careful consideration of the curriculum and teaching practices which promote respectful peer relationships (Allen 2005; Haste 2013; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011), and wider school policies and environments.
Studies focused on the implementation and practice of sexuality education have revealed that sexuality education is often girl-focused (Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011), and tends to problematise boys’ sexuality (Haste 2013). More specifically, curricula tend to send protective messages to girls, and do not recognise the different cultural scripts boys may use (Allen 2005; Haste 2013; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011). This is reflected in, for example, the information sources boys and girls access (Haste 2013; Measor 2004), and in gendered curricula and interactions in school whereby girls tend to be seen as in need of protective messages, whereas boys are expected to be sexually active (Measor 2004; Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011; Rijsdijk et al. 2013). By not recognising this in the curriculum, sexuality education might risk reproducing the same gender stereotypes, rather than addressing them.

Because of the above, it is questionable to what extent the implementation of CSE programmes can support critical discussion of gender and power. Using the framework advanced by Miedema (2013), this paper analyses teachers’ rationalisations of how and why to teach sensitive issues in the CSE classroom. The paper engages with the tensions that arise in programmes which stress the improvement of health outcomes (e.g. increased condom use, decrease in STIs or maternal morbidity), while viewing sexuality education as a means for economic development rather than a liberating force for empowerment and enjoyment of sexual and reproductive rights (Chilisa 2005; Lewis 2002).

Methods

Data in this paper derive from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students and their teachers in the setting where the sexuality education programme was implemented. Three upper-primary schools (grades 7 and 8), two secondary schools (grades 9 and 10) and one out of school youth centre were included in the study. All education centres were located in Oromia region in Ethiopia, but in four different towns. At the time of the data collection (April 2014), the schools and out of school youth centre had been running the programme as a pilot for 1–3 years. Interpreters knowledgeable about the context and fluent in Afan Oromo and Amharic translated during some of the FGDs and interviews, and in some cases, helped with the interpretation of findings. In total, 66 participants were included in the analysis.

Five FGDs consisting of five to seven members, of which two were same-gender, and three were mixed-gender in composition, served as the main source for understanding the student experiences. Following the FGDs, individual interviews were held with 15 students and 16 teachers in all the schools.

Both FGDs and interviews were conducted in an informal and confidential manner, and anonymity and voluntary participation were assured. In order to contextualise the discussions and interviews, additional interviews and conversations in which ethnographic notes were taken, were held with sexual and reproductive health professionals in national and regional offices of the local implementing NGO. So long as participants feel comfortable doing so, FGDs and interviews were recorded and transcribed, with findings being complemented by ethnographic field notes.

Content analysis of the transcripts and/or ethnographic notes from FGDs and interviews provided insight into how and to what extent students and teachers experienced the sexuality education programme as achieving its aim of assisting young people in their personal and sexual development. The views of participants were compared and contrasted, based
on role position and gender, to gain insight into experiences with the programme, and possibly different interpretations of students’ needs with respect to personal and sexual development.

Findings

Teachers and young people’s accounts with regard to young people’s needs and questions about sexuality, and experiences of CSE initiatives in school, reveal gendered practices and practices of exclusion in three important ways: relating to the selection of participants: gendered perspectives of the needs of young boys and girls: and a lack of discussion about topics relevant to young peoples’ interests, emotions and relationships. Engagement with young peoples’ voices makes a case for wider recognition of the central role of gender, emotions and relations in approaches to sexuality education.

Exclusion through selection mechanisms

Unequal access to the CSE programme was the first and most obvious form of gender bias. Many participants felt gender parity in the classroom should be the starting point for a more equitable forms of sexuality education. Yet, the extra-curricular programme had no clear guidelines about who could participate and what type of student had priority. Lack of clear guidelines about this meant that some schools developed their own guidelines, or went by a ‘first come, first serve’ basis. The few schools that had developed more detailed inclusion criteria based on their selection of participants on the basis of young people’s overall school performance, with a focus on English language skills, perceived behaviour, as well as the perceived availability of time. For instance, while some schools aimed to have a representation of students classified in ‘poor’, ‘average’ and ‘good’ performing students in the CSE programme, others included only those that were considered to perform well in school, as they were considered to be deserving of participation in extra-curricular programmes. Particularly students who performed well in English were selected given the programme was taught in English.1 In practice this means that girls, students with low grades or those with low SES backgrounds were excluded from the programme. The programme thereby – unintentionally – reproduced existing divisions in society.

Being selected to take part in the CSE programme was regarded as an achievement, producing an advantageous position for participants in the school. Especially gifted young people tended to gain access to international networks through the programme, which further reproduced their privilege. At the same time, access to the CSE programme was limited for more disadvantaged students who would benefit as much from it. For instance, one young woman observed that it was often girls from lower class backgrounds who had the most questions about sexuality, given their mothers were less likely to speak to them about these issues. However, because such young women were often not considered to belong to the category of ‘well-performing’ students, they tended not to be encouraged to participate in the programme.

In line with these observations, students and teachers considered girls in particular to be in need of support to attend the CSE programme. In one school, for instance, only three out of the 40 enrolled CSE-students were female. One of these three girls observed that girls in
her school were in need of encouragement to take part in the programme. Additionally, she felt that at least one female teacher should be assigned to teach CSE:

I think it’s best for a girl if there’s another woman as a teacher, for us, to be more free. (…) there are some students who feel nervous when they want to explain their idea for [male] teachers, but if there is another [female] teacher I think it’s the best. (…) For example, when [girls get their menstruation] for the first time, maybe they feel nervous, but [when] there is a female teacher, maybe they can explain themselves to that teacher freely, because she’s female, just like that girl. (Girl, grade 8)

Importantly, most CSE teachers were not selected or assigned to their roles based on interest, but rather on subject background, language skills and time availability. Some teachers mentioned that indeed they were not initially motivated to teach the programme, which may have affected classroom interactions.

Exclusion through gendered practices and interpretations

In addition to challenges of accessing sexuality education, gender biases in the information communicated within the CSE classroom caused further forms of exclusion. Because of gendered interpretations of what girls/boys needs were, the sexuality education programme did not always appropriately respond to young peoples’ needs. Furthermore, the information communicated through the lessons reaffirmed the existing gender order through the messages and interactions conveyed in the classroom.

Gendered interpretations of girls’ and boys’ needs

The language teachers used in relation to boys and girls offers a powerful illustration of how young peoples’ perceived needs were fundamentally gendered. In several schools in the study, teachers and students alike considered that girls learning the necessary skills ‘to protect themselves’ ought to be a main focus of their sexuality education. Girls, participants assumed, needed to be given the tools and information to protect themselves against sexual advances in view of the dangers of STIs and HIV, unwanted pregnancy, and the importance of preserving their virginity. Teachers, for instance, warned girls against the dangers of becoming pregnant or losing their virginity before they were married. During a FGD with young people, participants confirmed that lessons around pregnancy and virginity were mostly geared towards advising girls how to protect themselves against the shameful consequences of premarital sexual intercourse, rather than discussing personal and sexual relationships in a broader sense. Boys on the other hand felt left out of the discussion: ‘When we talk about virginity, most of the time, even in the programme, it’s more focused on girls (…) [not everything] is clear for us’ (Boy, grade 8, focus group discussion).

In addition, it was considered important for girls to learn how to protect themselves against potential violence from boys: ‘[Teachers] give us advice related to love, so how she can defend herself from boys, how she can defend [against] the boys using justice system, and also they [refer her to a] club called guidance and counselling for girls’ (Girl, grade 10). In another FGD, girls brought up the lack of opportunity to discuss ‘premarital sex’ (Girl, grade 11, focus group discussion), fearing judgement and being regarded as indecent. In consequence, sexuality education messages directed at girls were largely geared towards limiting their opportunity to explore issues of desire as an active sexual being. Both teachers and students argued that if girls could manage to save themselves from these dangers, and focus
on their education, they would be better prepared to participate in the labour market and be of importance to their family, community and country. Thus, girls’ sexuality was reduced to something that should be protected, and if protected well, instrumentalised to serve economic interests.

In relation to boys, fewer concerns were raised except with regard to STIs and HIV. During a FGD with young men, participants repeatedly referred to needing to learn ‘how to control themselves’ (Boys, grade 8, focus group discussion). Young women and teachers similarly referred to ‘control’ as a critical skill young men needed to master, illustrating the expectation that young men are naturally predisposed to strong sexual urges:

If he has a problem …. for example, if he loves someone and if the girl does not permit to be with him, he may use different forces. So [teachers] can advise him not to do that, to control himself, and to control his feelings. (Girl, grade 10)

Teachers advised boys to control themselves at least until they had finished high school, as being sexually active was considered to distract students from academic success. Teachers and boys alike reasoned that, if boys have finished their education, they would have the means to participate in the labour market and be able to care for a future family. However, the assumption that boys were ‘naturally’ sexually aggressive arguably limited their personal, relational and sexual development. Moreover, because boys were expected to be knowledgeable about sexuality, their questions, concerns and ideas concerning sexuality received little attention (cf. Muhanguzi and Ninsiima 2011). This dichotomous understanding of girls’ and boys’ needs reproduces stereotypical assumptions about sexuality, and fails to question the role of gender relations and gender power in influencing the expectations placed on women and men.

In contrast to the above assumptions that girls needed to ‘protect themselves’ and boys needed to ‘control themselves’, their actual interests were rather different. Both boys and girls expressed interested in having information about sexual relationships and sexual intercourse. However, their means of expressing this interest differed. One teacher observed that girls become quieter when the topic of sexual intercourse is addressed, whereas boys become more enthusiastic:

… the females are not this much eager to ask, because they are afraid. Boys ask more. They get some information on sexual acts. In the sexuality part [of the curriculum], it talks about oral sex, masturbation, and what does it mean. Is there such like of act? Just they are too much eager to know. (Male teacher)

In interviews, boys expressed an interest in having ‘full information’ about sex and sexuality, which went beyond information about acts and practice, but also concerned emotional and relational matters such as how to know when the time is right and how to make their girlfriends happy. However, some teachers again problematised this type of boys’ behaviour, complaining that they cannot sit still and talk too much during the lessons. Girls on the other hand, were viewed as mostly well-behaved, not disturbing the class to the same extent. However, this perspective worked from an assumption of innocence that was further reinforced by silence around the topic: girls tended to avoid explicit reference to sexuality so as not to be considered rude or judged (see also Lucas 2001; Mulumebet 2006; in Kebede, Hilden, and Middelthon 2014). As girls in one FGD point out, they feared learning and speaking about premarital sex, because ‘They are judging. When we talk about sexual intercourse [people say], “Oh she’s not good girl”. They’re judging you’ (Girl, grade 11, focus group discussion). It is through such interactions that boys’ sexuality becomes further problematised
and girls’ expected lack of interest in sexual intercourse (they are assumed to be more interested in topics such as virginity, pregnancy and bodily change) is reinforced. These interactions affirm stereotypes, silences and a gender order in which there is little space for girls’ sexuality and desire.

Gendered practices in school: exclusion and gender-based violence

In addition to the gendered identification of what the assumed needs of boys compared to those of girls were, tolerance of gender-based violence in schools contributes to another kind of gender-based exclusion. Ironically, while students learned about what gender equality meant through their sexuality education, their actual experiences in school were far from the ideal picture that is communicated. Gender violence could be expressed in power relations, the division of labour within the school (e.g. girls having to clean the compound), the perpetuation and tolerance of sexual violence, and symbolic violence in terms of, for instance, the misogynistic language used in school (see also Connell 2002; Le Mat 2016). In particular sexual violence may be perpetuated by teachers, with research revealing the serious implications and contradictory messages that affect students, especially girls, as a result of sexual violence (Le Mat 2016).

However, it was not only through the perpetuation of sexual violence that negative practices such as those described above play out. In lessons that were designed to critically address notions of gender and power, one girl described the values transmitted.

There is a problem even for the teachers. Because they teach us even about HIV (…) they see like, all of HIV-infection comes from girls. They think like that. And when we learn, even they break our morals, and we feel angry because of that. Because they tell us that all of the problems come from girls. (Girl, grade 10)

This comment reveals how teachers reinforce gender discrimination through their teaching, even in sexuality education classes. Clearly, such messages of blame are emotionally disturbing for girls, likely affecting her attachment to the subject, the teacher and possibly schooling in a broader sense.

Excluding sex from sexuality education

Finally, exclusion of explicit classroom discussion of the topic of sex itself and the (cultural) meanings attached to it, illustrates the lack of attention given to young people’s real concerns about sexuality. In this study, many young people expressed an interest in knowing more about ‘premarital sex’ or sex and desire, and emphasised how related relational and emotional aspects such as friendships and romance were important to them. However, teachers seem to neglected or reduced these topics to issues confined to marriage, and not relevant to young unmarried school-going people.

In good quality CSE, teaching about taboos and sensitive issues is central. However, teachers in this study reportedly struggled to engage with what were seen as highly controversial topics (see also Ingham and Mayhew 2006; Iyer and Aggleton 2013; Oshi, Nakalema, and Oshi 2005). Some of them said they felt uncomfortable speaking openly about pre-marital sex or homosexuality, and so they skipped lessons on these topics all together. Other teachers who did mention these topics in their lessons but provided different accounts to those in the curriculum about why these were important matters (Schaapveld 2013; see also Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). With respect to sexual intercourse, for example, most teachers
used a health-based and moral perspective to justify what was taught. For instance, by emphasising the ‘dangers’ of sexual intercourse, the curriculum could be used to promote abstinence or delay, rather than, for instance, safe sex. Similarly, teachers emphasised in interview the importance of teaching that ‘sex is not the same as sexuality’. In this lesson, students learn about different levels of intimacy, and how to list practices ranging from hugging, kissing, and touching to sexual intercourse. Many teachers took this as an opportunity to tell students that sexual intercourse is not necessary, adding that it is also not appropriate at a young age, and that young people can be intimate with their boyfriends or girlfriends in different, less dangerous ways. Consequently, an emphasis on the dangers of sex was often reflected in students’ own statements in interview.

Sex, first is dangerous. Second, it is very important. It’s dangerous because if we have sex it might give HIV/AIDS or diseases. Sex is important for having a child or for marriage. At the right time. If it is after a marriage, it is very important. But before a marriage it is different and it is not important. (Boy, grade seven, focus group discussion)

In their teaching, teachers typically used phrases such as young people should ‘respect their sexuality’ to indicate how and why young people should abstain from sex: because it is dangerous, and because exam success needed to be prioritised at their young age. For teachers, the perception that sexual relations ought to be reserved for marriage justified teaching about a taboo topic but only from a moralistic perspective, giving young people the ‘right’ information as preparation for their future family lives (Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). Other teachers justified the messages they conveyed based on a health-based point of view, as it was important to warn students about the dangers of STIs. Teachers’ interpretations of what adequate CSE entailed thus differed from those of the programme designers, who put greater stress on rights-based rationales. For example, one of the final lessons in the programme encourages students to set goals for the future and to make future plans. In practice, this was often interpreted and communicated as ‘focus on your education, and not on sex, to have a bright future’, or it was used as an opportunity to again relay messages about delaying sexual debut. CSE was thus often used to decrease the risk that young people would become sexually active and thus be distracted from completing their education.

Teachers’ rationales and justifications for their teaching stood in stark contrast to the interests and needs of students who felt it might be the right time for sex, and who had been in romantic relationships for a while, and had pressing questions. For these students, important information was left out, and they did not receive answers to the questions they were most concerned about. For instance, one student described in interview how details concerning contraceptives had been left out of lessons, and referred to the teacher’s provision of information as very ‘controlled’: ‘For example, if you take different medicines for contraceptives, (…) our teachers tell us what is this, but the teachers information is just controlled you know. It may not go further’. (Female student, grade 10). The programme thus did not always give young people the information they needed to make well-informed decisions about important issues. Young people in particular were concerned about the emotional and relational aspects of sex, which were discussed is a very limited way due to the emphasis on dangers and abstinence. These conflicting foci between the aims of teachers and the students’ questions created a major disconnect between the programme and its reception.
In consequence, students reported they felt not being taken seriously. However, from many teachers' points of view, the best advice to give to young people was to delay sexual initiation, and they regarded it as their (moral) duty as educators to teach accordingly. This sense of responsibility, teachers felt, further complicated informing young unmarried people about sexual intercourse. Explanations for this can be found in the health-, moral- or rights discourses (see also Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011) that were used as rationales for their modification of the (intended) curriculum. Yet, discussion of sexual relationships and expressing desire are essential in addressing gender and power in the sexuality education classroom. Not meeting students’ needs and questions about sexuality misrecognises the needs of young people who, as a result, may drop out of the lessons, search for answers in alternative (and often less reliable) sources, and leave their sexuality education with a sense of frustration and alienation due to the normative messages being conveyed. Furthermore, these normative messages reinforce prevailing patriarchal norms in school by generally neglecting questions of sexuality outside of heterosexual marital relationships and teaching that sex, especially for girls, is shameful and not to be openly discussed.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has identified three mechanisms through which gender, power and sex influence exclusionary practices in this study sample. The first relates to the selection of students and teachers: female students need more affirmative action and a safer classroom environment, and more female teachers should be involved in facilitating CSE. Secondly, gendered assumptions about boys’ and girls’ needs, result in conveying only partial information and reproducing stereotypes in the school. Thirdly, discussion about sexual relationships and desire is essential to address gender and power in the sexuality education classroom, yet this tends to be avoided by teachers who shift the focus instead to morality or health-informed advice. Gender and power end up being addressed only superficially through a factual approach, rather than as the starting point to exploring bigger questions. With regard to CSE’s potential to transform gender relations, it is important to move beyond just ‘including gender and power’ in the sexuality education curriculum, and instead to make this a central element of discussion that connects to relationships in schools, families, culture and society (Connell 2002; Harrison and Hillier 1999).

This paper has also shown how discrepancy between the design of the programme as comprehensive and rights-based on the one hand, and the discourses used to negotiate the actual content of messages communicated in the classroom on the other, illustrates an adapted interpretation of what sexuality education should be about. A more relational, perhaps participatory approach including young people as well as teachers in the design and implementation of the programme could better address the question of what sexuality education – especially comprehensive sexuality education – might usefully entail. It is important to better understand theoretically the concepts that underpin CSE and, in particular, the importance of addressing gender and power structures at the school level, and arguably within broader society.

Finally, the contradiction between young people’s wish to know more about premarital romantic relationships, sexual intercourse and related emotional attachments, and the messages teachers convey, highlights major confusion about the purpose of CSE. In line with the above, it is thus not only important to theoretically better understand the underpinnings
of CSE, but also how this may differ between contexts. Furthermore, methodologically it is important to pay more explicit attention to cultural meanings of issues such as marriage, virginity or premarital relationships. Oftentimes, sexuality education tends to take a ‘developmentalist’ approach, instrumentalising sexual health and gender equality as a means for economic growth (Cornwall 2003; Lewis 2002). The fact that this translation in a supposedly CSE classroom results in a more restricted message than intended, points to the need to better understand, adapt to and recognise the different cultural interpretations of what education means (Chilisa 2005) and the values that should to be promoted through education, particularly sexuality education.

Note

1. English is the medium of instruction in secondary schools in Ethiopia. In the case of this programme, the use of English also reflects the transnational relations that are attached to it: the curriculum was developed by a Netherlands-based NGO and was designed to be used in a number of different countries. However, linguistic norm-setting by donors may exclude or ignore local or contextual meanings expressed in other languages, and enforce having to conform to the ‘international’ norm of using English to privilege Western, ‘scientific’, knowledge about sexual health (see also Chilisa 2005).

Disclosure statement

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