

Childhood sexuality and AIDS education: The price of innocence, by Deevia Bhana, New York: Routledge, 2016. 159 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-08588-6.

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Deevia Bhana's book, *Childhood sexuality and AIDS education: The price of innocence*, confronts the reader with the reality of AIDS in Africa and its effects on young children. The author pulls no punches about sexuality education as a matter of life or death for primary school children. The reality of AIDS, particularly within the African continent and Bhana's home country of South Africa, challenges those who maintain that sexuality knowledge and education should be withheld from children until they become an age that is deemed appropriate for them. Rather, she argues that, "it is especially important to address prevention with younger boys and girls as active social agents with the capacity to engage with AIDS as gendered and sexual beings" (p. i). This book is a valuable contribution to those interested and involved in children's lives, particularly teachers.

In my academic teaching position, I am invited to briefly contribute to initial (pre-service) primary teacher education programmes on childhood sexuality. Bhana's research heightens an urgency to trouble the notion of (sexual) innocence in childhood. Readers should not be dismissive of the geographical and health contexts in which the research is conducted such as class and race issues in South Africa and the extent of AIDS. Rather, readers can be assured that these contexts provide important and constructive surfaces upon which to reflect more clearly within their own contexts on the call to interrogate critically notions of childhood innocence.

Bhana's book presents research within two socially diverse South African primary schools. Using interviews and an ethnographic study with young children aged seven and eight, and interviews with mothers of young children and teachers, she argues "how adults sustain the production of childhood innocence and the importance of scaling up programs in AIDS intervention, gender and sexuality" (p. i). "Central to this book," writes, Bhana, "are the voices of young children" (p. ix). The author positions her theoretical approach to this research within social constructionist perspectives of childhood and of AIDS, sociology of childhood, and a poststructuralist feminist analysis of power, drawing also upon queer theory and structural violence. This work confronts power relations in "poverty and plenty... [and] the intimate connections between gender, sexuality, race, and class in the social construction of [AIDS]" (pp. 2-3).

Bhana has structured *Childhood sexuality and AIDS education* in eight chapters, collating versions of articles originally published in one Elsevier and six different Routledge journals. "Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 put children at the centre of this investigation ... Chapters 6 and 7 focus on adult narratives of childhood innocence" (p. 17). The titles of chapters starkly alert readers to the author's purpose to her work, and invite a clear understanding of the risk for children when positioning them in childhood discourse as innocent.

In the first chapter, "The price of innocence in the time of AIDS", Bhana pays "attention both to the social inequalities through which boys and girls negotiate sexual meanings of the disease and to the active ways in which childhood innocence is promoted and defied" (p. 3). The two Durban schools in which the research is conducted are

introduced: one poor, the other affluent; children in one are all African, in the other, are predominantly white. The author provides some statistical information about the effect of AIDS in South Africa, and pointedly quotes from a UNESCO document that demands “clear, well informed, and scientifically-grounded sexuality education based in the universal values of respect and human rights” (Bhana, 2016, p. 4). Innocence, as a construct and practice by adults, is criticised for the assumption that it stands for protection for children from risk of sexual knowledge and activity. Ironically, innocence gets in the way of necessary and life-saving sexuality education. While her research puts “children at the centre”, Bhana also interviewed teachers and mothers.

In “AIDS, sex and disease: How much do boys and girls know?” (Chapter 2), children reveal their knowledge of AIDS as related to sex, contagion, kissing – all located within heteronormative sexuality, made visible within their gendered narratives. Bhana cites Robinson’s (2013) notion that children are ‘sexual subjects’, who are “curious, knowledgeable and capable of thoughtful reflection, and their responses, questions and struggles in making sense of the disease are worthy of adult attention” (Bhana, 2016, p. 37).

Chapter 3, titled “AIDS and stigma: Race, class, gender, sexuality and inequalities in children’s response to disease,” introduces children’s knowledge of AIDS through “a complex well of [structural] inequalities” (p. 41). Children speak about practices of power, inequality and exclusion that take shape in AIDS-related stigma of “those who do not conform to the ideals of innocence” (p. 42).

Gender and sexual violence form a major focus in Chapter 4 in which the African children of the study give meaning to the disease of AIDS. “Poverty, violence and pervasive gender inequality continue to make it difficult for women and girls to avoid unsafe sex” (p. 67). Talking of sex as “naughty”, and their understandings of fathers and boys who rape girls and women, the children shared about their fear of men, and how “girls spread AIDS”.

Inspired by questions about whether children should talk about AIDS, and whether their parents should talk about it to them, Chapter 5 “reveals the mockery of childhood innocence and the strategies that children devise to put adults at ease whilst their particular vulnerabilities are left unattended” (p. 90).

“AIDS, not sex! Teaching innocence” (Chapter 6) reports on teachers’ interviews in which dominant discursive practices “deny, silence and repress the heart of AIDS and sex” (p. 95) due to notions of innocence. Nonetheless, such ideas “are not irreversible because teachers point in contradictory ways to young children’s sexual agency” (p. 95). Teachers spoke of *naughty* and *innocent* children, as well as anxiety about parents and parental oversight of teachers’ work in schools.

Chapter 7, entitled “True for all mothers? Normalising childhood innocence,” explores mothers’ practices of sanitising and shutting down sex in AIDS-related education, “by their ambivalence towards sexual decadence and excess sexual knowledge which they believed could defile childhood” (p. 130).

The final chapter presents key findings from the research with children as well as various points raised by teachers and parents. I resonate particularly with one conclusion, which is hopeful, yet difficult, within constructions of childhood that are dominated by developmentalism:

[T]here is a need for pre-service and in-service training that takes children, gender and sexuality seriously – a move away from developmental theory to understandings of discourse, power and agency. This will allow for a rethinking of childhood innocence and of the ways in which power, agency and sexuality have effects for teachers, adult parents and children. (p. 146)

Bhana's words echo Silin's (1995) call to explore new possibilities for dialogues about how to talk with children about HIV/AIDS within the cultural and political environments of children's education. Silin advocates for spaces that allow dialogue, and education that respects pluralism (see Greene, cited in Silin, 1995). These words reverberate closely to my experience, in both research and consultation by teachers and students in teacher education, for spaces to talk about children and sexuality. *Childhood sexuality and AIDS education* provides such a space. It is compelling in its argument, and urgent in its timing. I consider that initial teacher education programmes would benefit significantly from drawing upon the ideas and questions raised from this book: in terms of interrogating constructions of childhood; centering the voices of children; and, as teaching professionals, negotiating children's will to (sexual) knowledge.

I found it evident in Bhana's writing that her positioning in this ethnography is ethical and careful, promoting justice and equity. "AIDS is produced on the fault lines of social inequalities, but children do come together in expressing knowledge and care for those who are ill" (p. 17). This matter is too important to cling to idealist ideas about children's innocence, or to hold adultist (see Le François, 2013) ideas that preclude children accessing information for their safety. In Bhana's words:

I summon us as adults to rethink our special responsibility to children in the time of AIDS and to shed our taken-for-granted assumptions about childhood innocence so that we will open our understanding to the creative ways in which children, under strikingly unequal social conditions, work on AIDS, gender, sexuality and relations of power. (pp. 4-5)

References

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Notes on contributor

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