



# Graffiti as a site for cultural literacies in Zimbabwean urban high schools

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## Abstract

It is widely believed that education is a socially situated cultural process. Generally, schools are regarded as the key educational institutions. However, education can be formal, non-formal and informal, based on media-driven communicative settings. These types coalesce within formal institutions of learning. This study focuses on the transmission of cultural knowledge in informal spaces such as the bathroom. It argues that graffiti is a medium that offers students a unique communicative dynamic enabling an open engagement with issues they would otherwise not do elsewhere. It facilitates the transmission of vital cultural knowledge/literacy whose length and breadth cannot be adequately exhausted by the formal school curriculum alone. Bathroom interactions, therefore, bring a different dynamic to cultural education in learning institutions. Sexuality, hygiene and decency, among others, are negotiated from a strictly student perspective. A trip to the bathroom therefore marks a crucial transition from formal to informal education, and back.

## Keywords

collaborative learning, cultural literacy, culture, graffiti, mediation, socio-cultural learning

## Graffiti as cultural text

The article explores how graffiti inscribed on bathroom walls offer students opportunities to shape their cultural literacies. It is generally assumed that the role of cultural transmission is left to more qualified adults in the group as they are seen as having accrued the requisite experiences, both good and bad, to guide the culturally naive

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younger generation of school-going children. It is high time that school administrators, researchers and policy makers alike take cognizance of the fact that children have their own perceptions of culture and that they are potentially living that culture. These perceptions are actively inscribed in toilet graffiti within the school system. The article does not, however, focus on the specific and explicit transformations of behaviours that result from children's interactions with graffiti. Instead, focus is placed in the ways in which students' graffiti is used to elicit these transformations. Specific attention is also placed on interrogating how these transformations are inherently cultural. Crucially, it is the students' interpretations of their culture that is at the heart of the research and how the students appropriate the medium of graffiti to perform or verbalise the ways in which they understand specific cultural constructs and cultural knowledge.

Grffiti can be taken as a cultural text, with multiple participants involved in both its production and consumption. Although it is appreciated that not everyone is a writer, potentially everyone can participate in its consumption. Bruns (2008) uses the term 'prosumers' to capture the hybrid experiences of simultaneously being a producer and/or consumer of media. This notion denies the suggestion that people, in this case students, exist simply as vessels in which media messages are deposited. They are not merely passive individuals whose behaviours and attitudes are the direct result of the media. For Croteau and Hoynes (2000), the notion of prosumer audiences is in accordance with a belief in the intelligence and autonomy of people, granting them both power and agency in their use of the media.

It is, however, possible to envisage two types of graffiti consumers: the active and passive consumer. Active consumers of graffiti, on the one hand, are those audiences who, after reading the inscriptions on the various surfaces on toilet walls, feel compelled to 'physically' react to them. Active, or physical, reactions to graffiti might necessarily include the writing of comments, which usually leads to conversation chains of varying lengths. Even a simple act such as the rubbing off of the inscription, whether partially or wholly, is also considered to be a form of active consumption of graffiti. Notions of active graffiti consumption underline the dominant conceptualization of how audiences, in this particular case, the students, use various forms of media. Buckingham (2012) underscores how children are not as passive in their media use as has been envisaged by previous studies. He argues that there are various ways in which children define and construct their own social identities through discussion about (and through) the media.

Passive consumers, on the other hand, are those who, having read the inscriptions, choose to maintain their 'silence'. They do not rub off what is written or make their comments visible to others. However, such silences can also be regarded as a weak form of agreement (in which silence is considered an endorsement of the status quo). Given that there is some form of social interaction taking place within the discourse community of toilet users, it is possible to hypothesize various degrees of cultural learning taking place within these spaces and that whatever is raised in the inscriptions potentially feeds into an ongoing, and ever-evolving, process of cultural transmission. The socio-cultural practice of graffiti writing can be used to attest to the fact that there is construction and reproduction of cultural meanings within informal discursive spaces in which students interact. Graffiti then becomes a particularized cultural narrative, participation in which – with regard to both production and consumption – is dependent on the students' social and

cultural ideological orientation. A trip to the toilet is therefore much more than a question of self-relief but a contribution towards the social construction of cultural literacies.

Culture has been defined from a variety of standpoints. There is no one agreed upon definition of culture to the extent that Mulholland (1991) rightly states that culture is a concept that has been difficult to define. Culture is taken as the sum of special knowledge that accumulates in any large social group and is the common property of all its members. However, problems arise in relation to the specific elements that are considered to constitute a particular culture. Determination of these elements depends on the particular perspective taken. One can define culture in terms of articulated ideals, however little they are practised. This kind of approach is prescriptivist and ends up finding fault with the way people are living their lives. The second perspective defines it in terms of living practices. According to this perspective, it does not really matter how far away from the ideal a particular group of people are living their lives. This perspective, therefore, defines culture as a people's lived experiences. It is taken to include a people's whole system of beliefs, values, attitudes, customs, institutions and social relations. In this regard, culture is taken as a construct actively experienced through social interactions of various types, graffiti inscribed in school toilets included.

In 'Excerpts from Raymond Williams' Keywords' (Williams, n.d.), culture is considered to be among three of the most complicated words in the English language. It is, however, inclusively defined by Williams (1958) as a people's whole way of life, be it material, spiritual or cultural. It is the latter definition of culture that is adopted in this study. As Hall (1976) aptly observes, culture is neither genetically inherited, nor does it exist in a vacuum. Rather, it necessarily has to be actively shared by members of a society through interactions of various types. Crucially, interactive situations of various types and forms offer spaces within which culture is both practised and policed. Graffiti inscriptions are therefore taken as the students' specific position, reflecting what they 'know' about specific cultural constructs.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory claims that the child develops in two separate stages. During the early stage, which is akin to that of primary socialization, the child is completely dependent on other people, usually the parents, who initiate the child's actions by instructing him/her as to what to do, how to do it, as well as what not to do. At this stage parents take the role of both representatives and conduit of the culture. They pass on (transmit) their culture primarily through language. This process is then repeated as the child enters the formal school system where students not only copy teachers' capabilities but are expected to go on to actually transform what teachers offer them through a process of appropriation whereby they create their own personal values. It is through appropriation that they create their own knowledge and develop meanings as they learn to explain and justify their thinking to others. It therefore emerges that they are not passive participants in this learning process.

## **The complex dynamics of cultural transmission**

In the process of appropriation, mediation plays a crucial role. Kozulin (2002) categorizes mediators into two types: human and symbolic (linguistic). Human mediation usually tries to answer questions concerning what kind of involvement, usually thought to

be on the part of the adult, is effective in enhancing the child's performance, while symbolic mediation deals with what changes in the child's performance can be brought about by the introduction of the child to symbolic tools (mediators). In both situations, there is a more knowledgeable other (MKO), who, as already stated above, can potentially be anyone, irrespective of their age, who has a better understanding and/or a higher level of ability than the learner with respect to a particular cultural task, process, or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach or older adult, but the MKO could also be peers, a younger person or even computers.

Many schools have traditionally held a 'transmissionist' or 'instructionist' model in which a teacher or lecturer 'transmits' information to students. It is from this perspective that Mkanganwi (1996), in his paper 'As my father used to say', crucially compares the process of cultural transmission with how adults carry their young children on their shoulders. This image is significant in a number of important ways. First, children do not 'go through' the process of cultural construction themselves. Second, they do not focus on the immediate situation but also on what is to come in the future. Third, it is an interaction that is characterized by unequal relationship whereby the adult by virtue of their status and experience (read as wisdom) dominates the process. It is apparent that Mkanganwi's 'model' of cultural learning leaves little room, if any, for any negotiation of alternative positions. Banks and Banks (1997) recognize that many children bring with them experiences and socialized patterns of behaviours that have not traditionally been valued in public school contexts. It is no wonder Buckingham (2012: 96) seeks to understand children's media practices in their own terms and from their own perspectives, rather than comparing them with those of adults. It is imperative to appreciate the social experiences of children, not least as these are constructed through the operation of other dimensions of power, such as social class, gender and ethnicity. Mtukudzi (2013), in his song 'Dear far' underscores the importance of taking heed of what children have to say. Most importantly, these experiences and patterns of behaviours are not completely overridden by the school system. In any case, they are already saying something within the spaces offered by the toilets in our schools.

Cultural knowledge is thus perceived as hardly a homogeneous phenomenon. It is highly possible that members of the same cultural group might hold different positions in so far as the same cultural concept is concerned. Adults and children are most likely going to hold differential ideological-cum-philosophical positions on the same cultural values. And these positions are likely to inform how they ultimately approach their life choices. For young children, it is therefore not only what they formally learn within the 'walls' of the classroom (as well as various 'social' clubs operating within the school system) that contributes to their overall cultural literacies. A characteristic of this formal cultural learning is moralization in which students are expected to hold predetermined ideological positions.

Hawkes (2001) identifies culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability, the glue that holds the social, environmental and economic pillars steadfast. It is in this light that culture is considered to be very crucial in national development. Indeed, Charamba (2013) acknowledges this critical link that exists between culture (*hunhu/Ubuntu*) and aspects of overall national development such as nationhood and the economy. It is then possible also to envisage, and establish, such a relationship between students' own perceptions

about specific cultural concepts and overall national and socio-economic development. However, questions arise regarding the methods through which culture is transmitted to the young population. The dominant model is the linear model, in which the older and more culturally experienced generation adopt a more or less didactic/moralistic approach in educating the more or less naïve younger generation (Mkanganwi, 1996). Cultural transmission is, however, much more than what Mkanganwi symbolically represents through the image of a father carrying their child on their shoulder, showing them the way. It is a lot more complex than a simple issue of the wise adult (the father) 'filling' the younger generation with cultural 'secrets of life'. There are interactions where the younger generation generates its own culture from their own perspective. Trivializing this significant cultural dynamic can potentially have far-reaching developmental implications. It is imperative that we know their perspective of 'culture' so that 'adult' cultural transmission can be truly goal-oriented and, potentially, effective.

Cultural literacy, built through a range of processes including indoctrination, socialization, training and education, can be taken as a recall of essential cultural facts. Cultural literacy includes cultural competence but also adds to it the ability to critically reflect on and, ideally, bring about behavioural change. Cultural literacies, formed through interactive situations, provide a framework with which meanings are actively created and interpreted in any given social milieu. Cultural literacy has four basic skills – cross-cultural awareness, local cultural awareness, critical reflection and thinking, and personal skills for coping with being a change agent. For the purposes of this article, attention is placed on local cultural awareness as it is the factor that is most saliently called upon in graffiti texts under study. Every member within a given cultural set up is expected to be aware of their own cultural performance in relation to group expectations, as well as being in a position to evaluate performances by fellow members with a view of taking corrective measures to ensure that cases of deviancy from cultural expectations are kept at an absolute minimum. This evaluation of other members' performances entails the identification of zones of proximal development which they then act to address through the graffiti texts. As Desmond et al. (2011) argue, cultural literacy entails the use of that knowledge to build communication, acceptance and understanding in an ever-changing global society.

The process of meaning-making is a highly political and value-laden process which cannot be divorced from group dynamics and/or communal interests. It is in this regard that discourse offers members a chance not only for self-expression, but also to enact their group identity, perceived or otherwise. Members within the group have the responsibility to ensure that the group identity is maintained at any given point. It is also the responsibility of group members to ensure that every member within the group is equipped with the requisite tools to enable them to be armed with the relevant cultural literacies. In cases whereby a gap in these literacies has been identified, group members act to ensure that it has been bridged appropriately. It is from this perspective that the article argues that graffiti offers students in both primary and high schools in Zimbabwe discursive spaces in which culture is at the centre of daily interactions. It is submitted that students recognize gaps in fellow students' literacies and that they then appropriate the spaces offered by graffiti to act as mediators and/or more knowledgeable others to ensure that they are culture-appropriately bridged. This bridging predominantly occurs within the arenas of gender and sexuality.

While the family is regarded as the point of first contact and, therefore, the most influential and primary socialization agent, educational institutions constitute a significant part of the socialization process and are, as such, considered as constituting the secondary socialization process. The formal nature of the school entails that the socialization process is itself predominantly formal by nature. The significance of the formalized school socialization process lies in the sense that it offers two, almost parallel, socialization processes which entail both an explicit development of technical and intellectual skills as well as, more often than not, an implicit or latent focus on the transmission of the society's cultural heritage to facilitate the individual's smooth integration into society. The main focus of the research is on the latter role of transmission of culture to the individual and how it occurs alongside other non-formal processes, in this case graffiti in schools. Du Gay (1996:43) argues that discourse plays an important role in society as it equips speakers with ways with which to talk about specific topics and ways with which knowledge about those topics is produced. In the sphere of public discourse – entering a toilet in these public schools is akin to entering that body of public discourse. It is in this regard that social and discursive practices are both shaped and resisted.

Graffiti is a special kind of situation, presenting us with a situation in which only one party of the interlocutors is 'visible' or prominent in any given interactive situation. Where a conversation chain develops, it is possible to distinguish between the culturally MKO and the novice. On the one hand, the self-appointed MKO assumes the role of a 'cultural custodian' of sorts, who is there to ensure that a less knowledgeable fellow acquires the requisite cultural knowledge/information. It is therefore the responsibility of the custodian to recognize zones of proximal development in fellow students and then assume the role of the MKO in mediating or bridging the gap to the missing information. At times, the process also involves simple affirmation of commonly held cultural assumptions. In either case, student graffiti enables a specific kind of socialization to take place within spaces offered by the toilet walls and surfaces that is specifically oriented towards the development of Shona cultural literacies in Zimbabwean schools. This context-specific socialization process is the mechanism that helps groups and individuals within a group decide what is considered the correct way of living, thinking, feeling and viewing the world. These beliefs are passed down from one generation to another and determine the limits that future members will live by and accept. It includes all attitudes, norms and values that a social group accepts as valid and important. Graffiti inscribed by, and directed to, fellow students, is perceived as a form of intra-generational cultural transmission whereby a discourse community of more or less the same age group is actively involved in the shaping of its own culture.

Interesting is the fact that graffiti presents a situation whereby discourses lie both physically and symbolically side by side. From a physical perspective, graffiti is spatially distributed in toilets which exist literally side by side with the classrooms in which the dominant discourses (cultural master codes) are imparted or constructed. Thus, the inscription of graffiti by students in the toilets enables sometimes conflicting discourses to exist side by side – a situation which can be used to highlight the competing nature of discourses. One may argue that high school graffiti is a choice by students, to borrow from Gaidzanwa (2001), to speak for themselves and, in the process, construct discourses that are potentially parallel to the more formal institutional discourses of the formal



school set up. Of interest is how 'peer group interactions and the highly gendered culture of childhood' (Stockard, 2006: 220) contribute to the construction of parallel discourses in discursive spaces offered through graffiti, and the extent to which these constructions affirm, renegotiate or resist dominant cultural and religious discourses. Thus, the adjacent existence within the school context means that culture is taken as a social construct constantly in a state of flux.

## Methodology

Data for the study was collected from nine high schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. Stratified random sampling was used to select the schools from which graffiti inscriptions were to be collected. The schools were categorized into three broad strata, based on their physical location in the capital city. Approached from this perspective, there are broadly three types of schools in Zimbabwean urban schools in general. That is, schools located in the high-density suburbs (the ghetto), those located in the Central Business District (CBD) and those in the medium- to low-density suburbs. These schools generally attract different types of student population as their enrolment is based on where in the city the prospective student lives. One would therefore expect high-density schools to have the majority of their student population living in the high-density suburbs. The same is generally true for student populations in the leafy suburbs. This is different, however, with schools in the CBD, whose student population is from both sides of the urban divide.

Graffiti inscriptions were collected from both male and female toilets. Where conditions permitted, a camera was used to take the inscriptions in image form. In cases where a combination of the writing instrument used, the prevailing lighting conditions and the surface on which the inscriptions were written, among others, did not allow for the use of the camera, the inscriptions were written down in a separate data-collection log book. All the data was transcribed, paying particular attention to the source of the inscription, from both a locational and gendered perspective. The inscriptions were then thematically categorized based on the specific cultural issue they addressed.

## Discussion

### *Construal of sex and sexual pleasure*

The socio-cultural significance of sex in African culture and its crucial role in development cannot be overstated. It is not considered just as a physical activity performed by two, usually, consenting individuals. A major interest of the present article is the conceptualization of sexual pleasure by students as discursively constructed in toilet graffiti. Analysis of the inscriptions is made against the backdrop of the interface between patriarchy and gender equality. Some of these notions and concepts are not really explicitly taught in either the school or the 'home' curricula. Thus, the ways in which they are discursively grappled with by the students through graffiti is a reflection of how the students themselves conceptualize sexuality in general.

Foucault (1978) notes how, from the Victorian age, sex was removed from the public domain (and therefore discourses) and confined to the matrimonial home where it was

only discussed in terms of the serious reproductive function. It is from this perspective that Ngubane (2010) aptly makes the observation that adults have made the fatal assumption that young people are too young (and probably too innocent) both to discuss and engage in sexual activity. However, Fernandes-Villaverde et al. (2011) rightly point out that married couples are not the only ones engaging in sexual relations or having sex. As Ngubane (2010) goes on to explain, these assumptions are often based on their own embarrassment about the subject and prevent young people having access to the information they need for healthy relationships. The crucial question is in what circumstances are they engaging in these illicit sexual activities, as well as the potential consequences it is likely to have throughout their lives.

The construction of sex-specific cultural competences is a salient feature of bathroom graffiti in general. In fact, most researchers and attitudes that people have on inscriptions made in the toilets reveal a preoccupation with sex-related themes (Mangeya, 2014a, 2014b; Tagwirei and Mangeya, 2013). It is then imperative to explore how such attitudes are discursively constructed in these spaces and the nature of the cultural values affirmed. Inscriptions show how attitudes towards sexual intercourse are negotiated within the toilet space. Inscriptions from both male and female toilets are both considered for analysis since they both show an adoption of the same proposition.

Example (1) shows how the students perceive sexual intercourse as an essential, if not rather indispensable part of their lives.

1. *Mhata hupenyu vakomana pasina mhata handingararami* (The vagina is life my boys [read friends]. Without the vagina I won't survive)

A significant aspect of the inscription is how it simply declares the value of sex in the inscriber's life. Proclaiming that without it, there is no survival puts it on the same level as other basic human needs such as water and food. Although it is not clear from the inscription whether the inscriber has already started indulging in sexual behaviour, what emerges is that they would find it very difficult, if not unbearable or impossible, to live without engaging in sexual intercourse. Interestingly, other inscriptions were found in support of this standpoint. These are represented by examples (2)–(4), below.

2. Chakakosha imhata (what matters is the vagina)
3. Kaydee was born to fuck all bitches
4. Yes fuck up

Both (1) and (2) define the 'quality' of life based on the level of access to sexual intercourse. It seems that life becomes worth living only when one engages in sexual intercourse. They dialogically respond to the cultural value of abstinence which dictates that the young generation (especially school children) are not yet ready to engage in sexual relationships. In fact, engaging in such activity in Zimbabwean schools is punishable by expulsion from school. It is possibly within that paradigm that the inscriptions are questioning the wisdom of denying them that basic right.



Inscription (3) extends this dimension through the use of the term ‘bitches’. The inscriber could have chosen to use alternative terms such as girls, ladies and women, among others. It is important to note that the term ‘bitch’ can be interpreted in variety of ways. First, it can refer to what have been referred to as ladies of the night. Indeed, Mangeya (2014b) establishes the majority of participants interviewed defined a bitch as a woman *anorara nevarume achibhadharisa mari* (a woman who sleeps with men in exchange for money). Second, it can also be used to refer to women who are generally of loose sexual morality. They may not be in the profession or in the habit of getting payment (financial or otherwise) for their services but they are defined by their inability to stick to a single sexual partner, or their aversion to this. It does not really matter whether the women concerned might actually be unlucky in love (to borrow from Westerhof, 2005) and find themselves, through no fault of their own, having to hop from one relationship to another. Last, but not least, the term can also be used to refer to girls or women in general. That is, they may not be loose, but they are just referred to as such. This is then complemented by the linguistic choice of ‘fuck’. When read in the context of ‘bitches’ the word ‘fuck’ reveals specific gendered attitudes where the male makes the assumption that females can actually be punished by sexual intercourse. Thus, it ceases to be an issue of male–female sexual union/relations but becomes one where the male exerts his dominance over the female. That example (4) confirms that proposition, more or less as a ‘universal truth’, which only emphasizes how the commonly held patriarchal value is constructed in student graffiti. At the end of the day, the inscriptions become a case of the perpetuation of the tradition of male domination.

Interestingly enough, inscriptions found in female toilets seem to be aligned to this cultural or ideological thinking. Inscriptions (5)–(8) illustrate how female sexuality has come to be socially interpreted vis-à-vis dominant patriarchal sexuality attitudes where the female is just an object of male sexual gratification. They are unpacked into separate propositions and sequentially represented as follows:

5. ... *akamamiswa na ... aramba kumupa makumbo* (... was [thoroughly] beaten by ... after she had refused to give her legs [read refused to have sexual intercourse with him])
6. Girls *dzangu poto hainyimwe munhu* (my girls [read friends/colleagues] you must not be stingy with the pot)
7. *Inonaka ndakambosvirwa hai* [sic] (it is so pleasurable, I was really fucked)
8. God have mercy

Inscription (5), above, seems to be an innocent declaration of how a specific girl in question (whose name was rubbed off – and incidentally some other name also added) was beaten by her supposed boyfriend (whose name has also been rubbed off) after she had refused to have sex with him. A significant characteristic of inscription (5) and (6) is how the writers use euphemisms (as a linguistic tool) to refer to the vagina. In (5) the writer refers to it as simply as ‘*makumbo*’ (legs). This has the effect of lessening the cultural significance of the female symbol of fertility. There is nothing really sacred about ‘legs’ in general. This is, however, by no means restricted to the example above. Amanze (2010) also shows how reference to sex simply as *makumbo* (legs) is in fact actually a

cross-cultural, and therefore, cross-linguistic phenomenon when he states how Chewa men or husbands euphemistically use the term *mwendo* (leg) in reference to sex. It is then in this perspective that (6) is interpreted. When read as a direct follow up to (5), it both becomes a statement of the general truth (a common-sensical proposition) and piece of advice that sex cannot be denied anyone. In this way, it seems to justify the fact that the girl in question indeed needed to be beaten for her perceived 'indiscretion'. The symbolic use of *poto* (pot) to refer to the female sexual organ is culturally significant. The pot may be taken as a common kitchen utensil but actually holds important cultural import. Interpreted in the context of African hospitality where it is considered a common courtesy to offer your visitors food, the inscription then seems to question the wisdom behind the girl's 'stinginess' in refusing her boyfriend his sexual prerogative.

What cannot be overlooked, however, is how the two inscriptions entangle themselves in the politics of violence in romantic and/or intimate relations. The matter-of-fact manner in which the girls discuss the apparent beating of the girl in question seems to suggest a hegemonic acceptance of the males' control over female sexual and reproductive rights. That a man can demand sexual privileges and is expected to go to the extent of beating up his partner if these privileges are denied him is a cause of concern. It becomes a naturalization of the subordination of women by perpetuating myths that seek to justify sexual assault based on the so-called uncontrollable male sexual urges and need to seek for sexual gratification (Chiroro et al., 2004; Thornhill and Palmer, 2000). The implications of sexual coercion in what Chiroro et al. (2004) refer to as 'acquaintance-rape situations' are therefore trivialized, at best, or, worse, totally overlooked. What seems to emerge from that interaction is that the inscriptions are priming female students to endure sexual assault in the name of male sexual gratification.

It is from these perspectives that (7) is then read as justifying (5) and (6). It comes over as written by a 'wisened' someone who has already experienced it and, from the resulting positive experience, actually sees no reason why any girl should even contemplate not indulging in sexual intercourse. What emerges is the fact that sexual intercourse is a very pleasurable experience which every girl should be participating in. This in itself would have not have been odd had it not been for the fact that it is found in a cultural set-up in which females are not expected to have any sexual desires at all. In fact, most men think that females do not actively seek to have sexual intercourse and that they only have it at the males' behest. Amadiume (n.d.) traces how, in Victorian English culture, women were not expected to experience sexual arousal, and these cultures were imposed on Africans by Christian missionaries and through modern eurocentric education. Significantly, (5)–(7) are instances where the implied female MKOs are failing to define themselves beyond the object-of-male-pleasures-and-desires paradigm.

It is imperative to appreciate that such subversive and counter-discourses largely promoting 'irresponsible' youth sexual activity are occurring within the context of sexual behaviour change discourses in the country. It is crucial that these discourses on youth sexuality be taken with the seriousness they deserve, since they provide crucial evidence of youth engagement and attitudes towards sexual activity. Indeed, it is counterproductive to carry on under the assumption that youth represents a utopian age of innocence characterized by sexual purity.

Inscription (8) is significant for the fact that it seems to question the wisdom behind irresponsible sexual activity discursively constructed by the texts above. It offers a counterpoint to the perceived pleasures of sexual decadence in youth. The texts are not coming with the same knowledge or ideological position. They are varied and are employed in a negotiation process whose result is not just one form of cultural knowledge/literacy, but a number of them at the students' disposal. Declaring that God should have mercy on the writers invokes divine intervention regarding the totally unacceptable sexual behaviours advocated for. The implication is that the preceding authors hold a totally unacceptable position, to such an extent that God has to intervene for them to be saved, possibly from eternal damnation. The inscription does not, however, provide a viable solution to the problem of the sexual desires of youth.

It is from this perspective that alternative positions are offered through graffiti. Suffice to note that these alternative positions are gendered. Both male and female students explore the possibilities offered by sexual self-gratification. Male high school students appear to discuss it more openly as seen in the declaration in (9) below:

9. *Kubonyora kunonakidza* (masturbation is pleasurable)

Inscription (9) can be read in the context of the assumed pleasures of heterosexual intercourse as well as abstinence discourses. Lips (1988) argues how the whole 'gimmick' about male vaginal penetration was founded upon male pleasure and procreation. Thus, the male is drawn to heterosexual vaginal sex on the basis of promises of untold experience of pleasure. Inscription (9) is then interpreted as offering a dialogic alternative to that position. It is offering another source of male pleasure which is worth considering. Most importantly, when interpreted within dominant abstinence discourses, masturbation seems to nullify such need as it does not lead to some of the problems associated with heterosexual intercourse. It is within this alternative perspective that (10) is interpreted.

10. *Rambai muchibonyora kuti zvinhu zvifambe* (Keep on masturbating so that everything will be okay)

The inscription offers very pertinent advice or encouragement. That is, if it is pleasure that is the main driver of sexual intercourse, then masturbation is presented as a viable alternative. It might even be the case that the same pleasure is derived and yet it is much safer. This is put into context from inscriptions found in male toilets of tertiary institutions where its viability was debated.

While males propose self-gratification as an alternative to forbidden heterosexual intercourse, female inscriptions offer an interesting alternative. The inscription in (11) captures this alternative position:

11. sex is gd but kip ur underwear onn [sic] (sex is good but keep your underwear on)

Crucially, the inscription does not dispute the pleasures and or inherent advantages derived from it. It therefore takes it for granted that sexual intercourse is actually very

good. This is significant in the sense that it is a declaration coming from a female who is not really expected to have any sexual desires (lest they may be referred to as ‘bitches’). What is interesting is the nature of intercourse to be engaged in. It departs from the conventional vaginal paradigm and suggests ‘outer-course’ as a possible solution. That is, the experience and enjoyment of sexual pleasure without vaginal penetration.

Both sets of inscriptions advocating for masturbation and ‘outer-course’ are significant in the sense that they offer what the students themselves regard as viable alternatives to their engagement in sexual gratification. This then raises important questions on what constitutes sexual pleasure. If we concede that it is beyond any reasonable doubt that the youth want to experience the pleasures associated with sex, then it is worthwhile to consider alternative safer sources of such pleasures. Masturbation and ‘outer-course’ present potentially viable options which reproductive health should seriously consider. Since these options are pretty much coming from the interested parties themselves, the task of advocating for these alternative activities, which were hitherto frowned upon, may not be that daunting. Second, and most importantly, they present much more economic and low-risk options in comparison to the potential distribution of condoms to the same demographic group.

The second cultural value discursively constructed in the toilet is hygiene. The subject of cleanliness or smartness seems to be incongruous in relation to toilet graffiti. This is especially because the toilet might be the last place expected to contain discourses on hygiene. In any case, there is a particular level of paradox in having to use a medium which is generally regarded as unclean to advocate for cleanliness. However, suffice to say that the cultural value of smartness was found exclusively in female toilets. Inscriptions (12) and (13) stress the virtue of smartness and the vice of ‘untidiness’.

12. Smartness is close to Godliness [sic].
13. Dirtiness [sic] is close to Satan

The two inscriptions, though found in the same bathroom, were apparently written by different individuals. This is evidenced by two distinct handwritings and shades of chalk used in their writing, thus suggesting that they were written by two independent/different participants. What is interesting is how, on the surface, there seems to be no real point in the second writer making their contribution, which is pretty much what the first statement is declaring in the first place. In this case, both writers base their propositions on dominant Christian discourses. Christian discourses are founded upon the desire to be closer to God and, in the process far from Satan. Constructing the discourse on smartness on that theological basis can be regarded as a way of scaring fellow students into practising the virtue. The complementary nature of (12) and (13) suggests that it is a commonly held position. This does not mean, however, that it is a universally held position. A separate inscription countered this otherwise established doctrine by the defiance in (14), below:

14. That’s urs [sic] (that is yours – loosely translates to ‘speak for yourself’)

Implied by the inscription is the fact that it is not every female student who subscribes to a femininity defined on the basis of smartness. Interestingly enough, inscription (15)

below can then be interpreted as dialogically in response to those students who refuse to be bound by the cleanliness virtue:

15. *Huchapa hatibvumidze as[i] itirai kumba kwenyu* (we do not allow untidiness but [if you feel you have to be] you may practise it at your homes)

There seems to be some dialogical ideological settlement where those who refuse to be bound by the cleanliness virtue can be allowed to be as dirty as they want at their homes but not within the school premises. There is also a subtle or implicit proposition that whatever bad habits the students bring to the school are a result of their primary socialization at home. Thus, the students writing the graffiti position themselves as better ‘more knowledgeable others’ than the parents who are failing to instil the cultural value at home. Explicit in that proposition is a separation of worlds, where the school and the home run parallel to each other. What is done at home might not be acceptable in the school environment.

Issues of hygiene extend to the body, whereby the female students are expected to bath and always be smelling nice and fresh. This is suggested by two inscriptions directed towards bodily hygiene. These are represented as (16) and (17) respectively:

16. *Mbavha hure ainhuwa* fish ([anonymous is a] thief, bitch. She was smelling like fish)  
 17. *Haisi* fish but *tsvina* (It’s not fish but filth)

It is interesting that (17) does not respond to the other allegations that whoever is being referred to by (16) is also a thief and a bitch. Rather, focus is put on the fact that the person in question does not smell nice because of a lack of bathing. This apparently puts cleanliness seemingly above everything else. It is no wonder that most schools have a prize for the smartest student as part of their traditional annual awards or honours ceremonies. This is the same virtue or cultural value that is being perpetuated in toilet graffiti.

It emerges that as the students enter the school premises they are not the empty vessels waiting to be filled with cultural values as the education system would want to take them to be. They come in with their own preconceptions which they ultimately find spaces to practise and enforce within the school premises. In cases where those may be controversial, for instance sexuality issues, the spaces offered by the private and anonymous walls and surfaces in the toilet allow for their relatively free discursive construction. However, it is not only controversial issues that are discussed in the toilet. Important values such as hygiene are also instilled within those spaces. Hygiene, for the students, covers both general and bodily cleanliness. Thus, as Oliver Mtukudzi, in the song ‘Dear far’, counsels:

If we really love our children  
 Let’s not pay a deaf ear to their crying  
 We got a lot to learn

A lot to learn from our children

They have something that society can really benefit from if we seriously and genuinely consider whatever they have to say.

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