

## Sex Education in Rural Schools of Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

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**KEYWORDS** Life Orientation Teachers. Sex-Related Content. Sex Education. Rural Schools. South Africa

**ABSTRACT** This study reports part of the findings of an ongoing study, which aimed to capture views about how sex-related content is addressed at three rural secondary schools in the province of Mpumalanga. The study captured the views of 14 Life Orientation teachers, of whom 9 were females and 5 were males in the age range of 30 and 45 years. The sample was selected purposefully on the basis that they had undergone sex education training offered by the Department of Education. Data were collected using qualitative research methods involving individual and focus group interviews. The findings of data which were analysed for content reveal teachers' preference to: (a) outsource the services to other non-teaching professionals, (b) omit the content which they consider sensitive and (c) to postpone sex-related lesson until the year ends. The paper concludes that if teacher education and in-service training programmes are not intensified to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to address sex education in schools; and if some of the beliefs about the subject are not challenged, South Africa may fail in the fight against sex-related problems which continue to scourge lives of young people.

### INTRODUCTION

Sex education is a component of the school curriculum that has received impetus for maximizing access to education along gender lines, a principle embraced by international and national policies on Education (UNESCO 2003/4). For example, the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO 2003/4) calls upon all education systems to include sex issues as part of life skills education, with the intention of contributing towards the attainment of one of the millennium goals adopted at the Jomtien Conference in 1990 namely, gender equality in primary and secondary schools by 2015. This was an acknowledgement that sex-related problems undermine children's (mostly girls') chances of gaining access to quality education on an equal basis to their male counterparts.

South Africa's commitment to this principle is reflected in various policies of the Department of Education (DoE). For example, the Tirisano National Integrated Plan (DoE 1999) stipulates that education should address the educational health lifestyles of learners. In addition, the White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education

requires schools to address inequalities along gender lines, and included issues of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse (DoE 2001); while the HIV/AIDS policy of the DoE requires schools to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS issues and to incorporate them as part of the curriculum (DNE 1999). As a consequence, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE 2002) addresses issues pertaining to redress of the imbalances of the past by emphasizing that sex education should be implemented across the curriculum.

Despite these policies that advocate for the incorporation of sex education in schools, research conducted in South Africa demonstrates teachers' reluctance to engage learners in a discussion on sex issues (Niehaus 2000; Visser 2005; Ahmed et al. 2006; Ahmed et al. 2009; van Rooyen and van den Berg 2009). Factors associated with teachers' reluctance to address sex issues content varied. Van Rooyen and van den Berg's (2009) study, carried out in Pretoria amongst teachers who had been trained as master trainers of HIV/AIDS, reveals factors such as: lack of sound management practices in schools, insufficient training as well as uninvolved stakeholders. Ahmed et al.'s (2009) study conducted in the Western Cape amongst 15 Grade 8 Life Orientation teachers recruited from eight schools, relates the problem to teachers' perceptions of the content of sex education as contradicting their values and beliefs. In ad-

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dition, they lament lack of accurate knowledge about sex education issues and therefore highlighted their preferences to teach about abstinence. Visser's (2005) evaluation of the implementation of sex and HIV/AIDS intervention in 24 secondary schools in Gauteng Province reveals that there was no time allocated to teach the subject as all sessions were allocated to examinable subjects. They prefer to have health and welfare professionals handle the subject, for fear of upsetting the community. Furthermore, there were some perceptions that the content covering sex-related matters could instil inappropriate messages to learners. Meanwhile, Ahmed et al.'s (2006) evaluation of teacher training curriculum and its relevance to HIV/AIDS in the Western Cape suggests that despite teachers' increased confidence and comfort in teaching sex education, many still struggled to transfer and facilitate the knowledge in the classroom situation. They prefer biology teachers to handle sex education content. However, George et al.'s (2010) study of 43 schools in the two districts of the Free State Province found that more female than male teachers and younger instead of older teachers reported favourable interaction with learners on HIV/AIDS and sexual practices matters.

International research also reveals the content for sex education as controversial and presenting unique educational challenges. For example, Lesotho et al.'s study (2005) indicates teachers' tendency to be supportive of sex education and HIV/AIDS. However, they felt that they lacked skills and knowledge for effective teaching of the subject. Teachers felt comfortable giving warnings about sexual behaviours that may lead to sexually transmitted diseases, the importance of maintaining purity and initiation schools. Also, a study carried out in Scotland reveals teachers' anxiety and concern about the sex education content at all levels in the school. Parents, school governors, teachers and learners questioned the integrity of sex education and they viewed the subject as encouraging a hyper-sexualized culture which intensified pressures among the learners to be 'sexy', attractive and sexually available (Buston et al. 2002). Whilst in England, Alldred and David (2007) reveal that older teachers felt uncomfortable about the subject and resisted addressing it, and those who did, incorporated the content into biology lesson. Moreover, sex education

teachers encountered resentment and unpleasant recognition from colleagues. Consequently, principals did not regard its significance and it was given a low status, with responsible teachers not being trained and it being allocated the least hours for teaching, that is, only 15-20 minutes per week. On the other hand, young people in New Zealand expressed frustrations that sex education does not cover issues pertaining to desires and sexual pleasure (Allen 2005). They viewed such a curriculum as treating them like children. Similarly, learners in Canada were critical of the teachers' emphasis on matters pertaining to sexual risk such as sexually transmitted diseases, infection and pregnancy, and their exclusion of topics they perceived as important (Trimble 2009).

When schools avoid addressing sex-related content, learners do not view themselves positively and legitimately as sexual beings. Also, they may find it difficult to evade or deal with sex-related challenges they might face. This is so because communication about sexual matters within families has become limited. As Mturi and Hennink (2005) point out, parents are unlikely to share information about sexual development and safe sex or any interpersonal aspects of sexual relationships. Even if an attempt is made to address such topics, nevertheless, an approach tends to be subjective, moralistic and protective. For that reason, learners have come to rely excessively on inaccurate information obtained from the media and peers (Ritcher 1996). Unfortunately, that does not help in protecting them from problems such as early involvement in sexual activity, risky sexual behaviours, teenage pregnancy and contraction of HIV and AIDS, just to mention a few. Such problems might temper with their education in various ways, which include: irregular school attendance, failure and ultimately school drop-out. In contrast, information on sex-related issues contributed to postponement of initiation of sexual intercourse (UNAIDS 2004).

Current literature indicates that a significant proportion of children become sexually active at a relatively young age. Notably, by the age of 13 most adolescents in South Africa had been sexually active and regularly engaged in sexual activities in their mid-teens and more than 50% of these teenagers are still at school when they have their first child (Ngwenya 2003). On a similar note, the Human Sciences Research Council

Report (2009) notes that one-third of teenagers between 12 and 15 years had engaged in sexual intercourse and thus contributed to the figures of unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections and other sexually transmitted diseases. To that Louw and Edwards (2009) suggest that many children may enter school not infected and leave school infected with HIV, or may become infected shortly after leaving school. These findings position the teacher as an important purveyor of sex education to bridge the gap between knowledge and the adoption of safe sexual behaviour.

Learners need information on sex education to make informed decisions about their sex lives and to communicate openly about the development of their bodies (DoE 1999; Department of Health 1999). Such education is necessary for their intellectual, physical, personal, social, spiritual and emotional growth (Louw and Edwards 2009). Sex education is also important for (a) enforcing moral values, cultural norms and controlling young generation's sex; (b) equipping individuals with knowledge and skills to enable them to stand up for their rights; (c) fostering healthy and responsible sex; and (d) as an aspect of public health and population policy. Farrelly et al. (2007) noted that children are innocent beings, but potentially corruptible. They need moral guidance and protection from knowledge that is inappropriate, especially in the case of premature exposure to sexual experience. Furthermore, children need to be educated about the technical and possibly harmful aspects of sexual expression to enable them to make socially desirable decisions regarding sexual relationships.

The current South African research on sex-related issues was mostly conducted in schools located in provinces other than the current research site. Mpumalanga Province is predominantly rural and rated second in terms of HIV infections in South Africa (DoE 2008). Therefore, the present study is unique, more especially that the research site is situated along the border gate of South Africa and Swaziland, just across the major highway road where many school-going girls engage in prostitution with truck drivers to support their families. As a result, the findings of the other studies may not find relevance in such a situation.

With the task of offering sex education being shifted to schools, the investigation into the manner in which teachers handle the subject

becomes imperative. The question addressed in this study was: What are teachers' experiences with regard to the teaching of sex-related issues? The investigation was guided by Urie Bronfenbrenner for understanding the child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1992). Clearly, the ecosystemic model views development as an on-going process, influenced by factors lying within and outside the child's environment, namely the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems. Bronfenbrenner (2005) defines the systems as follows:

- a. **Microsystem** encompasses interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting.
- b. **Mesosystem** comprises of linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person.
- c. **Exosystem** encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does not contain that person.
- d. **Macrosystem** consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso- and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems.
- e. **Chronosystem** is the patterning of environmental events and transition over life course, including the socio-historical events.

It then follows that we should consider various factors which have a direct and indirect effect on the teaching of sex education in Mpumalanga Province. The aim of this study therefore, is to elicit teachers' views in addressing sex-related content to secondary learners.

## METHOD

This study reports on the findings drawn from interviews conducted for the first stage of an ongoing qualitative research carried out in

Mpumalanga Province, one of South Africa's nine provinces.

### Research Design

A generic qualitative study was deemed suitable for obtaining teachers' perspectives about teaching sex education. The study ascribes to a non-categorical approach as described by Thorne et al. (1997). This research approach espouses the principles of qualitative research even though it does not claim to align itself to any of the approaches such as ethnography and grounded theory (Merriam 1998). Though the use of the small sample indicates no intention to make generalisations about the findings of the study, the idea is, however, to provide rich detail about the informants.

### Sample

Following purposeful sampling, the study recruited a total number of 14 teachers who had undergone Life Skills, Sex and HIV/AIDS training offered by the Department of Education. The teachers were responsible for offering the learning area, Life Orientation from grade 8 to 12. As sex education is part of the Life Orientation curriculum, it was assumed that teachers would feel comfortable talking about sex issues and their own experiences of addressing the learning content in class. The sample was made up of nine females and five male teachers. Teachers were participants of African descent even though they belonged to different ethnic and cultural groups. Their ages ranged between 30 and 45 years.

The sample was obtained from three secondary schools, which were located in the rural setting along the busiest high way road leading to the border of Swaziland and South Africa. Poverty in that area encourages prostitution among young girls, as they resort to providing sexual favours to truck drivers in exchange for money. Such a problem contributes to school absenteeism and drop-out. We presumed that teachers working in such a kind of environment would be eager and willing to engage learners with sex issues.

### Instruments

As this study was interested in capturing personal experiences about teaching sex-related

issues which are viewed by some people as private, the researchers used both individual and focus group interviews. The idea was to give participants an opportunity to express themselves in their own ways and pace. All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and they were tape-recorded with participants' permission. Most importantly, interviews facilitated the discussion, questioning and reflections about sex issues and also made it possible to understand motives behind particular reasoning, interpretations or actions.

### Data Collection

We began data collection using focus groups with three groups of teachers. Two groups had five members and only one group consisted of four members. The participants who appeared to feel uncomfortable (such as giving brief responses) during focus groups interviews were interviewed individually at school during lunch breaks and/or in the afternoons to avoid causing disruptions of the normal school activities. The strategy was also applied to obtain clarification of some expressed views. A face-to-face approach was followed to facilitate rapport-building and to create a platform for opening up about complex issues.

### Data Analysis

As in any qualitative research, data collection and analysis took place simultaneously and that involved developing tentative themes from listening to the recorded tapes. As soon as transcripts became available, the themes were refined and finalised. Sub-categories were identified and patterns were examined for similarities and differences.

### Ethical Considerations

In adherence to ethical issues, prior to data collection, permission was sought from relevant authorities in South Africa, namely the DoE, the District Office of the DoE in Mpumalanga and the three participating schools. Ethical issues were thoroughly explained and clarified at meetings called upon by respective schools and individual participants. The issue of non-payment was clarified and so was the point that participation may be terminated at anytime without negative repercussion.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the findings indicates that teachers had various reactions towards sex-related content, which signify the avoidance to address the sex-related content. The avoidance manifests in three ways: outsourcing the services of the non-teaching professionals; selective in terms of the content to address; and postponement. A number of reasons related to such strategies involved the perception of the sex-related content as a non-formal subject; teachers' lack of appropriate language and skills to handle the subject; societal norms; and fear of parents' reactions towards the sex content. As a strategy to add richness and life to this research and to enable the reader to draw their own conclusions from participants' words (Corden and Sainsbury 2006), the researchers have quoted participants' verbatim. For the sake of anonymity, participants' real names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

### Outsourcing/Referral to Other Agencies

Rather than handling the subject themselves, 10 teachers highlighted their preferences to seek the services of an independent person or service provider. Similar to the findings of Visser (2005) and Ahmed et al. (2006), whereby teachers turned to volunteers from Health and Social Welfare or biology teachers, participants of this study turned to non-teaching professionals working for *Love Life*, the largest national HIV prevention initiative for young people in South Africa. They also turned to home-based caregivers and/or nurses based at the local clinics. Such tendency came out clearly in the words of a 35 years female teacher Nozi, who was responsible for offering Life Orientation in the eighth grade. She explicitly stated that she prefers to "refer to *Love Life* and to the clinic nurses because they have been trained for the job". She further alluded to her lack of appropriate language to handle the subject as she said:

*I lack the language and I just do not know how to address such issues. I don't think I should force myself into it because even myself I was never taught about any of these issues, even menstruation, I learnt about those things from the "street". The truth is that you discover things yourself, from friends and media. Sex-related matters are a closed chapter, a no - nothing to talk about.*

Meanwhile a female grade 9 teacher, Kathy who also expressed her preference to outsource the services of the nurse in the local clinic indicated her difficulty of talking about sex-related issues in class because she perceived such content as "suitable for home not school". *She noted getting "frustrated, confused, and running out of words like not knowing where to begin"*. On the other hand, a male teacher Makanya clearly stated:

*I do not talk about such issues in class. The people from Love Life are there to talk about that content because they are still young and can easily talk about sex ...uhm... sex stuff, not me.*

### Selective in Terms of Content to Teach

Eleven teachers indicated that they did not teach everything officially prescribed for Life Orientation. In particular, they avoided sex-related content and they did not feel comfortable to teach because they perceived it as sensitive. Mancha (37 years) maintained that *I simply shelve it to avoid embarrassing questions from learners*. Similarly, Thamie (30) grade ninth LO male teacher averred that: *My values come first, and so I am selective. I talk about breasts and curves but stuff such as menstruations and condoms – no ways (shakes head). You have to be selective.*

Important reasons which motivated teachers to resort to skipping particular content included entrenched cultural practices which discouraged adult-child discussion about sex issues, as that would invite disrespect from the students. Such perspectives were clearly articulated by Thamie and Vusimusi in the following excerpts:

*As an African man it is difficult to openly talk about something that is so tabooed. Sex issues have cultural boundaries and you are not supposed to breach them. I do not want to be disrespected by students (Thamie).*

*Mam, where on earth have you ever found a Zulu man speaking about sex with children? Talking about sex is not everybody's duty. There are specific places and traditional institutions to speak where such matters are discussed; and these children know that very well. There are traditional men and women who are designated to talk with youths about sex matters. Teachers must teach formal subjects such as Mathemat-*

ics and others, not sex education. If they want to know more about such topics they must go to initiation schools. That is it! (Vusimusi).

Female perspectives indicate that "I simply shelve it to avoid embarrassing questions from the learners. HIV/AIDS yes, I can talk about but the rest ... I skip them".

Thamie, a grade ninth teacher said:

*My values come first. I am very selective in terms of what I say to these kids. I can talk about breasts and curves but stuff such as menstruation, condoms ... (shake head), I do not talk about.*

### Postponement

Some teachers alluded to tendencies for postponing addressing topics related to sex as such discussion was embarrassing and evoking feelings of discomfort and fear on their part. It did not matter whether or not the teachers had undergone sex education training organised by the Department of Education or any non-governmental organization. The content on sex was described as causing unpleasant emotions, and teachers dreaded addressing such content until the year's end. Teddy articulated that:

*I keep on postponing with the hope that one day I will get a better approach to introduce the subject. I would look for case studies to open (introduce) a dialogue, or think about some practical ideas. I sometimes ask learners to write questions anonymously and place them in a box for two weeks so that the programme can be planned around the learners' own needs. Hey such strategies do not work as I will get back to square one. I go up and down the class, in order to gain a footing and introduce the subject. But I just do not succeed. Two, three weeks and months will eventually pass without a breakthrough.*

One male teacher, Mosomi, also indicated that he postponed the lesson addressing such matters:

*I postpone, sometimes I miss my lesson or ask another teacher to take over my class. I cannot stand teaching them about how the body functions or how HIV is transmitted. Lord! (Shakes his head) it is such a daunting exercise.*

Teachers felt uncomfortable because they thought that learners may perceive them as relating personal experiences. For example, Sidney,

a 40 year old female teacher, who was offering Life Orientation to Grade 12 learners, expressed:

*Sex is very difficult subject which makes me feel uncomfortable because it talks about you. It sounds to me like I am talking about myself or my own experiences. It is as if I have to undress myself in front of the learners.*

Miasma indicated that she was never talked about such issues, so it is difficult for her to transmit such knowledge to another person:

*I feel uncomfortable because I was never taught about anything related to sex, including menstruation, now I have to teach. Even today my parents have never spoken to me about sex. What (sighs)? It is uncomfortable and frustrating. I don't have to force myself because it's not our culture to talk about sex; the truth is that you discover things yourself, from friends and media.*

A sense of fear was expressed by five teachers. In particular, there was a strong expression of fear for parents' reactions when they come to know that teachers were teaching learners about sex matters. In this light Jakes asserted that:

*At the back of my mind, I have parents. I fear what the children would tell them about what I have said in class and therefore become upset. They may accuse me of speaking to their children about the "unspeakable" because we live in the community where such matters are not discussed with children. They would say I teach the children about sex; and that is naughty.*

Kathy, a grade 9 LO female teacher shared the sentiment:

*I have been fearful to speak about sex matters because I was once confronted by a parent who told me that I must watch my tongue. I am afraid that each day I'm going to be confronted by these angry parents. When teaching about sex matters parents feel as if I'm encouraging their children to be promiscuous and to behave inappropriately. I'm very much scared! I don't want to be confronted again. I fear I might be evicted from this area that I'm corrupting children'.*

### DISCUSSION

Rather than teaching sex-related content themselves, teachers who participated in this study preferred to outsource the services of the non-teaching professionals, omit the content which they consider as sensitive and also re-

sorted to postponement of the lesson which covers such content until the year ends. The practices were motivated by the following: their perceptions of sex issues as non-formal; lack of appropriate language and strategies to address sex content; the social norms, and fear of parents' reactions towards the sex content.

Outsourcing in particular, was linked to the perception of sex education content as non-formal and deep stuff (as one of the teachers proclaimed), which does not belong in the school arena. This was so because the previous education system of apartheid in South Africa, which most of the current cadre of teachers had undergone repressed adolescent sex in various ways which included enforcing strict dress code, appearance and conduct of students of different genders (Niehaus 2000). Participants of his study (Niehaus 2000) indicated that love affairs between students, holding of hands between learners of different genders, including writing love letters, were not tolerated, and such conducts were punishable. Prescriptions about clothing and physical appearance aimed to preserve the immaturity, purity and virginity of adolescent bodies.

Whilst it is clear that outsourcing the services of the non-teaching professional could provide valuable contributions to the teaching of sex-related content, the problem is that the approaches followed by the non-teaching professionals in putting across the message of sex across are incompatible with what is required by the South African's RNCS namely; integration across all learning areas and conceptual progression from grade to grade.

Another factor which motivated outsourcing was teachers' lack of appropriate knowledge, skills and language to address sex-related matters in class, a problem that suggests inadequate preparation on sex education at both teacher education and/or in-service training. Indeed, Life Orientation teachers in South Africa come from different fields which have not adequately equipped them to deliver sex education confidently and effectively, and these include School Guidance, Physical Education and Religious Education and School Management (Helleve et al. 2009; Francis 2010). Although in-service training programmes are available to close the gap, they, however, do little to equip teachers with necessary skills and knowledge to address the content (Ahmed et al. 2006). The in-service train-

ing sessions consist of short courses which are run for one-to-three days on the content and aims of the programmes.

Teachers' tendency for skipping sex-related content was motivated by the perception of such issues as contradicting the societal norms, an indication that social norm dictates what the teacher should or should not offer in class. Communities in South Africa and other parts of the continent do not encourage an open discussion on sex matters. Such a discussion between an adult and a child is strongly restricted, equated to vulgarity and promiscuity that could encourage early sexual activities. This is so because sex is considered to be a private matter between married couples (Mturi and Hennink 2005). Quintessentially, youths are an immature, innocent and inexperienced population that should be protected rather than exposed to any discussion about sex. Youths are encouraged to preserve their virginity. On that account, most adults prefer to be silent in respect of educating children about sex education and relationships, so as to keep them ignorant about sex issues and protect their purity and innocence. Khathide (2001) noted that a person found to be talking openly to youth about sex-related matters could be shouted upon and called names and viewed as corrupt person. Yet, it should be viewed as a mechanism for airing thoughts and feelings in the hope of creating an environment in which people can express their sexual feelings without guilt.

## CONCLUSION

In a society in which adults do not acknowledge youth as sexual beings and discussion about sex-related matters is discouraged, teachers would resort to avoidance of such topics for fear of upsetting the community. Indeed, in some societies they could be ridiculed, called names, shunned and blamed for instilling inappropriate messages to children. In such a society, parents do not provide informative guidance to girls on sexual development and safe sex, or any interpersonal aspects of sexual relationships. However, those who engaged in such discussion with their daughters are likely to be subjective and protective.

It should be noted that in this era of HIV/AIDS infection and gender-based violence oc-

curing alongside social problems such as poverty, laxity of societal morals, and nonexistent parent-child discussion about sex-related issues, the importance of teachers as purveyors of sex education cannot be ignored. As a result, if teachers continue to avoid engaging learners in sex-related content, South Africa will not succeed in the fight against HIV/AIDS, sexual violence and other sex-related problems which continue to undermine the education of the youth.

The recommendation is thus put forth that sex-related content be tackled with no reservations for the sake of equipping youths with information and skills for responsible and healthy sex and to stand up for their rights and lives. With their advantage for reaching majority of youths, schools should take up this role seriously and avoid shifting the responsibility to the non-teaching professionals who might not be in the position to address the issues sensitively. In order to support teachers in carrying out this responsibility, teacher education and in-service training programmes should be intensified to equip teachers with necessary skills and knowledge to address sex education in schools.

Finally, the reader is reminded once more that as the findings reported in this study were based on a sample size consisting of teachers only, there is a need for further qualitative exploration of the content with learners. Also, it might help to capture the perspectives other schools, in non-rural settings so as to get a picture of what could be happening in the entire population. Factors motivating those who teach the sex education content with success need to be explored. Interestingly, learners' perspectives should also be investigated as well as extending the study to settings other than rural areas could enrich the findings of the study.

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