
TEACHER NARRATIVES ON THE TEACHING OF SEXUALITY AND HIV/AIDS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates two questions: what do teachers believe about their training and preparation to teach sexuality education, and how do teachers reconcile their own identities and beliefs with the content of sexuality education? Using a qualitative research design with in-depth interviewing as method, this article argues that Life Orientation teachers lack training and come from a diverse range of fields, which do not always adequately equip them to teach sexuality education confidently and effectively. The article also makes suggestions for policy, practice and direction that future research might take to deepen our understanding about the teaching of sexuality education, including that schools must provide in-service sessions on the teaching of sexuality and that teacher training in the area of sexuality education must take into account elements of self-reflexivity where teachers begin to recognise and name their own beliefs and prejudices, and begin to separate their own values from the content they are teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

This article engages with the concept of social communication in two ways. First, it understands that the performance of learners in schools continues to be low in spite of the many strategies which have been tried to date. And so, it engages directly with teaching in establishing how teachers come to teach sexuality education and secondly, how they reconcile their own values and beliefs with the content of sexuality education. Second, rather than work from superficial and reductionist approaches, which “artificially” derives strategies that focus on one or other different aspect of the learning environments in isolation, this study goes directly to teachers’ narratives and explores how they communicate their experiences specifically on the teaching of sexuality. The more we learn from the teachers inside the classroom, the more sustainable our schools become. By drawing on teachers voicing their experiences gained from working in the classroom we will be able to support all our learners and teachers better.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION

There are two key concerns regarding the teaching of sexuality education. First is the lack of training for teachers who do not have the necessary skills and knowledge (Coetzee & Kok 2001; Rugalema & Khanye 2002; Rooth 2005; Francis & Zisser 2006; Francis 2010) and second, the tension between the content of sexuality education, and teacher identity and beliefs (Ahmed, Flisher, Mathews, Mukoma & Jansen 2009; Baxen & Breidlid 2004; Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma & Klepp 2009; Francis 2010; Mukoma, Flisher, Ahmed, Jansen, Mathews, Klepp & Schaalma 2009).

The effectiveness of sexual health programmes depends on the overall comfort and confidence of the teacher around these issues. Ahmed *et al.* (2009) note that teacher comfort and confidence in this area depends on their level of knowledge regarding the topic, attendance of workshops, experience with HIV positive individuals, personal comfort with the topic, clarity regarding the messages being communicated, a belief in what was being taught, and support from colleagues. These are strongly related to training and experience, which are low due to Life Orientation (LO) being a new learning area. In this article this concern is interrogated further by examining how the lack of adequate training and preparation of teachers impedes teaching and learning of sexuality education.

A second issue is the tension between curriculum content of sexuality education and teachers’ own identity, beliefs and values which forms a sizeable barrier to sex education (Kirby, Short, Collins, Rugg, Kolbe, Howard, Miller, Sonenstein & Zabin 1994; Baxen & Breidlid 2004; Francis 2010; Francis 2011; Helleve *et al.* 2009). Harley, Barasa, Bertram, Mattson and Pillary (2000: 294) argue that

educators feel trapped between policy values and the values of the community, regardless of their personal beliefs. Teachers felt under pressure to teach values similar to those of the local community and were fearful of being seen to break with tradition and culture (Masinga 2009; Francis 2011; Harley *et al.* 2000).

Literature abounds on teachers who lack training to address adequately the interplay of values, sexuality and HIV/Aids education, with the result that certain content is left out or passed on to be covered by others (Baxen & Breidliid 2004; Francis 2010; Francis 2011; Helleve *et al.* 2009). Rooth (2005) found that teachers invited guest speakers to cover controversial topics around sexuality. Whilst there certainly is value to this approach, it can also be problematic in that the guest sessions are not integrated into the broader LO programme and linked to the appropriate life skills. This was similarly found by Mukoma *et al.* (2009) in their evaluation of a sexual health programme in South African schools.

Ahmed *et al.* (2009) also found conflict between the messages that teachers were expected to teach, and their own personal beliefs and values. Condom use is a particularly problematic topic for them and consequently abstinence usually receives more emphasis. This seems connected with a desire on the part of teachers to promote certain moral positions and values. Ahmed *et al.* (2009: 51) point out that “teaching sexuality is perceived as being integrally linked to responsibility and morality. Educators commented on their responsibility to instil values and morals into learners where this does not take place at home.” This was highlighted in a study by Helleve *et al.* (2009) where teachers’ cultural perceptions were explored in relation to teaching practice. While teachers recognised the importance of teaching youth about HIV and Aids, concern about learner behaviour centred more on the fact that they were sexually active at all than that they were practising unsafe sex. They saw their role as one of restoring lost moral values which were under pressure from media, peers and other influences (Helleve *et al.* 2009).

Teachers also felt that teaching sexuality in general was culturally more challenging than teaching about HIV and Aids (Mbanaga 2004; Helleve *et al.* 2009) which clearly widens the gap between learners’ needs and sex education in practice. Teachers may find it easier to teach about HIV and Aids prevention because these are negative health outcomes and they can avoid the more balanced approach of acknowledging sex as pleasurable. Many studies have shown that presenting sex as both risky and as pleasurable is more likely to meet the needs of youth (Walsh, Mitchell & Smith 2002; Mitchell & Pithouse 2009; Raht, Smith & MacEntee 2009). However, few teachers are prepared to take this approach, due to a combination of the barriers discussed above.

This article explores two research questions: what do teachers believe about their training and preparation to teach sexuality education, and how do teachers reconcile their own identities and beliefs with the content of sexuality education? In an attempt to answer these questions, the article starts with an unpacking of the qualitative research design employed to interview the participants in this study. The findings are then presented, followed by a discussion. Finally, the article makes suggestions for directions that future research might take to deepen our understanding of the teaching of sexuality education.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample

In selecting participants for this study, a purposive sampling technique was used. All the participants had to be teaching LO to grade 10 learners for a minimum of one year. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' age, gender, race, academic qualifications, years of teaching experience, and reason for teaching LO. All eleven teachers were teaching in a cross-section of urban state schools, in close proximity to Durban. Once the participants who met the established criteria were identified, they were contacted telephonically to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study. Out of the identified total of 15, only eleven were willing and able to participate.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age	Gender and race ¹	Qualification	Years teaching	Years teaching LO	Reason for teaching LO
1	35	White female	B.Soc.Sc.	3	3	School counsellor; school did not have enough LO teachers
2	29	White male	B.A. (Psychology and Communication), PGCE	7	7	Psychology background
3	41	African female	Diploma in Higher Education; Honours; Master's	9	4	Workload distribution in school

4	26	African male	B.Ed. (Accounting and Business Studies)	3	2	Needed a job and so agreed to teach LO; workload distribution
5	43	Indian male	B.Paed. (Physical Education and History)	14	9	Had to as PE was no longer a subject
6	55	Indian female	Diploma in Higher Education; Honours; Master's	25	6	Workload distribution; Lifeline counsellor
7	27	Indian female	B. Ed. (Life Orientation)	5	5	Studied LO
8	24	White female	B. Ed (Life Orientation)	1	1	Studied LO
9	35	African female	Diploma in Higher Education; Honours	8	3	Workload distribution
10	46	Coloured female	B. Ed (Life Orientation)	15	3	Workload distribution
11	26	African female	B. Ed (Life Orientation)	2	2	Studied LO

Data collection

At the root of in-depth life story interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman 1991). In-depth interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings, and interpretations cannot be standardised and, therefore, cannot be obtained with a formal, fixed-choice questionnaire. Unlike formal structured interviews, in-depth interviews are more like conversations where primarily open-ended questions that focus on exploring the norms, values, understandings, and experiences of people are used (Seidman 1991). In this research in-depth interviewing has been used to allow Life Orientation teachers to tell their own stories, especially as it relates to what they believe about their training and preparation to teach sexuality education, and how they reconcile their own identities and beliefs with the content of sexuality education. The participants' responses are presented mostly in the first person. The rationale for this is to allow the self of the teller to be at the centre of the story (Denzin 1989). The researcher's role was merely to guide the participants in the telling of their stories and to offer an analysis

afterwards. Plummer (2001) notes that the gathered life stories are lengthy, convoluted, rambling affairs where there is a great deal of meandering chatter and stumbling. In fact, the interview transcripts for each participant in this study totalled between 45 and 50 typed pages. So, while an attempt was made to be faithful to the words of the participants, editing in the form of cutting, sequencing, disguising names, places, etc. was used to transform the interview transcripts into an orderly, structured and manageable form to address the research questions of this study.

The interview schedule, part of a larger study, was structured around five focus areas, namely biographical information, Life Orientation, the teaching of sexuality education, sexual diversity, and sexuality education within the school. In the interview, the researcher set out to explore teachers' teaching background and experience, attitude and approach towards sexuality education, whether they included aspects of sexual diversity in the teaching of sexuality education, their reasons for doing this, how they approached the topics, what the content was, why the content was chosen, what challenges there were and what worked well. This article reports on teachers' identity, beliefs and how they came to teach LO. To manage the data all in-depth interviews were audiotaped. Written transcripts were prepared from the audiotapes of each interview.

Analysis

In analysing the in-depth interviews, the purpose was to expand, refine, develop and illuminate an understanding on what teachers believe about their training and preparation to teach sexuality education and how teachers reconcile their own identities and beliefs with the content of sexuality education. Analysis was also meant to transform the interview transcripts into an orderly, structured and manageable form with some meaning (Marshall & Rossman 1989). During the analysis phase the interview transcripts were transformed into a logical and manageable structure that attempted to address the research questions and communicate a thick description of what teachers had to say. The participants' stories were studied against the backdrop of the literature reviewed. This was done to highlight the areas that were consistent as well as those that were contradictory. The themes and issues that emerged from the data are then organised into a framework that illustrate the relationship between the different variables and the participants' experience.

Ethics and morality in research

The author has familiarised himself with the ethical and moral issues embodied in research projects, and has put the following checks in place. First, informed consent in writing was obtained from all the participants. Second, the participants

have received a clear explanation of the expected tasks in which they would be expected to participate, enabling them to make an informed choice for voluntary participation. Third, the participants have been informed of the parameters of confidentiality of the information supplied by them. The identity of the participants has been concealed and anonymity was guaranteed in the consent agreement. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

FINDINGS

In the sections that follow, the findings are shared on what the eleven teachers believe about their training and preparation to teach sexuality education, and how they reconcile their own identities and beliefs with the content of sexuality education.

‘How I came to teach Life Orientation’

All the participants reflected a common situation, identified by Rooth’s study (2005) where teachers with varied qualifications and backgrounds were co-opted into teaching LO. Eight of the eleven teachers came to teach LO because of the workload distribution in the school, while three had studied LO. Through this process LO is constructed as a marginal learning area that does not require a specialist teacher:

I don’t think teachers who are chosen to teach LO have a particular passion for it or a skill in the subject and because management doesn’t place importance on it, the students take it as a joke (Participant 1).

The key subjects are staffed first. So math, languages, science and the commerce subjects are staffed ... and then those who have a low teaching load are asked to teach LO. Can you imagine what everyone in the school thinks of LO? (Participant 3).

LO is taught in the afternoon when the learners are ready to go home or in the last period on a Friday. The learners don’t want to focus then (Participant 5).

This created difficulties for teachers by adding in the initial obstacle of having to legitimise and justify the reasons for LO and motivate both staff and learners to take it seriously. A further problem was the lack of training and experience in many cases to cover all components of the learning area. This point is highlighted by participants 5 and 10:

I come from a physical education and history background ... I have not studied citizenship education, identity, sexuality, homosexuality and stuff like that. The

department (Provincial Department of Education) arranged one or two days for us to attend workshops but this is not sufficient to equip us to teach in these areas (Participant 5).

Sexuality education is not something I took at university. I don't think there was such a subject when I was studying. So this is all new to me (Participant 10).

One of the main concerns regarding the teaching of LO, and specifically the sexual health programmes in a school context, is the lack of training for teachers who often do not have the skills and knowledge to tackle this task (Helleve *et al.* 2009; Mukoma *et al.* 2009; Rooth 2005). Inadequately trained teachers add to the silence surrounding topics of sex. In many schools there is a culture of silence. Certain subjects are taboo for discussion and teachers and learners are guarded, unable or unwilling to reflect personally on issues of gender and sexuality (Morrell 2003).

Approach and attitude

The eleven teachers all displayed very different approaches and attitudes towards the teaching of sexuality education, which can be seen as close-ups of a similar range of attitudes reflected in other studies of LO teachers (Helleve *et al.* 2009; Mukoma *et al.* 2009; Rooth 2005). Findings will be discussed under common themes drawn from the data under which both positive and negative responses could be grouped.

'It's too varied'

LO combines elements from physical education, career guidance, human rights and citizenship education, as well as religion and health education, which often overwhelm teachers and leave them feeling unprepared and unable to cope with the number of learning outcomes that needed to be achieved:

Let's be realistic, how many teachers out there can teach social development, psycho-social development, phys ed, sex ed, sexually transmitted diseases, human rights, democracy and about identity and the self? It's impossible (Participant 5).

The syllabus is wide and there are so many aspects to cover. Sometimes it can be difficult to complete the syllabus within the term. Some of the sections are new and so we also have to read up on it (Participant 10).

Most teachers felt that this was too varied and struggled to implement all outcomes. It also meant that the likelihood of an LO specialisation was reduced as teachers' interests usually encompassed only some of the broad components of LO.

'LO as home for sexuality education'

LO was seen as a logical home for sexuality education within the broader curriculum by the teachers interviewed. However, this did come with challenges, as teachers recruited for this learning area came from very varied backgrounds, some of which did not always prepare them for dealing with sexuality education:

I think it is well suited to the LO syllabus. The unfortunate part of that is that the teachers who are teaching LO are Maths teachers, or History teachers or Language teachers who are embarrassed about teaching sexuality education and rather avoid it (Participant 1).

Sex education is located in many places and LO is one of them ... it allows for social engagement, social understandings etcetera ... It's also good because in Life Orientation you are not talking overly fallopian, you are not doing anatomy and physiology, it's social, emotional, that kind of thing (Participant 6).

While most teachers felt that there was a need for learners to be taught about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), pregnancy and abortion, this did not translate into a fuller understanding of sexuality as an arena that included feelings and relationships, sexual diversity and a "discourse of erotics" (Allen 2001; 2009). The result of this is that many teachers took the approach that sexuality education meant giving warnings about diseases:

LO has been just Aids-based/driven ... and a lot of the kids are just getting tired of it because we are almost overloading them with it... so [LO] is more about diseases and precautions than ... sexuality (Participant 2).

I tell them that they need to know what they are in for. If they choose to have sex and do not wear protection then they can catch all sorts of things ... HIV and other diseases. I also warn them that they can never know who they are sleeping with and the multiple partners they might have had. So it is best to just say no (Participant 6).

Well I usually do a presentation on the STDs, HIV/Aids. When I show the students the Powerpoint presentation they are so disgusted and scared that some of them say that they will never have sex again (Participant 2).

One teacher did not feel that sexuality education should be taught at school at all and that this should rather take place at home:

We have to teach it as it is in the syllabus, but my personal view is why should we teach sex education? That's the role of the parents. I speak to my children about sex education and I don't know whether I want some stranger to tell them about sex and stuff like that (Participant 5).

Constant jostling as to who should take responsibility for sex education abounds in the literature (Francis 2010). When the argument that schools are the best option for the teaching of sexuality education is made, the teaching of abstinence is presented as the ideal. Abstinence is actively promoted so that sex education is taught within a moral context, a view held by many LO teachers in South Africa (Helleve *et al.* 2009; Rooth 2005). Ryan (2001), for example, argues that teachers should not be moralistic, but should attempt to join moral perspectives with biological information. He proposes that teachers or schools not decide what is taught in isolation of the community. Sex education should therefore reinforce what the community believes to be correct as in this way youth would not be separated from their family's values.

'Values'

Many of the LO learning outcomes across all focus areas or components are values and attitudes as laid out by the Revised National Curriculum Statements (Department of Education 2002; 2004; 2008), with the result that LO is a value-laden learning area. An implication of this is that teachers see their role as being one of teaching values and morals (Rooth 2005: 58). Sex and sexuality education is particularly affected by this as teachers choose what to teach on the basis of their own values and beliefs. This is also reflected in the eleven cases in this study. The excerpt below gives an indication of the discomfort felt by teachers whose personal or religious beliefs conflict with the requirements of the curriculum:

Also I am a religious person and I don't like discussing things like that, so I find it uncomfortable. The children also know everything. You know when I speak to the class and tell them that we are going to discuss sex they ask me what I want to know. They are like so forward (Participant 4).

I won't teach about something I believe is wrong ... the Bible is clear on that. One of the boys in my class said that God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve. I agree with him. As a teacher I want to teach what is right. I believe it is a sin and it is wrong (Participant 5).

It is clear that sexuality education and teacher identity and beliefs are closely linked and that this informs both content and approach, both of which varied greatly across the eleven participants. Talking about sex and sexuality with learners often generates a great deal of anxiety as some teachers are frightened of encouraging sexual activity, or of parents accusing them of this, or they feel it is inappropriate for them to talk about these things to learners who are so young (Kirby, Laris & Lori 2007; Jewkes 2009). Better coping strategies and less negativity was noted in the cases of those teachers who separated their own

values and beliefs from the content of sexuality education, although their sense of comfort and freedom to teach what was necessary was also limited by the school context.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Some concluding observations can be made, which have implications for both policy and practice. From the data, it is clear that LO teachers lack training and come from a diverse range of fields, which do not always adequately equip them to teach sexuality education confidently and effectively. Schools must provide in-service sessions on the teaching of sexuality so that teachers become more knowledgeable and confident. It might also be useful to explore drawing on outside experts as guest teachers. There are many well-trained external experts on issues related to sexuality education such as nurses, NGO employees and others who do this kind of work very well and who are able to articulate issues on sexuality confidently and purposefully.

Training and equipping LO teachers with the skills to deal with the sexuality component is crucial in order for learners to gain objective, accurate information that will not only protect them in terms of risky behaviour, but also provide a deeper understanding of various aspects of sexuality. If this is not done, Francis (2010) argues that the lack of training will further entrench teachers' failure to engage with the position of youth as "knowers" as opposed to innocent, or seeing young people as legitimate sexual subjects who can give input into what is taught. Furthermore, inadequately trained teachers often add to the silence surrounding topics of sex, compounding gender issues as well (Morrell 2003). Pre-service teachers similarly need teacher education that pays attention to sexuality education (Francis 2012).

Teacher training in the area of sexuality education must take into account elements of self-reflexivity where teachers begin to recognise and name their own beliefs and prejudices, and begin to separate their own values from the content they are teaching. Masinga (2007; 2009) posits that teachers need to be self-reflexive and that they need to acknowledge their own prejudices and identify their values and beliefs as separate from the content that they teach. If this is not done, as Masinga noted in her reflection on her own experiences, this can have a particularly negative effect on sexuality education when teachers feel that certain aspects of the curriculum such as safe sex practices are in conflict with their own morals and religious beliefs. Finally, policy makers need to address the issue that LO as a learning area is too broad to allow for adequate specialisation.

Endnotes

- ¹ The terms “white”, “African”, “Indian” and “coloured” are part of the nomenclature of the apartheid system, and continue to shape post-apartheid understandings. In this study, I view and use race as a social construct and not as indicator of absolute, pure strains of genetic material or physical characteristics. While I will make reference to racial categories such as Indian and white, it should not lend legitimacy or credibility to the many popular cultural stereotypes and caricatures that accompany these descriptors.

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