



Reflections of Community Engagement Activity on Sex Education, Sexual Consent and Awareness among High School Learners in the Mpumalanga Province

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ABSTRACT

Consent related topics in sexual education seem to be avoided or considered taboo among learners in rural communities. The study explores the perceptions of sexual awareness, consent and sexual knowledge among high school learners in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. Two theories of social constructionism and person in the environment were used as lenses to understand sex education in relation to issues of consent. A focused ethnography approach was employed to reconnoitre the perceptions of learners on sexual awareness and sexual consent, and a purposive sample was implored to select learners involved in the study. The study used two focus groups of twenty boys and eleven girls from Grades 11 and 12. The study emanates from the reflective essays penned by ten participants from the University of South Africa, who played a role in facilitating discussions among Grades 11 and 12 learners as part of their community engagement. The study revealed that although sex education is taught at school, issues of sexual consent are lacking, and learners have no knowledge of what consent entails. Furthermore, the results revealed that the effects of sex education in the curriculum are minimal, and there should be more learning activities to promote sex education in schools.

KEYWORDS

Community; consent; gender-based violence; rural schools; sex education.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study was to reflect on dialogues about sex education among high school learners in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa (SA). The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child set the fundamental right of every child, which is to be safeguarded against all types of violence or mistreatment, a principle firmly embedded within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development under SDG 16.2. Additionally, various SDG targets address the need for the safety and rights of children and refer specifically to practices such as child marriage, child labour and female genital mutilation. Notwithstanding that, millions of children are subject to some form of abuse and violence. School-related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV) is a worldwide phenomenon among adolescents. It has no geographical, cultural, social, or economic boundaries or ethnic considerations and occurs in places such as schools and homes that are supposed to provide care and protection.

This article adds to the current understanding of social dialogues by providing insight into the experiences of university staff involved in community engagement, focusing on sexual awareness, consent, and sexual knowledge among high school learners. It seeks to analyse the perceptions of high school learners on sexual awareness, consent and sexual knowledge. The paper will also shape future community engagement efforts by utilising dialogues to foster inclusive spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can share insights and viewpoints. The goal is facilitating constructive exchanges that lead to collaborative problem solving for community issues.

Background to the problem

SRGBV is defined as acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics (UNESCO/UNGEI 2015; Orton, 2018). Schools are key sites of sexual harassment. According to Sweeting et al. (2022), schools are often unaware of this serious offence and do not understand these offences. Hot spots for SRGBV incidences are toilets, classrooms, corridors, school grounds, and staff accommodations. Experiencing high rates of SRGBV SA is no exception, with 1.8 million (15.3%) learners having experienced some form of violence between Grade 3 and Grade 12.

The 2019/2020 Annual Crime Statistics Report states that more than 24,000 children were sexually assaulted in SA (The Star newspaper). Although statistics are not readily available for schools, there is a great deal of under-reporting. It is estimated that 22.2% of school children who have been victims of violence are victims of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse against learners is also regarded as an unsettling reality that hinders a learner's school progress. It is reported that sexual offences contact crimes reported in SA in 2021 and 2022 amount to 12,702 and 11,855 cases, respectively (Police Recorded Crime Statistics 2023). In 2022, Mpumalanga recorded 741 cases of sexual offences cases of which rape was the highest at 644, and after that, sexual assault at 97 cases.

According to the 2019/2020 Annual Crime Statistics Report, more than 24,000 children were sexually assaulted in SA. In September 2021, Police Minister Bheki Cele told parliament that between 2018 and 2021, 781 South African children were recorded as victims of child trafficking (Masson, 2023). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2007) indicates that SA is a “main destination” for smuggled and trafficked persons on the African continent. SA is identified as a source where traffickers find their victims, a place of transit and a destination for both labour and sex trafficking (Masson, 2023).

There are different opinions, understandings and views of the conceptual meaning of gender-based violence and what it entails. The views vary from suggestive remarks (verbal harassment) to actual physical violence such as rape (Mason, 2023). This impacts the recognition, acknowledgement and response to gender-related violence offences that are linked to many different causes which are often interrelated. In countless cases, such activities are linked to social and cultural values and traditions and the power relations and status between men and women. A qualitative study among 43 South African school teachers and administrators in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal found that teachers’ opinions, attitudes and sense of moral authority may dominate and affect how they respond to gender-based violence (Zuma, 2018). The (ibid) further states that this impacts their teaching of moral values, healthy relationships, sexual consent, and gender equality. As such, the researchers opine that changing people’s perceptions and attitudes is crucial to addressing the engraved practices, traditional beliefs and social and cultural value systems that often perpetuate SRGBV.

The right of a child

UNICEF (2020) states that the exploitation and sexual abuse of children violate human rights and pose a public health issue, carrying substantial repercussions for global health and progress. Within this framework, SRGBV must be addressed and eradicated to fulfil the rights of each child. To address SRGBV, it is important to realise that child sexual abuse is gender-blind, and children are abused in all settings and often by someone known. Taylor, Mumford, Liu and Stein (2017) argue that schools should provide classroom-based programmes in combination with building-based interventions. The (ibid) further state that classroom-based programmes should provide education on gender-based violence prevention and promote gender equality, empowerment, and healthy relations. The building-based intervention has as its objective to identify and eliminate spaces known as “hot spots” where gender-based violence, abuse and harassment frequently happen (Hwayyan & Mahamid, 2019; Taylor et al., 2017).

According to UNICEF (2020), the following three areas should receive attention as inter-related activities: first, identifying the “risks and drivers” for sexual abuse and promoting responses to protect against the exploitation of children. Second, addressing the “social norms and behaviour” causing SRGBV; and lastly, assisting the guardians of children (parents, caregivers, teachers) to ensure the safety of children and their rights to be free from sexual violence and abuse. Creating a safe school environment is critical, and this should be promoted through the participation of children and guardians.

UNICEF (2020) emphasises that the best strategies consist of all-inclusive methodologies dealing with education, skills, knowledge advancement, and empowerment. The (ibid) further states that it is important to involve both genders (men, women, boys and girls) in programmes preventing violence, sexual abuse and human rights violations. Within the Theory of Change framework, increasing knowledge and learning activities is critical to discovering the reasons and underlying aspects (Sweeting et al., 2022). So, appropriate interventions can positively impact behaviours and perceived peer norms (Sweeting et al., 2022).

The South African context

SA is known for its rape culture in schools (Bhana, 2021), and statistics reflect that one (1) in five (5) children are victims of sexual abuse representing 19.8% of the global average. The 2019/2020 Annual Crime Statistics Report states that more than 24,000 children were sexually assaulted in SA. Although statistics are not readily available for schools, there is much under-reporting. It is estimated that 22.2% of school children who have been victims of violence are victims of sexual abuse.

Statistics of sexual misconduct are alarming and reflect the magnitude of the sexual abuse of children. It is stated that between April 2020 and July 2021, more than 160 cases of misconduct by teachers were reported to the SA Council of Educators (SACE) (2021). The underlying cause of this intolerable epidemic is primarily blamed on gender dynamics and inequality within the broader social and cultural norms, values and context of the society. Gender relations, inequalities and oppression are consequences of predominant cultural and social values where patriarchy dominates and sets the rules for gender roles. Although girls are experiencing violence and abuse on a much bigger scale, it is important to recognise that both sexes can be offenders and victims of such acts.

Schools, as a place of learning, should provide a safe environment where teaching and development of critical thinking and learning can take place. According to Bhana (2021), schools can provide the space to change ingrained patterns of violence and gender relations. The Harvard Graduate School of Education (2023) highlights that schools should steer the norms of gender equality, consent and healthy relationships. The (ibid) argues that school curriculums should include sex education, life skills and guidance for educators and parents on how to react to “incidents of gender bias, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

The stigma related to sexual abuse is probably the most significant cause for not reporting cases of gender-based violence. Furthermore, learners fear being blamed for acts of abuse and lack the ability and confidence to talk about sexual issues, which can often be blamed on social and cultural norms. Many schools do not have efficient management systems to accommodate cases of gender-based violence and agreement on what exactly can be defined as sexual abuse. (Department of Basic Education).

In light of the alarming prevalence of gender-based violence and sexual abuse in schools, the DBE has launched a national effort to tackle this issue. The strategy includes:

- Mobilising communities to improve physical safety in schools.

- Creating safe spaces and forums for children to report cases of gender-based violence.
- Dismissal of teachers found guilty of sexual abuse of learners.
- Introducing a teaching module for schools on how to manage acts of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.
- Developing a teacher's manual on how to enhance gender equality in education.
- Including a module on SRGBV in the Life orientation/Life skills curriculum.

Although the above are critical to ensuring the safety of all learners and getting rid of gender-based violence, the strategy of introducing a module/theme on SRGBV in the Life Orientation (LO) is probably the most important initiative as this underlies the Theory of Change discussed in the previous section. Learners will learn and analyse different kinds of relationships between sexes and evaluate these relationships. The focus is on building the skills and capacity of learners to reflect on their behaviours and those of others and to critically evaluate human rights, values and practices.

According to Mavhandu et al. (2022), a sexual education programme ensures students have a safe learning environment that highlights gender equality. Sule et al. (2015) defines sexual education as a curriculum developed to provide adolescents with skills and knowledge aimed at understanding their sexuality. Life Orientation was presented as a compulsory subject during the implementation of the new CAPS Curriculum to equip learners with the necessary tools to learn about themselves in relation to society and social expectations. Mavhandu et al. (2022) further argue that the curriculum should cover appropriate "biomedical facts, address issues relevant to learners such as stigma and discrimination, political impact of HIV/AIDS and psychosocial determinants of health". The sociocultural and socioeconomic issues in SA require that the LO curriculum incorporates sexual education. However, Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021) argue that LO educators feel more inclined to teach students in relation to morals and values that are more accepted in the community. As a result, topics such as sex education, sexual consent and awareness are not adequately dealt with.

According to LeDuc (2023), comprehensive sex education inclusive of consent, healthy relationships, STIs, gender identity and expression, sexual desires, and development reinforces the ability of young people to make informed choices. The (ibid) further indicates that this often delays getting involved in sexual relationships or engaging in risky behaviour. A study about sex education beliefs found that parents in a rural SA regard talking about topics on sex as taboo. Modise (2019) highlights that it cannot be taken for granted that parents will provide sexual health education to their children due to cultural beliefs, barriers and traditions. The (ibid) expressed that "In most African communities, talking about sex is taboo, and people have sex rather than talk about sex". Adekola et al. (2021) argue that although parents support the idea of sexual education, most parents are more comfortable if the discussions are influenced by their cultural values and beliefs. SA is a multi-racial and cultural country. Thus, the interpretation of information is influenced by vast belief systems and values. Taking into consideration the

sociocultural factors that hinder sexual education conversations between children and parents, young people must be provided with a curriculum that aims to increase their awareness, knowledge and skills of gender equality, consent and healthy relationships. And also how to react to gender bias, sexual harassment and violence incidents.

Issue of Consent

Consent is critical in any sexual activity, and it is only valid when an individual has agreed willingly, consciously and voluntarily to such an act (Bekink & Bekink, 2006). The person must have the knowledge and the ability to comprehend what s/he is consenting to. Simply stated, without consent, any sexual activity is regarded as rape or sexual assault. The Sexual Offences Amendment Act of 2007 maintains that consent is a key aspect when defining rape and identifies women and children as vulnerable persons when pertaining to sexual violence (du Toit, 2012).

Bekink and Bekink (2006) emphasised that learners in South African schools do not necessarily have the knowledge and empowerment to exercise consent. Furthermore, sexual education is influenced by sociocultural beliefs, which often are the cause of gender-based violence. Masehela (2014) indicates that African tradition and patriarchy have demonised women and children from voicing concerns and options relating to sex. Beare and Boonzaier (2020) state that women's idea of sexual consent is likely influenced by social gender relationships, gender bias, lack of empowerment and existing patriarchal power structures. A study conducted by Khumalo, Taylor and Mabaso (2020) found that the underlying cause of "sexual risk behaviours" of young men is embedded in cultural and social notions and practices. The (ibid) concludes that "sexual behaviours and cultural norms are interconnected", and all sex education programmes in schools should be approached and developed taking into consideration the cultural and social norms and context of the specific target group.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories, social constructionism and person in the environment theory (PIE), respectively, underlie this study's theoretical framework. Gergen (2001) defines social constructionism as a perception that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences. Furthermore, Vinney (2021) purports that social constructionism is the belief that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context and that much of what we perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions. Learners tend to rely on shared societal assumptions in learning about sex education, especially in the absence or unavailability of mentors and information. Owen (1995) adds that social constructionism acknowledges that genetic inheritance and social factors play concurrent roles, yet it does not discard the significance of hereditary tradition. Instead, it prioritises exploring the social influences on collective and individual experiences. In this sense, sex education is not regarded as separation but originates in socially shared constructions. Teaching and learning should inform learners to construct relevant and meaningful knowledge that will empower them to make informed decisions.

Social constructionism refutes that our knowledge is a direct observation of reality. It argues that we construct our versions of reality as a culture or society. Social constructionism emphasizes that learners cannot engage in activities unassisted. They need assistance from knowledgeable persons, in this case, teachers. Learning is socially constructed and does not exist in isolation (Wenger 1998). As learners construct knowledge and interact with one another, they construct the everyday patterns of life that define their reality. However, a lack of proper guidance and teaching may result in unhealthy sexual behaviors. Even though learners are expected to construct their own knowledge, they need guidance. In saying this, appropriate knowledge of sexual awareness is a necessity. Without guidance, learners may get information from other sources that could be untrustworthy.

Further, a person in the environment theory is necessary to understand the learners' behavior and responses. Kondrat (2017) explains that it is based on the notion that an individual and his or her behavior cannot be understood adequately without consideration of the various aspects of that individual's environment (social, political, familial, temporal, spiritual, economic and physical). The school in question is situated in a rural area where most families are child headed due to parents working in big cities. Makuya (2022) explains that learners from child-headed households experience challenges such as "poor socio-economic background, child abuse, stigmatization, exclusion, psychological and emotional abuses. The (ibid) further states that this affects learners academically, socially, emotionally, physically and psychologically. The above theoretical perspectives provided the framework for analyzing sexual consent and awareness among high school members in the Mpumalanga Province of SA.

Background to research study

This research study originated from a Mandela Day Community Outreach initiative organised by the Tirisano Community Engagement project, College of Human Sciences, at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The initiative includes a Career Guidance and Counselling Information session for Grades 11 and 12 learners organised by the Unisa Gauteng Directorate for Career Counselling and Development. The study was conducted at one Technical High School in the Mpumalanga Province. The learners' ages were between 16 and 18. Permission to conduct such a session was obtained from the school principal. Facilitators were recruited through an open online invitation by the Tirisano Community Engagement Project to staff in the College of Human Sciences, Unisa. Interested staff members responded electronically to indicate their availability. A meeting was held with the interested individuals, and they were briefed about the type of school and the expectations associated with being facilitators. A total of ten (10) staff members participated in the Career Guidance and Counselling Information session.

Research Study and Methodology

Against the above background, and to address the learners' lack of knowledge about sexual consent and sexual behaviour, the facilitators approached the school principal. They obtained permission to invite Grades 11 and 12 learners to participate voluntarily in a focus group discussion (FGD). The main topic of the FGD was "sexual consent among the youth". Two (2)

separate FGDs were arranged and conducted, one (1) for male learners and one (1) for female learners from Grades 11 and 12. Twenty boys (20) and eleven (11) girls participated in the two (2) FGDs, respectively. The following secondary topics guided the FGD:

1. What is your understanding of sexual consent?
2. How can you negotiate consent?
3. How can teenagers protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases?
4. How do you take care of your body as a teenager?

The facilitators designed a qualitative research inquiry to explore the perceptions of sex education and awareness among high school learners in the Mpumalanga Province. Cresswell and Poth (2016) assert that this process is gathering data. The process, also known as non-numerical data, helps discover people's experiences and comprehend concepts, perceptions, and opinions. Thus, the interpretive research paradigm focused on understanding and analysing "the subjective experiences of humans" (Thomas, 2005). Furthermore, this research study could be classified as focused ethnography as the researchers immersed themselves in the school's organisation to grasp the understudy phenomenon. This was done through observation and social dialogue. The focused ethnographic process allowed the researchers to obtain firsthand data from the learners and describe and interpret their experiences and perspectives. This approach was appropriate as it provided information on learners' knowledge of sexual consent and the interpretation thereof.

As this research study focused on the participants' real-life perceptions and social context, the ethical principles of the right to privacy, anonymity, voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent and academic integrity were strictly adhered to (Resnik 2020). Participants were informed about the purpose of the research study and given relevant background on the topic. No personal, identifiable data were recorded, and data pseudonymisation was applied to replace the identification of the participants. In the case of the focus group discussions and social dialogue, all participants (learners and facilitators) signed a consent form and agreed to keep the discussion and participants' identification confidential.

Six (6) facilitators participated in this process, each submitting reflective essays that delve into their interactions with learners, detail the information and knowledge acquired, and articulate their understanding and interpretation of the various topics discussed. They also reflected on their personal experiences and interpretations of how they viewed their interactions with the learners, employing social dialogues to tackle topics concerning sexuality and consent. Reflective essays allowed the facilitators to learn how the participants perceive and make sense of their reality and experiences (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Mortari, 2015).

Data presentation and analysis of reflective essays

The qualitative data obtained from the reflective essays were in hard copy format and were organised according to content using thematic analysis. The authors read and studied the transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with the data. This was followed by highlighting significant statements using the highlights tab on MS Word and assigning each

statement a code using MS Word comments. Afterwards, the codes were categorised into themes according to their similarities and differences, and each theme was summarised. Trends were identified and analysed, and the overlapping of themes was verified and collapsed into one where there was a commonality.

FINDINGS

The following five (5) major themes emerged from the reflective essay data:

1. The state of school infrastructure.
2. Failure of the curriculum to address issues related to learners' sexual behaviours.
3. Lack of awareness and understanding of sexual consent.
4. Use of home language as a mode of communication.

1. The state of school infrastructure

The selected technical high school is situated in the rural community of Mpumalanga, which is in a very remote area and access to the actual school is difficult. Most learners are from impoverished backgrounds and lack the necessary funds for transport to get to the school. Thus, they often have to walk long distances to attend classes. This impacts directly on their learning and academic performance. The condition of the school is characterised by deteriorated buildings, which are marked by a lack of or broken windows, doors and diminished floors, which makes concentrating in class during autumn and winter difficult for the learners as they experience discomfort because of weather conditions. The state of the classrooms is characterised by a lack of furniture, such as desks and chairs, and learning materials. Reflections indicated that learners experience the school infrastructure as "not conducive to learning" as the classrooms cannot accommodate the capacity of the learners in the schools. In most instances, learners did not have chairs and tables to support their learning activities. Reflections also showed that the classrooms desperately need repair and renovation. The lack of class furniture also reflects the issue of classroom overcrowding, whereby the number of learners exceeds the number of furniture available. The challenge of overcrowding in the classroom leads to the disturbance in learning due to noise and minimal interaction, as well as a lack of feedback and facilitation due to the teacher-learner ratio.

2. Failure of the curriculum to address issues related to learners' sexual behaviours

The second theme that evolved relates directly to the need for learning activities about sexual actions and behaviour, as discussed earlier. The school curriculum should include sex education, and schools can steer the norms of gender equality, consent and healthy relationships (Bhana, 2021). Due to the extent of sexual abuse in South African schools, the DBE introduced LO as a compulsory school subject to develop not only skills, knowledge, values and attitudes for effective and responsible participation in a democratic society but also to learn about themselves, and this includes sexual education. This is supported by social constructionism, which highlights that learners need assistance from knowledgeable persons, in this case, teachers and the lack of proper guidance and teaching may result in unhealthy sexual

behaviours (Wenger, 1998). Within the South African context, it is especially critical to provide adolescents with skills and knowledge aimed at understanding their sexuality (Sule et al., 2015). Since in most African communities, sex is a taboo subject (Modise, 2019). Teachers have an immense role to play and contribution to make towards awareness raising, an increase of knowledge and skills of gender equality, consent, healthy relationships and sexual abuse and violence.

However, results from this research study reflect that the teachers are not fully engaging with learners on the topic of sex education, thus leaving the learners with little knowledge, not to mention skills, to equip them with the vital building blocks towards understanding their sexuality, healthy behaviour and relationships. Data from the reflective essays indicate that the learners at the selected school had to construct their own knowledge of sex and issues of consent based on assumptions due to a lack of information and the failure of the curriculum to address such topics. As such, teachers in this disadvantaged school were likely to be less involved in issues of sex education, sexual consent and awareness of the life orientation syllabus depending on the grade they teach. Teachers' withdrawal from deeply engaging with the curriculum left the learners with little information, which is the vital building block towards their development. This lack of sex education and the gap in knowledge and skills are clear from the following statements in the reflective essays:

"The girls indicated that sex and sexual education is not thoroughly taught to them because the teacher is too shy to talk about those topics during the Life Orientation lessons although it is in the curriculum."

In support, another learner recounted:

"The student told us that they have not received sex education because the principal and their teachers are shy to discuss the topic."

Another important aspect that one facilitator highlighted in the reflective essay is that learners were very shy, and it was challenging to conduct a dialogue with them. After some ice-breaking activities to engage them and the facilitators themselves sharing their life experiences, a few learners participated in the dialogue and were willing to share their views and understanding.

3. Lack of awareness and understanding of sexual consent

The reflective essays exposed that the learners do not comprehend the meaning and implications of sexual consent and lack the necessary knowledge to exercise their rights. In the case of the male learners, it is clear from the reflective essays that the male learners lack awareness and understanding. When asked what consent means, most of them did not understand the meaning of the word until it was explained. One essay explained that when the boys were asked what sexual consent is, one of them said,

"It is buying a few drinks for a girl".

In another essay, it became clear that the majority did not understand the meaning of the word. When asked whether they have ever given consent to their partners to have sex,

“... they all laughed, and the brave ones went on to say that it was obvious that their partners had agreed to sleep with them and that there was no need to ask for consent”. The other learner went on to say that if his girlfriend or any other girl agrees to go out with them to a tavern, and he buys her drinks (alcohol), it is obvious that she has said “Yes” to sleeping with her.

“When explaining to them that their actions will warrant an arrest and that it is rape, they just laughed about it. It was explained to them that anyone under the age of 18 is still a minor and needs consent from their partners, and sleeping with them is a crime, and they can also be arrested. They still laughed. When asked about safe sex. The majority of them said that they do not practice it, and the only thing they worry about is pregnancy and nothing else.”

Another facilitator explains as follows:

“We also discussed how to negotiate sexual consent, which made us realize that the students didn't completely understand what it entailed.”

The initial discussion during the social dialogue with the girls focussed on fertility and the high possibility of becoming pregnant due to having experienced monthly menstrual cycles. One facilitator indicated that she got the impression that the speeches given by family members about how they were changing from being girls to teens did not necessarily help them get ready to handle the difficulties they were facing. For instance, several of the learners were unsure of how to act or carry themselves, especially if they were engaging in sexual activities. In addition, one facilitator indicated that the only thing that most teenagers were told about when they were experiencing their periods was that they should stay away from boys. The other unusual thing that was highlighted by the learners' narratives is that there was also food that they should not eat in their culture or customs when they were on their periods (i.e. dairy foods), which is believed to increase the menstruation flow. One of the facilitators reflected as follows:

“This information struck me as a little odd because growing up as a girl and becoming a teenager are two very different experiences that need guidance that is open-minded and adaptable on both the guide's and the teenager's ends.”

The facilitators also explained to the girls during the social dialogue why it is important for them to understand what it is and why it is necessary for them to know that their consent is important before anyone can have any sexual relationship with them. Each of the facilitators spoke on the topic from their individual experiences highlighting the fact that a sexual relationship without their consent is a violation of their body and an abuse that can lead to violence and rape. In the words of one facilitator:

“We also emphasised that a relationship should not be viewed as a transaction in which sex is exchanged for men's advances, gifts, or affection.”

While the dialogue was on, a male colleague from UNISA came in to speak to the female learners on his observations during his engagement with the male learners. His intervention enriched the discussion as he also gave practical examples of what the girls should not allow the

boys to take for granted in their relationships. He emphasised the importance of their right to say “No” to men’s advances.

4. Use of home language as a mode of communication in local schools

From the reflective essays, it became clear that communication in learners’ home language is critical, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as sexuality, consent and sexual activities. According to Chürr (1013), the mother tongue reflects the cultural identity of learners, and it is essential to acknowledge that “a child’s way of thinking” is stimulated through language. This emphasises that “education in the mother tongue is a key factor for inclusion and quality learning, and it also improves learning outcomes and academic performance”. Mother tongue education plays a critical role in avoiding knowledge gaps and increasing learning and comprehension speed. Most importantly, multilingual education empowers all learners to take part. It fosters mutual understanding and respect for one another.

The critical role of mother-tongue instruction was highlighted in the following remarks of the facilitators in the reflective essays:

“The English language proved to be a challenge when they wanted to express themselves and ask to explain other terms by using their native language (Setswana) so that they could understand better. Initially, learners were a bit reluctant to engage with the team, but as time went on, they got comfortable engaging and interacted meaningfully. Then I noted that it was just a matter of language barrier. They couldn't understand what we were trying to communicate to them.”

The following account also captures one of the facilitator’s views:

“I have also picked up how self-critical they are with the English language as I could not speak their home language, so I had to communicate in English. Some speak Setswana and even apologise for it and ask that I try to listen, then say which parts I understood and which ones I did not.”

Another facilitator also expressed the concern about mother-tongue education as follows:

“The dialogue session was also interesting. I really enjoyed hearing what the learners had to say; however, a language challenge was evident as they were more comfortable engaging in their home language (Setswana).”

It can be concluded that learners’ comprehension and learning of sex education and their actions and participation in sex education classes are without a doubt affected by the language of instruction. Therefore, their access to health care, consent and sex information via the curriculum is limited.

DISCUSSION

Educational facilities are supposed to create safe environments for children, and schools should offer a safe space where classroom-based programmes, in combination with building-based interventions, can provide education on gender-based violence and its prevention and the promotion of gender equality, empowerment, and healthy relations (Zama, 2018). However,

the results show that the school does not offer such a space and environment. The selected school was overcrowded and lacked the necessary infrastructure to promote learners' participation and learning activities. Noise and minimal teacher-learner interaction are detrimental to any learning activity. Furthermore, the safety of children cannot be guaranteed in a set-up where their rights to be free from abuse cannot be monitored and observed. According to Taylor et al. (2017), building-based intervention is necessary to identify and eliminate spaces known as "hot spots" where gender-based violence, abuse and harassment frequently happen. However, in this situation, identifying and eliminating danger zones is nearly impossible because of overcrowding, shortage of infrastructure and active teacher-learner interaction. According to UNICEF (2020), creating a safe school environment is critical and promotes the participation of children and guardians, activism and accountability.

The second theme relates directly to the need for learning activities about sexual actions and behaviour. This emphasises the important role that a facilitator plays in a social dialogue to create the opportunity for participants to exchange their information and perspectives, clarify viewpoints, and negotiate and develop solutions to issues of interest. However, results from this research study reflect that teachers are not fully engaging with learners on the topic of sex education, thus leaving the learners with little knowledge, not to mention skills, to equip them with the vital building blocks towards understanding their sexuality, healthy behaviour and relationships.

The lack of awareness about sexual orientation may lead to instances whereby the learners are unaware of negotiating sexual consent. As a future generation, this makes them be disadvantaged in life because they may find themselves in instances where they are raped, or they become rapist because of a lack of understanding. It was highlighted that providing awareness to children or learners in this instance can help in alleviating rape, which is currently a pandemic in SA. For example, participants expressed the following: *"Giving them the talk and sharing with them what sexual consent actually is, enlightening them about statutory rape and other misconceptions about sex and all of this coming from females was beneficial"*. Tyndale et al. as cited in Mavhandu et al. (2022), Sule et al. (2015) and LeDuc (2013), state that sex education in schools has positive results and reinforces the ability of young people to make informed choices and often delays getting involved in sexual relationships or engaging in risky behaviour.

Language undeniably impacts access to learning and comprehension, and often, learning through a second or third language negatively impacts the learner's ability to understand and express themselves. From the results, it is clear that learning and teaching in the mother tongue helps enhance understanding and comprehension, especially of concepts and topics often regarded and respected as part of a community's cultural and social practices. However, it is worth noticing that mother tongue instruction in SA is a highly contested topic due to the linguistic diversity in the country (Magocha et al., 2019).

A person-in-environment perspective suggests a more acceptable framework for measuring an individual's behaviour and his or her presenting problem. The theory focuses on changing an individual's behaviour and incorporates looking at environmental conditions that may contribute to behavioural problems. This perspective encourages the provision of interventions for individuals or aspects of the environment. In this case, the facilitators in the school lack this aspect as they do not engage in topics related to sex education. The DBE needs to empower teachers with skills to engage learners in topics of sex education, as society needs assertive learners who are knowledgeable and responsible.

Recommendations and conclusion

Although this study was undertaken at a single rural high school in SA, the results are clear that it is critical to increase knowledge and vigorous learning activities to address and eliminate SRGBV. Schools are key sites of sexual harassment but also key sites where norms, practices and beliefs are established and offer a space where risks and drivers for sexual behaviour can be identified and eliminated.

The reflective essays proved to be very relevant to this study as they constitute an in-depth investigation of life experiences on sex education, sexual consent and awareness among high school learners in the rural Mpumalanga Province of SA. It also served to seek guiding evidence to reveal sensitive information and possible issues for further research. The focus group discussion provided the ideal opportunity to analyse the feelings and perceptions of the participants from their lived experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018).

This study had some limitations, especially regarding the extent of the study and the data collection techniques. The small sample size implies that the group does not necessarily represent the larger learner population. Furthermore, the focus group discussions should have been conducted as an entry point to inform the learners about the study and the topic, hear their voices, observe their feelings, and determine whether they would be interested in and feel comfortable discussing a topic of this nature.

It is recommended that an information guide, PowerPoint presentation, and other relevant resource materials about a specific topic be made available to the learners prior to an engagement before conducting the focus group discussion. This would give learners the chance to access information and to focus their questions on their own real-life issues. As part of our research agenda, it would be helpful to go back to the school to interview or conduct a focus group discussion on the impacts of our dialogue and other activities on learners, teachers and the school.

Some of the issues tackled were identity, consent, and hygiene. The responses highlighted the need to educate the younger people about these issues. Some learners had their parents to provide them with the information, but most relied on friends and what they saw. Having these types of engagements can be beneficial to combat social issues like teenage pregnancy. This would allow learners to identify highly sensitive issues without exposing their vulnerability, ignorance and personal views.

In conclusion, it is recommended that in future studies, focus group discussions and dialogues be followed by a more in-depth investigation of subtopics and issues raised by the learners. The social dialogue during the FGDs was an ideal opportunity to identify specific experiences and challenges, which establishes the foundation for more intensive investigations and structured questions to guide follow-up interventions.

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