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TEACHING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN THE EARLY GRADES: A CASE STUDY OF GRAD 1 SOUTH AFRICAN PARENTS

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse escalates exponentially, and parents and schools are essential in protecting their children. The Bill of Rights in South Africa and the Children's Act stipulate that every child is protected from harm or hurt. Public schools in South Africa took the initiative to introduce comprehensive sexuality education into their Life-Skills curriculum. This qualitative study used an interpretivist paradigm to explore Grade 1 parents' views on teaching comprehensive sexuality education. The study was conducted in three Gauteng schools with five parents with a child in Grade 1. The author used a semi-structured open-ended interview schedule to collect individual face-to-face data from each parent. Data were analysed using Creswell's six steps of data analysis. The findings revealed that parents did not understand the difference between sexuality and comprehensive sexuality education. They believed their young children would learn explicit content and reproduction in Grade 1. Many people were against the teaching of comprehensive sex education due to their misunderstanding. However, once parents understood the difference and the significance of protecting their children against sexual abuse, they acknowledged and agreed that comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based approach to sexuality education. The content is grade and age-appropriate. The study recommended that parents be capacitated on the difference between sexuality and comprehensive sexuality education. Furthermore, parents as partners in education must be consulted and engaged when new skills programs are implemented.

Keywords: *Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Sexuality Education, parents, grade 1 learners*

Introduction

Children aged 5 to 9 are most vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and harm, and they are not mentally and physically developed to make independent decisions to protect themselves. Therefore, parents and caregivers have an essential role in protecting children. The Constitution of the Republic of South (1996) articulates that every child has the right to be protected. According to Peterson (2019), parents and schools should ensure a safe environment where children receive quality education about their bodies. Violence against children, especially child sexual abuse and neglect, is a critical challenge in South Africa despite numerous efforts to curb this scourge (Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). Furthermore, Gwirayi (2011) agrees that child abuse is a worldwide pandemic across races, tribes, cultures, and social classes.

The World Health Organisation [WHO] (2020) found that over one billion young children suffer harm and hurt from child abuse. Pijoos (2017) reported 54 cases of sexual assault of young children in one Gauteng primary school. The MEC, Panyaza Lesufi, stated in October 2017 that a security guard was arrested and charged with rape and sexual assault of 87 schoolgirls at a primary school in Soweto, Johannesburg. As a result of these alarming statistics, the Department of Basic Education [DBE] (2011) agreed to introduce comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as a program into the Life-Skills curriculum to minimise the risk of child abuse and teen pregnancy. This paper explored parents' views on teaching CSE to Grade 1 learners in South African public schools.

Explanation of Sexuality Education and Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Sexuality education (SE) has different nomenclature in different contexts. It is also known as sex education, sexual education, and sex ed in the global North and South. Breuner and Mattson (2016) and Kinnear (2018) agree that SE includes teaching human sexual anatomy, sexual activity, sexual reproduction, safe sex, birth control and other topics related to sexual health. SE is a life-long process of obtaining information and forming beliefs, values,

and attitudes. The aim is to bring about behaviour change (Kirby, 2011), including reducing unprotected and unwanted sex and pregnancy (DBE, 2017) and reducing harmful behaviour, including sexual offences such as assault and abuse (Kinneer, 2018).

In contrast to SE, CSE is a curriculum-based approach to teaching and learning that focuses on the emotional, cognitive, physical and social dimensions or aspects of sexuality (Kinneer, 2018). As a curriculum-based subject, CSE addresses the biological, emotional and social aspects of sexuality. According to UNESCO (2018), CSE focuses on the scientifically accurate teaching of skills and values to enable young learners to understand their rights and well-being. Furthermore, Kirby (2011) mentions that CSE is also described as an instruction method based on curriculum (Life-Skills) that aims to give learners the knowledge, attitudes, skills and values to make appropriate and healthy choices. Comprehensive Sexuality education encompasses a range of topics tailored to the child's age and developmental level. This is what is called age-appropriateness. A child aged four to six years learn, for example, about topics such as friendships, emotions, healthy living, nutrition, different parts of the body, and what good touches and bad touches are to them (UNESCO, 2018). Older children and adolescents can also learn about these topics at different levels. Eisenberg et al (2022) found that CSE the potential to promote healthy sexual development.

Parents' Views on Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Parents are significant role players in the lives of young children, and they are responsible for protecting and ensuring their children receive an appropriate holistic education, including CSE (Nkoy, 2022). Venketsamy and Miller (2021) agree that parents are responsible for their children's education and, therefore, be familiar with the school's curriculum. They believe that sexuality education is a sensitive topic to be taught in schools and therefore, parents should be informed and consulted. With the high rate of child abuse, CSE is a 'necessary evil' since child abuse figures are increasing exponentially (Mkhize & Masinga, 2018).

For this reason, Finland and most Western countries have included sex education in their school curriculum. This has been done with consultation, advocacy, and permission from parents and parent bodies. In the UK, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) is responsible for developing the SE curriculum (Turnbull et al., 2008), stating that the DfEE communicated with all parents as partners in teaching sex education. Parents are critical people in their children's education, ensuring that their culture and ethos remain intact. Turnbull et al. (2008) revealed that parents felt appeased when the school shared the information taught to their young children. This information allowed parents to communicate with their children about sex education.

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse has mandated that all children during their primary and secondary schooling receive information on the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (Mijatovic, 2020). This council consulted with parents and articulated the aims and purpose of sexuality education. Parents agreed that if SE content were age-appropriate and would protect their children, they would have no issues (Mijatovic, 2020). In the USA, 90% of parents favoured teaching sex education in schools. Similar findings were revealed by Dake et al. (2014), where 87% of Canadian parents agreed with the educational policy on sexuality education. In Australia, Robinson et al. (2017) found that 71% acceded to the sexuality education program in the country. Zhang and Yuan (2022) found that 87% of parents in China agreed about the importance of sexuality education lessons in primary schools.

Despite research revealing that a high percentage of parents are in favour of sex education in primary schools, some parents are not in favour. In rural Namibia, parents found it very difficult to discuss sexuality education matters and believed that their children would learn SE content from their peers and media (Lukolo & van Dyk, 2015). The research found that most parents were uncomfortable and believed that they did not have the appropriate knowledge to communicate with their young children. Some parents believed their children would be taught sexuality education in high schools. Mahoso (2020) found that parents believed their children were too young to learn about reproduction and intimacy in primary schools. According to BBC News (2011), many British parents opposed school sex education for children in primary schools. They, too, believed that children should be taught SE content once they were 13 years and above. A survey by the BabyChild website found that 59% of the 1700 parents surveyed disagreed with this practice. The most common reason cited was that 'it was inappropriate to teach children about sex,' 'parents should be responsible for discussing sex education with their children,' and that 'there is no need for children to know about sex education,' especially children aged 5-11. Zhang and Yuan (2022) also found similar findings among Chinese parents that children should be taught sensitive topics from Grade 6 upwards, with more controversial topics taught towards the end of their schooling career. Kirby (2011) and the DBE (2015) believe that CSE must be age appropriate and should consider the mental maturity of the learner.

Importance of CSE in early grades

The early grades are a significant period in the young child's development. During this phase, children meet, learn about, and communicate with significant others in their immediate environment, which goes beyond the home environment to the school. Kurtuncu et al. (2015) state that during this period, the child's curiosity is at its peak, and parents must talk to them openly and honestly. Young children are curious about their bodies, and therefore, they need guidance from a source knowledgeable about areas of development (Kinnear, 2018). To protect the learner's well-being, the DBE (2015) opines that children should receive solid foundational knowledge and understanding of sexuality and sexual literacy. Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) believe that harm and hurt to young children can be prevented through CSE. There is evidence that if children are exposed to age-appropriate CSE materials within a structured, safe and conducive environment, learners will develop attitudes, skills, and knowledge about comprehensive sexuality education. Davies (2017) also agrees that there is a need for building strong ethical and respectful relationships and sexuality literacy early in life. These relationships are the foundations for understanding children's sexual citizenship and health and well-being (Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). Research by the Department of Education in Victoria, Australia, found that 93% of young people learn about sex and sexual health from school-based age- and content-appropriate education (Kinnear, 2018)

Theoretical framework

Parents are the primary caregivers, educators and protectors of their young children. For this reason, the author opted for Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979) as the theoretical framework since it focuses on the role of the family and their interaction with the child. This theory encapsulates an integrated family approach when exploring parents' views toward teaching CSE in the early grades. Within the micro- and mesosystem is a relationship with the parent, child, and teachers. Since the microsystem is the first system in which young children engage with their parents and siblings, they expect open and honest responses to their questions (Kinnear, 2018). Nkoy (2022) believes that the people within this system are responsible for protecting the young child. In this study, the author agrees that parents are responsible for protecting their children from exposure to illicit material or content. The author also opines that young children should be exposed to age-appropriate content on CSE in the mesosystem (school). Research in Zimbabwe (Mahoso, 2020) and rural Namibia (Lukolo & van Dyk, 2015) found that parents lacked the appropriate knowledge and skills to communicate sensitive topics with their children and, therefore, depended on teachers to educate their children (mesosystem).

Furthermore, Bowen (1978), in his family system theory, argues that every family has the responsibility of creating a safe and conducive space for their children. Bowen and Bronfenbrenner's theories both view the role of the immediate family as paramount in protecting the young child. Within the Ecological system theory, the family faces factors existing in the macrosystem, such as norms, values, religion and culture. South Africa is a multicultural nation with diverse norms, values, and beliefs. Depalma and Francis (2014) state that many South African cultures find topics on sex, sexuality education, intimacy and reproduction taboo. Some people believe that these topics should be discussed when children are in higher grades or secondary school. Since this theory focuses on the quality and context of children and their environment, it is crucial that age- and content-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education is embedded into the curriculum and taught to young learners to protect young children from hurt or harm.

Research Methodology

In this study, the author utilised the qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm to explore and describe parents' views towards teaching CSE in the early grades. Maree (2020) states that the interpretivist paradigm allows the researcher to listen to and interpret the subjective experiences of the parents on the teaching of CSE in the early grades. For this study, the author purposively selected five (5) Grade 1 learners' parents to participate in the individual face-to-face interview. The face-to-face interview allowed participants to share their views and opinions in a safe environment and allowed them to probe for further clarification of their responses. The participants were invited from three (3) feeder schools in Pretoria West from a lower-income community in Kwaggasrand. The author used codes for each parent participant to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Table1: Participants' biographical information

PARTICIPANTS	CODE	GENDER	AGE	SCHOOL
Participant 1	P 1	Female	31	A
Participant 2	P 2	Female	32	A
Participant 3	P 3	Female	30	B

Participant 4	P 4	Female	42	B
Participant 5	P 5	Female	30	C

Table 1: Participant Information (compiled by the researcher)

Data was collected through interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were best suited for this study as a holistic understanding of the CSE within its context was gathered. It also allowed participants to share their feelings and allow different perspectives to be studied (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the face interview clarified misunderstandings and allowed for (Cohen et al., 2018). Since the topic was very sensitive, the researcher respected the participant's views when they agreed to refrain from elaborating (Maree, 2020).

The author collected and analysed the data using Creswell's six steps in data analysis. All data were audio-recorded to prevent misrepresentation of the participants' views (Maree, 2020). Each dataset was read several times and divided into themes. Codes were used for each theme to ensure consistency in the information. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, the author cross-checked and compared data with audio recordings. The data was analysed thematically (Cohen et al., 2018). Verbatim quotes were used in the findings and discussion.

Permission to undertake this study was obtained from a South African university's ethics committee. The ethics approval is EDU025/21. All ethical principles were upheld during the study (Maree, 2020). All participants signed the informed consent prior to each interview.

Findings

After carefully analysing the data, using Creswell's six steps, the author identified the following themes.

- Parent's understanding of SE and CSE
- Lack of consultation and engagement
- Values and beliefs

Theme 1: Parent's Understanding of Sexuality Education and Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The author asked participants to explain their understanding of the concepts of SE and CSE. From the responses, there was evidence that participants differed in their understanding of both concepts. According to P1, she indicated that

sexuality education is teaching children about sex, intimacy, and reproduction. CSE is the same; there is nothing different between sexuality education and comprehensive sexuality education.

P4 responded to the same question.

I'm not too sure if I understand completely, but I have read articles. My understanding is that it is more about sexual education at school, in terms of making the children talk about sex and the mechanism around sex.

The author found similar responses from P3 and P5. They also believed there is no difference between sexuality education and comprehensive sexuality education. P2 responded differently about SE and CSE. According to her *CSE does not only focus on teaching children about sex education. It also includes teaching children about relationships, health and wellness, whereas sexuality education is more about body parts, reproduction, and sexual activities.*

The responses show that participants lacked a clear understanding of SE and CSE. The author believes this is due to the need for more advocacy and awareness for introducing CSE to parents.

Theme 2: Lack of Consultation and Engagement

To elicit whether participants were consulted or engaged about introducing CSE in the early grades, P1 said, *"I have not been consulted about teaching comprehensive sexuality education to Grade 1 children. I heard this from the TV news that schools will be teaching children CSE in primary schools."* P2 responded, *"No one told us about CSE in schools. I heard this from my neighbour that the school is going to teach children sex education from Grade 1 onwards. My child is in grade 1, the school nor the teacher sent me any information."* P3 and P4 also shared similar sentiments. They, too, were not informed by their schools or the school governing body. They believe that this is a very 'hushed' topic to discuss. P5 indicated, *"My sister is on the school governing body, and she told me that the school was introducing CSE in the primary schools from Grade 1. She also mentioned that the reason is that there are many child abuse cases in our community. The school said CSE knowledge will protect young children from abuse and neglect."*

Parents needed to be consulted or engaged with implementing CSE in Grade 1. This could lead to resistance from parents.

Theme 3: Values and Beliefs

The author asked participants about their views on teaching CSE content and their values and beliefs. Most participants agreed that teaching CSE content will affect their norms, values, and religious beliefs. P5 was very eloquent in stating

It is taboo to talk about sex. It is against our values system and beliefs. We are not allowed to discuss sex at home. The priest is the only one to talk to our children. From a young age, I was never taught about sex education by my parents. I learnt this from my friends at school. Parents are very shy to talk about sex.

According to P1, she mentioned

I think traditionally, in my culture, sex and sexuality talks are taboo. This is never discussed in our culture. I believe that this lack of discussion has resulted in many young boys and girls making poor sexual choices. In our villages, sex talk is like a crime.

P2, P3 and P4 stated

In their culture, they do not discuss sex with their children. Zulu parents never sit with their children because they believe it is culturally taboo. Sex talk is frowned upon in African culture. However, in today's modern technological world, children are exposed to sex on their cell phones. Parents know that their children are watching programmes that are not age appropriate on television and the internet but are too shy to talk about it to their children.

The author probed and asked how they would protect their children against child abuse. All participants agreed that child abuse is increasing in their communities. According to P1, she said

As a parent, it is my responsibility to protect my child. I should make my child aware of good and bad touch. I can only do this with support from my family members. I also think that teachers and the priest can help our children.

According P5 mentioned

Maybe sex education is not so bad after all. I don't know everything about how to teach my child about sex education. I think the teachers are the best people to teach them. I believe to protect our children; we must talk to them about sex education from a young age. I don't think I will stop my child from learning about comprehensive sexuality education.

P4 also agreed that she would allow her child to be taught CSE content; however, she was very specific in saying

The school can teach my child, but they must not teach her how to have sex. They should teach the children content that is suitable for their age group.

P2 and P3 stated that they are not against teaching CSE content. However, explicit content should be taught from higher grades. They should not start teaching explicit materials to young children in Grade 1. They believed that in Grade 1, children should learn about their bodies and how to care for them. Both parents stated that when they were in school, the topic of 'My Body' was discussed in the school subject 'Health Education.'

The participants' views above show that parents are concerned about their children's safety. At the same time, they are conflicted about their values and religious beliefs. Their cultural values and beliefs significantly impact what their children learn. In the probing question, parents are 'not against teaching CSE content, they are concerned on the depth and scope of the content.'

Discussion

The findings in this study revealed that most participants showed minimal understanding of the difference between SE and CSE. P1, P3, and P5, in their responses, indicated that SE and CSE are the same. The author assumes that the word "sexuality" in both concepts could be responsible for the participant's belief that SE and CSE are the same. However, according to UNESCO (2018), CSE is a curriculum-based subject that addresses the biological, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality. On the other hand, SE focuses on teaching human anatomy, sexual activity, sexual reproduction, safe sex, and sexual and reproductive health (Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). Most participants understood SE education well and could articulate SE's focus. Only P2 in this study showed that she had some understanding of CSE and was able to state that CSE is more than just sexual education. This view concurred with DBE (2015), Kinnear (2018), Kirby (2011), and Nkoy (2022), who agreed that CSE goes beyond the teaching of sex education. CSE focuses on empowerment and skills development among young learners to decide about their bodies.

Parents are responsible for the education of their children. Peterson (2019) states that parents are responsible for ensuring their children have a safe learning environment. Venketsamy and Miller (2021) state that parents are partners in education and, therefore, have a right to what their children learn in schools. Parents need to understand the curriculum well and be consulted throughout the process (Nkoy, 2022). The findings in this study revealed that participants needed to be consulted regarding introducing CSE in Grade 1. This was revealed by P1, who said, *"I have not been consulted about teaching CSE in Grade 1."* Similar responses were received from P2, who indicated that she heard about CSE from her neighbours. P5 stated that she was informed by a reliable source, a school governing body member. In the UK, Mijatovic (2020) stated that the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse consulted parents about introducing sex education in primary and secondary schools. The findings revealed that most parents (80%) favoured their young children learning about age-appropriate sexuality education content. Similar results were found in the USA, where 90% of parents agreed to introduce sex education in schools (Dake et al., 2014). The author believes that the Department of Education and the schools should keep parents abreast with curriculum changes and implementation. If parents were made aware of the CSE program and its content, there would be little or no resistance. During the consultation and engagement, parents must thoroughly know the CSE program's aim, purpose, and content.

This study revealed that parents' norms, values, and beliefs are deeply entrenched in the philosophy of life. All participants indicated that if their young children are exposed to sexual content, it would impact on their norms, values and beliefs. P5 was forthright in her response that discussing sexuality education is taboo in her culture. Within the African culture, talks and exposure to sex, sexual activity, and intimacy is against their religious beliefs. Her view concurs with Depalma and Francis (2014), who stated that many South African cultures had found topics on sex, sexuality education, intimacy, and reproduction as taboo and is often spoken in hushed tones within the home environment (Munyai et al., 2023). Furthermore, Rashikj-Canevska et al. (2023) concur that initiating conversation about sexuality and sexual behaviour can be a difficult topic for most parents.

P1 further stated that such discussion topics are carried out by adults or elders in the community. According to P2, P3, and P4, in the African culture, parents do not talk about sex to their young children. Such discussions are usually done by the priest or religious leader in the community. Similar findings were revealed by Mahoso (2020) among Zimbabwean parents. These parents believe their culture does not allow them to talk about sexuality education to their young children.

Despite participants being reluctant about CSE in the school programme when confronted about protecting their children, all participants agreed that parents are responsible for protecting their children. This aligns with the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa that every child has the right to be protected from harm or hurt. (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; DBE, 2015). In her response, it is evident that P1 does not have the appropriate knowledge to explain CSE content to her child. Therefore, she agreed that teachers are appropriately positioned to teach their children. This view concurs with Lukolo and van Dyk (2015) and Nkoy (2022), whom all found that since parents do not have the appropriate knowledge and skills, CSE should be taught by skilled and trained teachers to teach age-appropriate content.

P5 was very forthright when she realised that CSE is more about creating awareness and protecting children from abuse. She responded, *"Now that I think about it like that, I don't think I will stop my child from learning about CSE."* Her view aligns with Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021), Nkoy (2022), and Venketsamy and Kinnear (2020), who agree that CSE has the potential to prevent young children from any form of harm and hurt. P4 agreed that the school might teach her child CSE content, but she responded strongly that the content must be age appropriate. Her view concurs with the Department of Education in Victoria, Australia, where young people learn age-appropriate content on sex and sexual health. Kinnear (2018) also agrees that young learners should be exposed to age-and content appropriate material. This is evident in the Technical Guidance for Sexuality Education (UNESCO, 2018), which outlines the content each age group should be exposed to at the school level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study is an original contribution to the knowledge about parents and CSE. This study articulated the difference between SE and CSE, distinguishing these two concepts. Through this study, parents understood the value of CSE in the school curriculum for Grade 1 learners. CSE is not only about intimacy and reproduction; it is a curriculum-skilled-based program to raise awareness and protect young children. Parents became aware of their role and responsibility of protecting their children through education.

Parents are significant role models in their children's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They are the child's primary educators and are responsible for protecting their young children in their immediate environment. As partners in education, parents should engage and collaborate with the school to know and understand what their children

are being taught. Schools also should communicate appropriately with parents (Venketsamy & Miller, 2021). Young children should be made aware from an early age of protecting themselves (Kinnear, 2018) through an age-appropriate school-based comprehensive sexuality education program (DBE, 2015).

From the findings, it is recommended that there should be ongoing, open, and honest consultations between the school principal, school governing body, and parents regarding the implementation of CSE. In these meetings, clear explanations should be given to all parents about SE, CSE, the aims, purpose, and the content outline to help parents understand the purpose of the program. Parents should be allowed to participate in discussions regarding the content that young children should be taught. Contextual factors, namely parents, religious beliefs, norms, and societal values, must be considered when developing and implementing a school CSE programme De Croo et al (2023) state that CSE is a safe and effective way to protect and young people from abuse in any form. . In conclusion, with the high rate of child abuse across the globe, CSE is a 'necessary evil' in our society. It is recommended that further studies be undertaken with parents in semi and urban areas and in the existing eight provinces of South Africa.

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