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## **Teacher and parental involvement in providing comprehensive sexuality education in selected primary schools of Kalomo district of Zambia**

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### **Abstract**

The study sought to investigate teacher and parental involvement in the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in selected primary schools of Kalomo district of Zambia. This was from the background that the Ministry of General Education included Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in the primary school curriculum with an aim of providing information to the learners whilst in school. Using a phenomenological design, In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 teachers who taught grades 5 to 7 and 20 parents whose pupils were in grades 5 to 7 in the five selected primary schools. Data was analysed thematically by coding and sorting before presenting findings. The study findings revealed that parents in schools supported the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education by allowing relatives to help pupils answer the question on sensitive pregnancy, childbirth and sex itself. The challenges parents and teachers faced included culture barriers and older pupils failing to participate in the discussion about sex in classes, among others. The study recommended that both parents and teachers should impart correct knowledge on comprehensive sexuality to the future generation by breaking the cultural barriers which hinder the smooth delivery of Comprehensive Sexuality Education knowledge in the community.

**Keywords:** Teacher education • Parental involvement • Comprehensive sexual education

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### **Introduction**

The study was motivated by the way parents respond to questions which their children come with on Comprehensive Sexual Education in their homes. Learners need to learn what the government has planned in the syllabus while parents still withhold the information waiting for what they consider is the right time. By definition, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is the education which is provided in schools while following a syllabus designed with topics on sex and health education (Kristin, et al., 2006). The assertion is that teachers and parents are key in providing information to learners in the area of sexuality so that they are in the knowing of their body. Miller (2010) noted that teaching CSE calls for breaking some of the traditional beliefs and crossing barriers into the culture of the old. However, caution need to be taken since cultures differ. The Zambian society and Africa in particular have an organized culture which calls for the teaching of sexual education to pupils only when they reach puberty stage (Thompson, 1980). The African education system had its curriculum centred round a number of teaching and learning activities. These activities were learnt

both informally and formally. Among the formal learning activities was sexual education. Kamalondo (2005) explains that sexual education in the Zambian society was only taught to young adults who became of age and were ready for marriage. Before that, sex was associated with a number of deterrent taboos which hindered pupils and the young to ask anything concerning this subject.

Matondo (2010) asserts that sex education in the North-western province was taught during the initiation ceremonies. Boys were taught the roles of a man during the circumcision camp period and girls were taught their sex roles during their seclusion period. In formal schools, the curriculum only provided health education which talked about nutrition and hygiene in general. Other tribes around Zambia also did not teach sex education to pupils who were below puberty because they were believed not to be read to handle sexual issues. It was from such a point of view that Mwanakatwe (1974) states that traditional education had a curriculum that did not discuss sexual related matters to everyone except when that child reached the right age to hear such discussions. Sex education was meant for someone who was of age and went for marriage teaching.

In 2009 UNESCO, working with partners such as convention on rights of the child, social and cultural rights, among others, developed the international technical guidance on sexuality education (ITGSE). The ITGSE provides governments with the rationale for offering comprehensive sexuality education in schools. This provided key characteristics of effective sexuality education and content suggestions to help them design their own programs to suit their country. Comprehensive sexuality education was thought to be one of the key recommendations to fast track the HIV response and end of the AIDS epidemic among young people.

In December 2014 Comprehensive Sexuality Education was rolled into all primary and secondary schools across Zambia to empower pupils with values, knowledge and morals were embedded in the policy document mission statement (MOE, 1996). The new curriculum also has content on sexuality taught to grade 5 and above. Statistics that there was a large number of pregnancy cases saved as an indicator that the young people were indulging early and were at a high risk of sexual health problem (Ministry of Education Bulletin, 2015). What was not known was teacher and parental involvement in the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in the primary schools of Kalomo district of Zambia. The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher and parental involvement in the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in selected primary schools of Kalomo district of Zambia. The study was guided by the following objectives:

- a. To ascertain parental support to teacher's efforts in providing comprehensive sexuality education to primary school pupils of Kalomo district, and
- b. To establish the challenges associated with the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education to primary school pupils of Kalomo district.

The findings of the study may provide information of how parents perceived the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in schools, as it is aimed at equipping the pupils with information on sexuality education and decision making. The findings may also give insight on the actual experiences teacher went through as they discussed sexual related matters with pupils in the primary schools.

### **Factors for successful teaching**

There are a number of factors which contribute to successful teaching of CSE in the various education institutions in different parts of the world. Kalim (2016) mentions that the Muslim community has not embraced the teaching of CSE because it is against the religious practices. He explains that Moslems have a period and way of teaching CSE to their community and not using the school. Furthermore, Daka (2007) comments that when a girl became of age, it was the duty of the grandmother to educate her. However, Lukama (2007) contradicts the above notion by stating that grandmothers of today are not available for their grandchildren to share the wisdom. He asserts that the sad reality is that our customs and traditions have been neglected through the intrusion of western cultures into our ways of life.

Lukama (2007) further observes that Zambians have embraced foreign influence to the extent that it has led to the attenuation of the local culture and traditions. Kapwepwe (1994) blames

whites as a group that has contributed to the destruction of cultural and traditional ways of life in schools and communities. Additionally, a study by Chondoka (1988) established that most young people are spending most of their times in schools, colleges, universities and urban areas during holidays away from the traditional environments. This deprives them the privilege of getting information and instruction on sexuality rituals and practices that they need to know from the tradition point of view. This is an unfortunate situation as it has left a negative attitude in the young people towards their culture and tradition (Kapwepwe 1994).

### **Sex education**

The decline in traditional preparation has left a gap in young people's informal education which is having an impact on cultural attitudes and expectations of sex and relationships. The only institutions where the pupils can get the right information regarding sexual education seem to be schools and the social media to a certain extent. To add on, the MOE (2012) states that it is the responsibility of the teacher to impart sexuality education knowledge into the pupils to bridge the cultural beliefs from the community. Therefore, the teaching topics in schools include values, attitudes and sources of sexual learning, norms and peer influence on sexual behaviour. Other teaching content is on decision making, communication, refusal and negotiation skills as well as finding help and support. The last teaching content includes culture, society and human rights, including sexuality, culture and law, sexuality, media and the social construction of gender, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and harmful practices.

A study by Himaambo (2016) on 'understanding Zambia's diverse culture, tradition' found that parents supported some teaching of sexual education to their children which were mainly on hygiene practices and preventive measures to getting pregnant especially for girls. Even before the 'nkolola' ceremony was held, girls had a gist of what sex was. In addition, Chanda (2016) observes that parents supported sexuality education even from their communities through traditional practices. For instance, a Chewa girl between 9 to 16 years of age undergoes puberty and initiation rites called 'Chinamwali'. This traditional initiation ceremony can take 2 to 3 weeks. The young girls are taught traditional customs relating to sexuality and reproduction. The boy of the similar age initiated into semi-secret society called 'nyau' to attain full adult male status and during this initiation. They are secluded and given instructions. In this line, parents are, therefore, supportive to the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in some ways through traditional practices.

A study was conducted in Thailand by Boonmongkon & Thaweessit (2009) on sexual education and sexual harassment. The study was conducted in 20 government and 10 private schools and interviewed teachers and pupils regarding the teaching content of sexual education. The findings revealed that teachers did not teach comprehensive sexuality education despite there being a National Policy and Curriculum, which the authors attributed to teacher discomfort or resistance. The study further revealed that parents did not help their pupils in answering questions related to sexuality education while they were happy to help the in other subjects. The parents instead asked the relatives to help with the answers on any topic dealing with sexuality.

Similarly, a study conducted by Kirkman et al., (2002) in Peru looked at parental openness on sexual education to secondary school pupils. The findings established that many young people found it difficult to talk to their parents about sexuality and majority of parents especially fathers felt uncomfortable on this subject. The study concluded that teachers had the role of educating pupils in schools regarding sexual behavior and conduct since they were considered to be truthful and never felt shy with pupils. Further, Firtzgerald (2000) observes that pupils learnt about sex from each other and did not acquire the most correct information on the subject because in local language, private parts are insults. It is, therefore important for parents to help guide their children regarding their sexual behaviour according to the way they want them to grow up in society instead of leaving room for deception by peers.

Tembo (2012) explains that many traditional cultural practices regarding sexual teaching were very special, sacred and only secretly exposed to special groups or age sets or cohorts who were going through the rite of passage. Parents never taught their pupils any sexual related matters but found other elders, grandparents and aunties as teachers. Duha (2014) adds that there are sacred ceremonies which are very meaningful to adults and their young people who are anticipating and

cannot wait to participate in them amongst the Hindu communities. He adds that topics on sex are never discussed in the presence of pupils until they are of age. Parents, families of young people and the entire close-knit community are anxious and interested in passing on very important life values to the young people we hope most of these practices are kept confidential.

A research by Kasonde (2010) on ‘challenges of teaching sexual education in secondary schools of Zambia’ established that the majority of teachers 75% had a positive attitude towards teaching comprehensive sexuality education to learners in various schools. In the Islamic states, however, Farai (2015) mentioned that sexual education was not a topic for both boys and girls together and that boys and girls were supposed to be taught separately as per tradition. It can be stated that the school curriculum with sexual education is being discussed and implemented slowly as others are accepting the changes in the world. However, the challenge to explicitly teach comprehensive sexuality education in Zambian schools is somehow hampered by aspects of culture which restrict parents to teaching pupils only when they have attained puberty.

## **Methodology**

The study used the qualitative method and employed a phenomenological design to explore the subject matter. Tavakoli (2012) says this design examines the lived or experiential meaning and attempts to describe and interpret these meanings in the ways that they emerge and are shaped by consciousness, language, our cognitive and noncognitive sensibilities among others. To encourage these perspectives to emerge, phenomenologists use open-ended interviews as their primary data collection tool (Creswell, 2009). The study targeted five primary schools and teachers who taught grade five to seven since that was where CSE was prominent. Out of a population of twenty schools and a hundred and twenty teachers, the study sampled five schools and fifteen (15) teachers who taught grade 5-7 and twenty parents whose pupils were in the same schools and were in grade 5-7. These were interviewed making a total sample of 35 participants. The parents who resided nearby the school were the participants. Thirteen (13) parents were female while seven (7) were male. The parents were explained to on the aim of the study and how their rights were protected throughout the study. Interviews were conducted at the convenient time of the participant during the day so as not to disrupt their work. The responses were recorded and transcribed. Themes from the responses collectively were put in their analogous, coded and then analyzed. Similar ideas were presented together and verbatim were used to present the conversation from participants according to the categories.

## **Findings and discussion**

The findings were presented and discussed in relation to the set objectives which were to ascertain parental support to teacher’s efforts in providing comprehensive sexuality education to primary school pupils, and establish the challenges associated with the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education to primary school pupils of Kalomo district.

### **Parental support towards comprehensive sexuality education provision**

The study findings revealed that parents in schools supported the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education by allowing relatives to help pupils answer the question on sensitive pregnancy, childbirth and sex itself. Parents acknowledged that pupils came with homework from school which contained some sexuality related issues. They mentioned that they provided some answers to some simple questions while difficult or sensitive questions were directed to their aunties and grandparents for answers. This was a demonstration that parents did not provide the actual support they were supposed to provide during homework for sexual education. One parent said,

“I remember one day my girl asking what child abuse was. I explained and she went ahead to ask me what sexual child abuse was. To this question, I told her to go and

ask the auntie because the question was beyond me. My boy does not ask me such questions I wonder”

Another parent said,

“My girl and boy came with work also on child abuse and asked me on how a boy can be abused. The question was hard for me to answer. I waved it off and said it is not possible. The following afternoon she explained to me on how boys can be abused. The boy was even telling me ways he can be abused sexually. I just looked at her and laughed in shock.”

The parents also stated that questions which were more direct to them and those which sought information to be given or taught to mature people was avoided since they perceived that pupils were not mature enough. They, however, explained that teachers provided such information to the pupils in class. Additionally, parents were of the view that teachers should continue teaching learners comprehensive sexuality education since parents could not manage to break the silence embedded in the topics.

One of them said,

“It is the role of the teacher to teach our pupils anything about sex because they are trained. As for me, it is hard to teach my child about sex.” Another parent concurred that, “as a parent it is difficult for me to provide details while it is easy for the teacher. The topic is sensitive for me.”

Respondents recommended teachers to teach sexuality education in schools and not by parents in their homes. Parents further indicated that they withheld certain information with pupils regarding sexuality education because the culture did not allow them to release such information to the pupils at an early age. Having been brought up in a silent culture concerning sex education, it is difficult for us to open up to our pupils. One parent said,

“I don’t know what they were learning at school and my son asked me how a girl can get pregnant? I looked around in shame, asked him where the question came from. He said he heard the teacher use such a term. I told him to go and ask the teacher because I can’t just explain.”

Another parent said,

“With me, my girl asked me on why women get pregnant and not men. I just said it the way God made us. Even in the Bible u have head that men don’t get pregnant and she agreed. I knew she had another answer which I didn’t provide.”

Parents went on to mentioned that they provided some basic information on certain topic on sexuality education on how pupils should dress and protect themselves from pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted diseases. However, they did not go further to define terms in sexuality education a task which was left to the teachers. Teachers were also asked on how supportive the parents of pupils were to the provision of comprehensive sexuality education to the primary school pupils. They stated that parents provided partial information to the parents regarding sexuality education while most of the important information was left for the teacher to handle. One teacher said,

“Parents do not give the primary school learners with accurate information regarding sexuality education. When I give learners homework, pupils come with extra questions which the parents fail to provide answers.”

Some of the teachers said,

“Parents are not open enough to answer sex related questions from pupils.”

“Pupils usually come to report that my parents said I should ask you this and that question.”

“Homework given to pupils which is on sexual content is usually answered by relatives in the house and not parents.”

The respondents established that parents were not so open to pupils regarding sexuality education when they are asked. However, they provided answers to some questions, but not to the extent of making the learner know what has to be known.

It is clear from the foregoing that parents left the responsibility with the teachers of teaching the learners on sexuality education. Parents did not want to be open to the pupils and tell them the reality regarding sex. They preferred to talk to their children about other life issues and not sex, thereby, leaving the responsibility to talk sex to the teachers. Kapwepwe (1994) says both teachers the parents have a responsibility and he does not see teachers to be outsiders in sexuality education. He asserts that the only institutions where the pupils can get the right information regarding sexual education seem to be the schools. Chondoka (1988) adds that most young people are spending most of their times in schools, colleges, universities and urban areas away from the traditional environments in rural areas especially during holidays. This deprives them the privilege of getting information and instruction on sexuality rituals and practices that they need to know from the parents but learn from other people within the communities they live.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to impart sexual knowledge into the pupils to bridge the cultural beliefs from the community. Therefore, the teaching themes in the curriculum include values, attitudes and sources of sexual learning, norms and peer influence on sexual behaviour. Other teaching content was decision making, communication, refusal and negotiation skills as well as finding help and support. The MOE (2012) in its syllabus says that the teaching content included: culture, society and human rights including sexuality, culture and law, sexuality and media the social construction of gender, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and harmful practices. These have to be taught not only by teachers but by every responsible parent and community member to the next generation of parents.

The findings of the study also showed that parents supported the pupils to a certain extent by telling them some sexual related information. This is what Himaambo (2016) supports when he observed that parents supported some teaching of sexual education to their pupils which were mainly hygiene practices and preventive measures to getting pregnant especially for girls. Even before the ‘Nkolola’ ceremony was held, girls had a gist of what sex was. Chanda (2016) also confirms that parents support sexuality education even from their communities through traditional practices. He gives an example of a Chewa girl between 9 to 16 years of age who undergoes puberty and initiation rites called ‘*Chinamwali*’. Chanda explains that this traditional initiation ceremony can take 2 to 3 weeks. The young girls are taught traditional customs relating to sexuality and reproduction. The boy of the similar age initiated into semi-secret society called ‘*Nyau*’ to attain full adult male status and during this initiation, they are secluded and given instructions.

Parents are, therefore, supportive to the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in some ways through the traditional practices although it’s the age difference which matters most despite not coming out in the open. The argument is may be on time to tell the pupils regarding the sexual activities. Traditionally it is called the ‘right time’ while in school they are calling it ‘the right time’. The factor might be the age and purpose of this education depending who is involved and why being involved. Significant to note is that, they are taught separately traditionally while in school both are taught in one class.

Parents asked other relative to help their pupils answering the homework and other sexual related questions while other parents who did not have relatives in homes answered partly and left some sensitive questions for the teacher to tell the learners. This is in agreement with Thaweessit and Boonmongkon & Thaweessit (2009) whose study revealed that parents did not help their pupils in answering questions related to sexuality education while they were happy to help the pupils in other

subjects. The parents instead asked the relatives to help with the answers on any topic dealing with sexuality. This demonstrated that parents were for the idea of pupil's sexuality education by asking relatives to help the pupils with answering questions on sexuality education.

### **Challenges towards teaching comprehensive sexuality education**

The findings of the study revealed that challenges parents and teachers faced in teaching comprehensive sexuality education included culture barriers and older pupils failing to participate in the discussion about sex in classes. The study showed that parents were shy to mention certain sexual reproduction organs in the local language. One parent said,

“It is difficult for me to explain certain words which are part of the reproduction system in Tonga. The words are too heavy to be used on a child by me as a parent.”

Another parent said,

“Discussing sexuality education with my pupils is what I have failed to do. I feel very shy to even talk about HIV contraction methods before my pupils. It is a heavy situation.”

Yet another parent mentioned that,

“it is not suitable for a father or mother to talk about sexual issues to pupils. It is the role of the grandparents.” Another one added, “It is the aunties and uncles who can help discuss such. This is only possible if the child has no grandparents closer to ask.”

Parents also asserted that traditional beliefs about sex hindered them from discussing sex with their children. One parent said,

“I cannot discuss sex with my child because it is against my tradition. It's the grandparents to do so. But when the child comes with a question, I usually give them basic information only.”

Parents further reported that it was culturally unacceptable for elders to discuss sexual related matters with pupils before they reached puberty. On parent said,

“it is a taboo to discuss sex with pupils, so it is very hard for us parents to help pupils understand the topic.”

Another parent observed that,

“pupils can only understand basic information, but the teaching content is beyond this basic information. This makes pupils to ask further questions which are beyond their age.”

They proposed that pupils should be limited to only little sexual content until they were above 16 years of age so that they could understand the subject. Teachers also had their own challenges which they faced in the process of teaching comprehensive sexuality education. They explained that some pupils who were older failed to participate in the discussion about sex because such topics were not open for public discussion. One teacher said,

“older pupils especially girls are not comfortable discussing sexual related issues in class.”

Another teacher said,

“Boys ask a lot of questions which are female related and some of them are beyond their understanding. Girls too ask difficult questions which are beyond their understanding.”

Teachers posited that it was difficult to teach pupils the reproductive organs in their local language because the terms were too heavy to be spoken before pupils while they hardly understood English. One teacher said,

“Teaching sexuality education calls for mentioning the organs. It is easy to say penis, scrotum and virgin in English yet in local language these are heavy words on me as a teacher and pupils. However, we just have terms to teach these to learners”

Another teacher said,

“Despite being a teacher, I also feel shy to give the needed details to the pupils because they are too young for some content. They don't understand some of the things we teach hence they ask endless questions because they have not experienced puberty. Despite, I have to do my job and teach them CSE. I have no option ”

The pupils too felt it was insulting to teach them their private parts and their functions beyond their age. The respondents felt that pupils tend to practice what they learn in class to some extent while the knowledge was key to help prevent disease contraction and unwanted pregnancies.

Overall, the findings of the study established that it was culturally unacceptable for elders to discuss sexual related matters with pupils before they reached puberty. This is in agreement with Kirkman et al. (2002) whose findings established that many young people found it difficult to talk to their parents about sexuality and majority of parents, especially fathers, felt uncomfortable about this subject. This may be true because many parents in Zambia tend to adhere to traditional and cultural norms and values. Consequently, they may be reluctant to discuss sexual related issues in public before their children. Furthermore, the parents were shy to mention certain sexual reproduction organs in the local language. It also established that teachers were considered to be the best people to teach about sexuality education since they were trained to handle all subjects. Firtzgerald (2000) agrees with these findings when he concluded that pupils learnt about sex from each other and did not acquire the most correct information on the subject because in local language private parts are insults.

The study revealed that some pupils who were older failed to participate in discussions about sex because in public because they felt uncomfortable. The above challenges hindered the smooth teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education in the primary schools of Kalomo district. The findings are consistent with Tembo (2012) who noted that topics on sex were never discussed in the presence of pupils until they were of age. He explains that traditional cultural practices about sex were very special, sacred and only secretly exposed to special groups or age sets or cohorts who were going through the rite of passage. Tembo adds that parents never taught their children any sexual related matters but asked other elders, grandparents and aunties to do so.

Lastly, the study indicated that culture was another barrier to the effective teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in the primary schools. The finding agrees with Kasonde (2010) who noted that the challenge to explicitly teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in the Zambian schools was the aspect of culture which restricted parents to teach pupils only when they attained puberty. Kasonde asserts that before that age, pupils were exposed to different myths which hindered them from indulging in sexual activities.

## **Conclusion**

The study concluded that parents were involved and supported the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education by allowing relatives to help the pupils answer the question on the content. However, they left most of the teaching of sexuality education to the teachers instead of



them helping the learners at home. Despite, there was parental support towards the pupils' education. The study also concluded that challenges faced in the teaching of comprehensive sexual education included culture barriers, older pupils failing to participate in the discussion about sex because such topics were not open for public discussion, parents being shy to mention certain sexual reproduction organs in the local language and that it was culturally unacceptable for elders to discuss sexual related matters with children before they reached puberty. The study recommended that parents should take keen interest in helping learners with any types of homework unlike choosing which one to help and not to. IT also recommended cultural barriers enshrined in traditional practices which hinder parental guidance on sexual related education for the pupils should be done away with in order encourage both parents and teachers to impart correct knowledge on comprehensive sexuality to the future generation.

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