

Attitudes and Perceptions of School Stakeholders on Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Primary Schools: A Study of Junior Grades in Zimbabwe

Kenneth Mukau^{1*} 

Henry Nichols² 

AFFILIATIONS

^{1,2}Department of Education
Foundations, University of the Free
State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: nicholshj@ufs.ac.za

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

Received: 02 May 2024

Revised: 25 June 2024

Accepted: 27 June 2024

Published: 30 July 2024

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DOI: [10.38140/ijss-2024.vol4.11](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijss-2024.vol4.11)

Abstract: This study investigates the attitudes and perceptions of school stakeholders, specifically principals and teachers, regarding the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in primary schools. It focuses on junior grades (grades 3-7) in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. Given the increasing prevalence of child marriages, sexual abuse, and early pregnancies, delivering CSE effectively is crucial. This research uses a qualitative approach rooted in the interpretive paradigm and informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory to explore stakeholders' perspectives on the dynamics of CSE implementation. Through a case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants, including school principals and teachers, to shed light on systemic barriers that hinder effective CSE integration. These barriers include ambiguous policy frameworks, entrenched cultural beliefs, resource constraints, and inadequate training. Despite generally positive attitudes towards CSE, the study reveals persistent challenges that undermine its successful integration into the curriculum. To address these issues, the study advocates for collaborative stakeholder engagement in curriculum development, emphasising community support and ownership. Furthermore, targeted initiatives such as in-ser-

vice training for principals and teachers, along with the provision of adequate teaching materials, are recommended to enhance implementation efficacy. By addressing these challenges, stakeholders – such as parents, teachers, and non-governmental organisations – can help create an enabling environment conducive to CSE in junior grades, thereby empowering learners and promoting their overall well-being.

Keywords: Comprehensive Sexuality Education, primary schools, junior grades, qualitative research, Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction

In 2015, Zimbabwe underwent a significant curriculum update which included the incorporation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into its revised educational framework. This addition is considered relatively recent and has faced several challenges in its implementation, influenced by a variety of ecosystemic factors. Sexuality education has a long-standing history in the United States (US), Western European countries, and the global South (Brown, 2018). It has evolved over the years in response to societal changes (Guttmacher, 2020). However, the focus on sexuality education continues to be shaped by societal norms, values, and the political climate in each country (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [SIDA], 2016). Traditionally, discussing sexual matters has been considered taboo in Zimbabwe, and adolescents in many cultures have not been provided with information on sexual issues (Mahoso, 2022; Amnesty International, 2018). If sexual education was provided, it was typically the responsibility of parents and often delivered shortly before marriage. Unlike Western countries, Zimbabwe does not have clear-cut policies on CSE in place (Mahoso, 2022; Muridzo, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). CSE was only included in the curriculum with the introduction of the updated curriculum in 2015. Within this updated curriculum, elements of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) were integrated into the subject of Guidance and

How to cite this article:

Mukau, K., & Nichols, H. (2024). Attitudes and perceptions of school stakeholders on comprehensive sexuality education in primary schools: A study of junior grades in Zimbabwe. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Sociality Studies*, 4, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijss-2024.vol4.11>

Counselling, as well as life skills orientation, marking the initial incorporation of CSE-related topics (Amnesty International, 2018). Consequently, the history of CSE in Zimbabwe primarily revolves around the subject of Guidance and Counselling and Life Skills Orientation.

Teaching CSE has become essential as it plays a significant role in recognizing and upholding human rights, providing knowledge, values, and skills necessary for HIV prevention, and promoting gender parity (Fairfield & Charman, 2022). An evaluation by Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2018) reveals that CSE helps young people by equipping them with accurate information and fostering skills in decision-making, negotiation, communication, and critical thinking. Teaching CSE to primary school junior-grade learners is crucial not only because it helps children develop skills to avoid sexual harassment but also because it helps them develop the ability to form meaningful relationships with others (Chirwa-Kambole, 2020). Furthermore, Mahoso (2022) indicates that CSE greatly assists learners in gaining accurate knowledge about their bodies.

Regardless of its effectiveness, the success of CSE can be influenced by the attitudes and perceptions of school principals and teachers. According to Guy-Evans (2020), the school where administrators and teachers are located is considered part of the microsystem in the ecological theory of child development. Therefore, the perceptions of these key stakeholders towards CSE are crucial and can impact the implementation and outcomes of the program. Many teachers and school principals tend to resist teaching CSE in junior grades due to their negative attitudes towards it (Chavula et al., 2022). A study conducted by Beyers (2017) revealed that participating teachers expressed reluctance to teach CSE because they believed it was unnecessary to address sexuality issues with young children, considering it as an adult matter. Furthermore, teachers avoid teaching topics that contradict their personal values and beliefs (Mkumbo, 2018). Vanwesenbeecka et al. (2018), in their research conducted in low-income African and Asian countries, found that many teachers struggled to discuss certain CSE topics due to misalignments between their attitudes and perceptions and the established CSE standards. Additionally, discussions about sexual matters are hindered by cultural taboos and religious objections, which create discomfort for both educators and students (De Haas & Hutter, 2019). UNESCO (2015) emphasises that the absence of CSE policies is a significant drawback to the program.

1.1 Problem statement

With the recent introduction of CSE into the Zimbabwean education system, it is crucial to understand the attitudes and perceptions of school principals and teachers towards CSE. These attitudes and perceptions have a direct impact on the successful integration of CSE into junior-grade classrooms. The school environment, which reflects community values, plays a pivotal role in implementing educational policies such as CSE (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018). However, there is still a gap in our understanding of how these stakeholders perceive and approach CSE, which hinders its effective implementation. Hence, the study answers the following research question:

- How do the attitudes and perceptions of school principals and teachers influence the implementation of CSE in Zimbabwe junior grades?

2. Theoretical Framework

The Socio-Ecological Model, proposed by renowned developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, serves as a robust theoretical framework for understanding the intricate dynamics influencing CSE delivery in junior grades in Zimbabwe. Bronfenbrenner introduced this model to elucidate the interconnectedness of various environmental systems and their impact on individual development, emphasising the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The microsystem, which includes family, school, and peer groups, has direct influences on CSE provision. Positive support from these environments fosters children's acquisition of knowledge and

skills for sexual health, while negative attitudes may leave them vulnerable to exploitation (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Chinyoka, 2016). The mesosystem emphasises the importance of cohesive relationships between microsystems, highlighting the need for collaboration among family, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Alignment in attitudes toward CSE enhances its effectiveness, whereas conflicts impede implementation (Chinyoka, 2016). The exosystem, involving broader social structures, influences CSE provision indirectly through entities like school development committees and cultural norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Clarke, 2020). Decisions within the exosystem significantly impact the quality and availability of CSE programs. The macrosystem, encompassing cultural values and societal norms, plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward CSE (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Kitchen, 2019). Cultural beliefs and historical contexts influence the acceptance and implementation of CSE, necessitating culturally sensitive interventions (Muridzo, 2017). The chronosystem recognises the dynamic nature of developmental contexts over time, including historical legacies and evolving social norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Historical attitudes toward CSE impact contemporary perceptions, highlighting the need for interventions that consider evolving needs and realities (Kitchen, 2019).

Overall, the Socio-Ecological Model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the ecosystemic factors influencing CSE delivery in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Its application in this study illuminates how various environmental systems interact to either facilitate or impede the successful implementation of CSE initiatives in junior grades in Zimbabwe.

3. Review of Related Literature

The effective implementation of CSE faces significant hurdles due to cultural and religious beliefs and norms, particularly in countries like Zimbabwe. Cultural taboos and religious objections hinder open discussions about sexual matters, creating discomfort among both educators and students (De Haas & Hutter, 2019). Practices such as early marriage and misconceptions about sexuality further complicate matters (Chinyoka, 2016; Mapfumo, 2017). Language barriers also impede effective communication of CSE content (Beyers, 2017; Mahoso, 2022). Despite its potential to promote healthy relationships, resistance from parents and communities persists, reflecting a broader disconnect between CSE principles and cultural norms (Mukoro, 2017; Keogh, 2018). Bridging this gap requires sensitisation and education within cultural contexts to encourage open dialogue and understanding, facilitating the successful implementation of CSE (Zulu, 2019; Chavula et al., 2022).

School principals play a crucial role in the successful implementation of CSE within schools, with their attitudes and perceptions significantly influencing the integration and support of CSE programs (Thabela, 2018). In Zimbabwe, principals oversee the supervision of CSE implementation, impacting decisions regarding timetable allocation and resource allocation (Muridzo, 2017). Collaborative efforts involving stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and community leaders have been effective in countries like Thailand, Uganda, Nigeria, Zambia, and Fiji (Kemigisha, 2019; Kunnuji et al., 2017; Chirwa-Kambole, 2020; Ram et al., 2020). Principals serve as key intermediaries between stakeholders and schools, facilitating engagement and resource mobilisation for CSE programs (Mapfumo, 2018). Leveraging their authority, principals engage with parents during school gatherings and advocate for CSE through staff development sessions and student assemblies (ITGS, 2017; Mahoso, 2022). Ultimately, supportive attitudes and active involvement of school principals are vital for the successful implementation of CSE initiatives.

The effective implementation of CSE is hindered by various factors related to teachers' perceptions and attitudes. One major challenge is the lack of competent teachers equipped with the necessary skills to deliver CSE effectively (Mocheche, 2018; Tabong, 2018; Zulu, 2019). Studies across different countries, including Australia, South Africa, and Malawi, highlight teachers' deficiencies in understanding the content and methodologies of CSE (Banda, 2020; Benedict, 2021). Additionally, negative attitudes toward CSE among some teachers further impede its implementation, as they

perceive it as unnecessary for young children or conflicts with personal values (Beyers, 2017; Mkumbo, 2018). Some teachers avoid teaching certain topics altogether due to discomfort or cultural reasons, leading to incomplete coverage of CSE content (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016; Bayes, 2017; Mocheche, 2018). Moreover, a lack of ownership of the CSE curriculum by stakeholders contributes to teachers' motivation to overlook its implementation (Zulu, 2019). Overall, inadequate training and negative perceptions among teachers pose significant barriers to the effective delivery of CSE in schools.

In Zimbabwe, the integration of CSE into the educational framework, notably within the competence-based Curriculum (CBC), signifies a pivotal shift in sexual and reproductive health education (Amnesty International, 2018). However, challenges persist due to historical disparities in guidance and counselling services and a lack of qualified personnel (Mapfumo, 2017; Urombo, 2018). The absence of clear CSE policies exacerbates implementation hurdles, as evidenced by teachers lacking guidance on content delivery and instructional time (Mahoso, 2022; UNESCO, 2015). This policy vacuum not only impedes effective CSE rollout but also perpetuates misconceptions regarding the age of consent and access to reproductive health services (Murwira, 2018; Urombo, 2016). Urgent steps are needed to address the policy gap to ensure equitable access to sexual and reproductive health information and services in Zimbabwe (Amnesty International, 2018; Keog, 2018).

Strategies for the effective implementation of CSE in schools rely on several key factors. Effective leadership from school principals is crucial for inspiring support and creating a conducive environment for CSE implementation (Mahoso, 2022). Policymaking that prioritises CSE provision is essential, as it provides a framework for program execution and addresses sensitivities (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018). Involving parents in program formulation and implementation is paramount, although resistance may exist due to cultural and social norms (Gudyanga et al., 2019). Training and supporting teachers in CSE delivery is fundamental, as well as ensuring they have the necessary skills and resources (Zulu, 2019).

Additionally, collaboration with non-teaching staff and integrating health services into CSE programs enhances support for students' sexual and reproductive health (Keog, 2018). What is more, empowering students to actively engage in CSE promotion fosters meaningful dialogue and understanding (Tabong, 2018). These strategies, drawn from various contexts, underscore the multifaceted approach required for successful CSE implementation.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the various ecosystemic factors affecting the integration of CSE in primary schools in the Chikomba district of Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. The qualitative approach aims to articulate and elucidate the sentiments, outlooks, and experiences of the participants (Yin, 2017; Martic, 2018). This approach was particularly well-suited for this research, as it facilitated a comprehensive exploration of diverse attitudes and perceptions, thereby providing valuable insights into the impact of CSE implementation in the school environment.

The interpretive paradigm, as advocated by Cresswell (2014) and Buestrol (2020), underpinned this research, emphasising participants' subjective experiences within their social context. It acknowledged knowledge as socially constructed and was influenced by researchers' ontological and epistemological beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2022a; Thomas, 2020). This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of school principals' and teachers' attitudes toward CSE in junior grades. Given the complexity of ecosystemic factors impacting CSE, the interpretive approach proved relevant, considering contextual sensitivities and temporal dynamics (Hassan & Hashim, 2021). It guided meticulous data collection and interpretation, acknowledging the influence of cultural beliefs and contextual circumstances on individuals' perspectives. By adopting the interpretive paradigm, the

research aimed to unravel the intricate interplay between stakeholders' perceptions and the sociocultural landscape, enriching the understanding of CSE implementation challenges and opportunities in junior grades.

Research design, according to Yin (2017) and Martic (2018), refers to the strategic plan used to address research questions. In this study, a case study design was adopted to investigate the ecosystemic factors impacting CSE in Zimbabwe. Case studies are well-known for providing in-depth analyses of single or limited units in real-world contexts and offer rich qualitative insights (Cherry, 2022; Dwadi, 2020). To enhance the depth of understanding regarding attitudes and perceptions towards CSE in Zimbabwe, this exploratory case study employed semi-structured interviews with junior-grade teachers and school principals (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Although exploratory case studies have a qualitative nature and limited generalizability, they provide valuable insights into complex phenomena (Cresswell, 2014; McCombes, 2021). The study aimed to uncover emergent patterns through thematic analysis and comparison while emphasising the need for cautious interpretation due to potential biases.

4.1. Sample and sampling method

The study used a sample selection process that combined convenience and purposive sampling methods, following recommendations from Yin (2017) and Rahi (2017). Convenience sampling is helpful in choosing participants who are easily accessible, especially in qualitative studies, as explained by McCombes (2021). As a result, three primary schools were selected based on their proximity to each other. Purposive sampling further refined the sample by ensuring the inclusion of participants with extensive knowledge of the study's subject (Hassan & Hashim, 2021), including three school principals and nine junior-grade teachers. This method, as described by Thomas (2022), facilitated the inclusion of experienced teachers and school principals, which was crucial for achieving the study's objectives. The resulting sample allowed for a thorough exploration of the research topic, effectively meeting the study's requirements.

4.2 Data collection tools

The study primarily used semi-structured interviews to gather data on participants' attitudes towards CSE in Zimbabwe. These interviews were chosen for their flexibility and rigour and involved open-ended questions to obtain detailed and nuanced responses (Buestrol, 2020). To ensure data integrity, all interviews were audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis. In addition, comprehensive field notes were taken to provide further insights and assist in result triangulation (Bowen, 2017). By combining audio recordings and field notes, the study aimed to capture the richness of participant responses and enhance the credibility of the findings. Bonache and Festing (2020) emphasise the adaptability of semi-structured interviews, which allows for coverage adjustment and exploration of unexpected issues while also accommodating individual differences among interviewees (Buestrol, 2020).

4.3 Data analysis

The study used thematic analysis to identify and analyse emerging themes within the collected data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This approach allowed the researchers to understand shared meanings and experiences present in the data. This rigorous approach facilitated the systematic identification of recurring themes and patterns across the data, enabling a thorough exploration of the factors, including the attitudes and perceptions of the participants, that affect CSE in Zimbabwean primary schools. The researchers made sure that the themes were interconnected in a logical and meaningful way, creating a coherent and convincing narrative that accurately represented the data, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022b) guidelines. This meticulous process allowed them to present a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the ecosystemic factors influencing CSE in Zimbabwean primary schools.

4.4 Ethical consideration

In conducting research, it is essential to adhere to ethical principles, which encompass moral standards that govern human behaviour, particularly in studies involving human subjects (Resnik, 2020). Ethical clearance was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) with the clearance number: UFS-HSD 2023/0408/3. Participants should feel confident that the researcher upholds ethics throughout the entire research process, as each phase and aspect of the study has the potential to present ethical challenges (Westby et al., 2018). Throughout this study, strict adherence to ethical research guidelines was maintained to ensure the dignity, rights, and safety of the participants (Polit & Beck, 2020). The study's objectives and purpose were communicated transparently, ensuring that participants were fully informed before data collection commenced. Personal identifiers were removed from interview notes and transcripts, with participants being identified only by the codes (SP) for school principals and (TR) for teachers.

Consent forms were provided to participants, outlining their voluntary involvement and the right to withdraw (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). To enhance the credibility and validity of the data, a triangulation approach was employed, utilising data from both teachers and principals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), with a focus on prioritising participant well-being and rights. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the University of the Free State.

5. Presentation of Results and Findings

This section presents the findings organised into key themes that emerged from the data analysis, addressing the research questions posed in this study. This analysis aims to answer the research questions by presenting findings that investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of teachers and principals regarding Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in junior grades in Zimbabwe. The findings are organised in a way that first profiles the participants, followed by an exploration of their understanding and attitudes towards CSE. Next, the influence of cultural and religious contexts is examined, and finally, strategies for improving CSE delivery are proposed.

5.1 General profile of respondents by experience

The figure below shows the distribution of participants by their working experience as teachers and administrators.

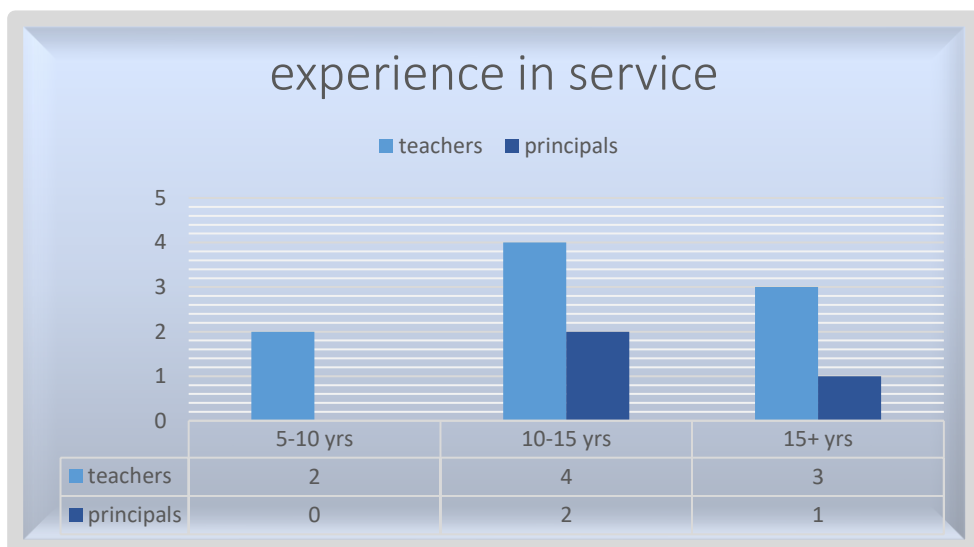


Figure 1: General profile of respondents by experience

5.2 Research results

5.3.1 Teachers' knowledge and understanding of CSE

The participating teachers demonstrated a varied understanding of CSE but uniformly affirmed its importance. TR1 described CSE as encompassing sex education that equips learners with the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills for making informed decisions about their sexual health. TR2 and TR3 emphasised the integration of sexuality education with life skills acquisition.

TR1: ... CSE encompasses sex education geared towards equipping learners with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for making informed decisions about their sexual health...

TR4 highlighted CSE's broader aspects, including well-being and disease prevention:

TR4: ... CSE incorporates broader aspects of well-being and disease prevention, highlighting its multifaceted nature...

TR5 and TR6 stressed CSE's role in addressing reproductive health issues and empowering learners to make informed choices.

TR6: CSE educates young individuals about the risks of teenage pregnancies and empowers them to navigate life's challenges...

Teachers consistently cited early pregnancies and sexual abuse as compelling reasons for introducing CSE early. These insights highlight the need for standardised training and comprehensive support mechanisms to effectively deliver CSE in Zimbabwean schools.

Furthermore, the consensus among teachers regarding the importance of teaching CSE to junior grades emphasises its relevance in addressing pressing societal concerns. It also showcases their positive attitudes toward the program. Teachers mentioned early pregnancies and instances of sexual abuse as compelling reasons for introducing CSE at an early stage. TR8 stressed the importance of integrating CSE into the curriculum for junior-grade learners, as it equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate complex social realities. TR3 and TR9 further emphasised the role of CSE in empowering students to independently address abuse and inappropriate behaviour, thereby fostering a safer and more supportive learning environment.

These insights underscore the critical need for standardised training and comprehensive support mechanisms for Zimbabwean teachers to effectively deliver CSE and address the complex challenges surrounding sexual education. Research in various African contexts, such as studies by Okon and Usoroh (2019) in Nigeria and Ntinda, Wawire, Mwongeli, and Mbeo (2021) in Kenya, aligns with the findings of the present study. These studies emphasise the nuanced nature of teachers' understanding of CSE, recognising its broad scope beyond traditional sex education. Okon and Usoroh (2019) particularly highlight the importance of standardised training to enhance teachers' capacity to deliver effective CSE, which echoes the sentiments expressed by TR1 in the current research.

5.3.2 Principals' understanding

School principals, who play a pivotal role in bridging the school, home, and community, also exhibited varied understandings of CSE. SP1 viewed CSE as providing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values necessary for making informed sexual choices. SP2 and SP3 had slightly different takes, with SP2 focusing on behaviours and attitudes and SP3 emphasising aspects of well-being and STIs.

SP1: This programme provides our learners with knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values for making choices in their sexual lives...

SP2: CSE involves understanding children's behaviours, desires, and attitudes related to sex...

SP3: *It has to do with aspects of human well-being, childbirth, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as components of CSE...*

Their partial understanding indicates a need for clearer comprehension in order to effectively supervise and lead staff development sessions. Collaboration with curriculum planners is essential to enhance principals' understanding and facilitate the creation of school-based monitoring tools. However, their partial understanding suggests a need for clearer comprehension in order to effectively supervise and lead staff development sessions. Collaborating with curriculum planners during program formulation can enhance principals' understanding and facilitate the creation of school-based monitoring tools, as seen in Kenya (Keog, 2018).

A refined understanding of CSE among school principals not only amplifies their supervisory capabilities but also allows for the initiation of supportive programs within schools. The expression of uncertainty by some principals emphasises the importance of comprehensive training and collaboration between these principals and curriculum planners. Establishing a shared understanding of CSE ensures alignment between curriculum goals and administrative oversight, fostering a conducive environment for effective implementation and supervision. Empowered with enhanced knowledge, school principals can proactively champion CSE, facilitating its seamless integration into the school community and ultimately contributing to the well-being and development of students. Importantly, despite not fully grasping CSE, it is noteworthy that principals demonstrated positive attitudes towards the programme.

5.3.3 Teachers' attitudes

Teachers showed a generally positive attitude towards CSE, though their views on its implementation varied. Many teachers supported integrating CSE into the Guidance and Counselling learning area, while some advocated for it to be a standalone, examinable subject.

TR1: *CSE equips learners with knowledge, attitudes, and skills for making healthy choices in their sexual lives...*

TR2: *CSE provides our learners with information on bodily development, sex, sexuality, and relationships.*

TR8: *I appreciate this program for its emphasis on sexuality, which arms young learners with life skills*

Some concerns about age-appropriateness were also raised. Some teachers, like TR9, expressed concerns about the age-appropriateness of the content.

TR9: *Even though I believe this program helps our learners, I still feel that the content sometimes does not properly match their age...*

These varied perceptions emphasise the importance of developing culturally and religiously sensitive CSE programs in order to gain community acceptance. It is worth noting that all teachers unanimously recognised the necessity of teaching CSE to junior grades. They expressed concerns about early pregnancies, sexual abuse, and the need for informed decision-making. These attitudes align with those of teachers in South Africa, who also appreciate the integration of CSE into the primary school curriculum, as discovered by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Mji (2017). The researchers found that South African teachers recognised the importance of CSE in addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy. Similarly, in Kenya, some teachers support CSE as a means to address adolescent sexual health issues (Obare et al., 2012).

However, despite the general appreciation of the CSE program in schools, some teachers pointed out that certain factors were hindering them from effectively implementing the program. For example, TR5, TR7, and TR9 lamented that they have yet to fully grasp the suitability of the program for junior-grade learners in terms of their age.

These concerns align with the findings of Obare et al. (2012) in Kenya, who noted that attitudes toward CSE among some teachers have been influenced by debates surrounding the curriculum's content and its appropriateness for different age groups. Therefore, it is crucial to design CSE programs in a way that respects and considers the cultural and religious beliefs of specific societies in order to gain community acceptance.

5.3.4 Principals' attitudes

Principals' attitudes towards CSE were positive, though they acknowledged some knowledge gaps. All the school principals recognised the importance of CSE despite their partial understanding.

SP1: *CSE is sex education based on knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values to make choices in their sexual lives...*

SP2: *CSE enhances understanding of children's behaviours, desires, and attitudes related to sex and physical intimacy with others...*

SP3: *CSE encompasses human well-being, childbirth, STIs, and other diseases affecting people...*

The study highlights the need for comprehensive training for principals to enhance their supervisory capabilities and support effective CSE implementation. SP3's tentative statement, "I think...", reflects the uncertainty and suggests the necessity for a more thorough understanding. However, their partial understanding suggests a need for clearer comprehension to effectively supervise and lead staff development sessions. As outlined by Keog (2018), the collaboration between curriculum planners and principals can enhance these school leaders' understanding of the programme and facilitate the creation of school-based monitoring tools. In addition, enhanced capacity-building initiatives are necessary to bridge the gap between policy objectives and classroom practices and ensure consistent, effective CSE implementation (Banda, 2017). Overall, the study highlights the critical role of school principals in shaping CSE outcomes and emphasises the importance of their comprehensive understanding for successful implementation.

5.3.5 Cultural and religious contexts

Cultural and religious beliefs were identified as significant barriers to CSE acceptance and delivery. Participants expressed discomfort discussing certain CSE topics due to cultural prohibitions and language barriers. For instance, TR4 and TR6 mentioned their unease with culturally sensitive terminologies.

SP3: *Anxiety on where to start, how to start... culturally those topics are not discussed in public.*

TR4: *I used to be uneasy and shy about some topics like reproductive organs and menstruation which culture prohibits from public forums...*

TR6: *I was not comfortable with some terminologies used in CSE which are not culturally allowed in public.*

Despite these challenges, UNESCO underscores the importance of CSE in empowering children with knowledge, skills, and values to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being.

These sentiments align with Mahoso's (2020) findings on resistance to discussing sexuality in Zimbabwean culture, especially in vernacular languages. Similar challenges were reported in Malawi, where cultural norms and attitudes hindered teachers' ability to effectively deliver CSE (Banda, 2017). In Nigeria, such factors led to mixed attitudes from educators about CSE implementation in schools, as shown by Asekun-Olarinmoye, Fawole, and Asekun-Olarinmoye (2018). The trio explained that religious and cultural factors influenced how CSE is perceived and implemented in schools, with some teachers expressing resistance due to their conservative cultural norms and religious beliefs. Gudyanga et al. (2019) further support this, lamenting that cultural

misconceptions persist and some communities view CSE discussions as taboo, invoking divine punishment (Gudyanga et al., 2019).

Despite cultural and religious resistance, UNESCO (2015) underscores the importance of CSE in empowering children with knowledge, skills, and values to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being.

5.3.6 Strategies to improve CSE delivery

Participants proposed several strategies to enhance CSE delivery, reflecting their positive attitudes toward the program. According to the participants, continuous professional development was deemed essential.

SP1: *Schools should educate teachers through workshops and emphasise using CSE as a cross-cutting theme in other learning areas.*

Engaging with parents and communities through awareness campaigns and field trips was highlighted.

SP2: *Schools need to engage our local communities through awareness campaigns on CSE and carry out field trips...*

Some of the participants also highlighted the importance of adequate teaching materials and ICT tools, which were seen as crucial.

SP2: *Schools must ensure they procure all the required teaching and learning materials for the program...*

Parental involvement was emphasised as pivotal for CSE acceptance and implementation. Engaging students in curriculum formulation and review ensures relevance and inclusivity, and effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks are vital for assessing CSE implementation.

Resource provision, such as textbooks and ICT tools, was deemed essential for effective CSE delivery by SP2, SP3, TR1, TR3, and TR6, and it aligns with Venketsamy and Kinear's (2020) emphasis on adequate teaching resources. Thus, school principals have a role to play in this case since they are the ones in charge of school funds. When adequate resources are in place, program implementation becomes effective and efficient. Furthermore, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, as highlighted above, was additionally supported by TR2, TR4, and TR5. This suggests the inclusion of health professionals and police in the CSE program. Such collaborations have been successful in other contexts. They have helped improve CSE program fidelity in Zambia (Chirwa-Kambole, 2020) and in Ghana (Tabong, 2018). In these two countries, collaboration has gone as far as making the local context understandable and, in some instances, through consultations, having to rename sensitive topics. For example, 'sexuality education' becomes 'life skills orientation'. Parental involvement emerged as a pivotal factor in CSE acceptance and implementation, as emphasised by SP3 and SP2. Le Matt (2019) highlighted the role of parental and community involvement in Ethiopia's CSE program.

Engaging students in curriculum formulation and review was proposed by SP3, TR5, TR8, and TR9 as a means of ensuring relevance and inclusivity, resonating with Zulu (2019) and Keogh's (2018) advocacy for student participation. In addition, effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks were identified as vital for assessing CSE implementation. However, SP3 lamented the absence of such policies in Zimbabwe, highlighting the need for school-based tools similar to those in Ghana and Senegal (Keogh, 2018; Chau, 2016).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has examined the complex dynamics surrounding the implementation of Comprehensive Sexual Education in junior grades, revealing diverse perspectives among school principals and teachers. Our findings highlight the multifaceted nature of CSE implementation and emphasise the importance of collaborative efforts involving educators, parents, communities, and various stakeholders. Key elements identified for successful CSE programs include effective teacher training, resource provision, community engagement, parental involvement, student participation, and robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

The research sheds light on the subtle interplay of cultural influences and contextual factors that shape attitudes towards CSE. It emphasises the need for tailored approaches to sexual education. Importantly, it recognises knowledge as socially constructed within the interpretive paradigm, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of stakeholders. Comparisons with prior literature reveal both consistencies and differences, indicating the evolving nature of CSE discourse and the necessity for context-specific interventions.

Despite certain limitations encountered, including constraints inherent to exploratory case studies, this research establishes a strong foundation for further inquiry and dialogue in the field of sexual education. By promoting more informed practices and policies that meet the diverse needs of learners and communities, this study advocates for the following:

- Further research should explore additional aspects, such as parental involvement and community engagement, to gain a better understanding of the gaps in knowledge and perceptions regarding CSE.
- Policies should prioritise comprehensive sexual education that is culturally sensitive and inclusive, directly addressing these contextual factors.
- Training programs should be developed to enhance educators' capacity to deliver effective CSE, ensuring they are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Schools should collaborate closely with communities, health professionals, and other stakeholders to ensure a holistic and integrated approach to sexual education.
- Innovative methodologies and technologies should be explored to facilitate the delivery and engagement of CSE among students, keeping up with the evolving educational landscape.
- Future research should implement strategies to enhance sample representation and mitigate biases, ensuring more comprehensive and representative findings.
- Engaging students in curriculum formulation and review processes is essential to ensure that the CSE program remains relevant and inclusive.
- Furthermore, schools should develop robust monitoring and evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness of CSE programs, similar to those successfully used in other countries.

7. Declarations

Authors contributions: Conceptualisation (K.M. & H.N.); Literature review (K.M. & H.N.); methodology (K.M. & H.N.); software (N/A); validation (H.N.); formal analysis (K.M.); investigation (K.M.); data curation (K.M.) drafting and preparation (K.M. & H.N.); review and editing (H.N.); supervision (H.N.); project administration (K.M.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Acknowledgements: No acknowledgement to make.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability: All relevant data are included in the article. However, more information is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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