




Navigating between faith and duty: Teaching inclusive sexuality education in South African schools

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Abstract—South Africa, home to one of the world's most progressive constitutions, is committed to promoting equality, human rights, and the well-being of its citizens. However, the implementation of inclusive sexuality education in schools has become a contested issue, particularly at the intersection of religious beliefs, cultural values, and professional obligations of teachers. This editorial explores the tensions experienced by teachers navigating between their faith and their duty to deliver an inclusive, rights-based sexuality curriculum. This paper highlights the necessity of equipping learners with accurate, age-appropriate, and inclusive information about gender, sexuality, consent, and relationships. However, strong resistance from religious communities, parental groups, and conservative teachers has generated fear, misinformation, and policy pushback. The editorial argues that while faith and cultural identity are valid and deeply personal, they must be balanced with the constitutional mandate to uphold learners' rights to education, safety, and health. It calls for open dialogue, teacher support systems, inclusive policy design, and faith-sensitive training that can help reconcile this divide. Ultimately, it contends that teaching inclusive sexuality education is not about undermining faith but fostering respect, dignity, and informed decision-making among youth. In this delicate balancing act, the role of the teacher is both challenging and pivotal, standing at the crossroads of faith and duty in shaping an inclusive and just education system.

Keywords: Comprehensive sexuality education, Inclusive sexuality education, Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, South African schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

SOUTH AFRICA, home to one of the world's most progressive constitutions, is committed to promoting equality, human rights, and the well-being of its citizens. However, implementing inclusive sexuality education in schools has become a contested issue, particularly at the intersection of religious beliefs, cultural values, and professional obligations of teachers. This editorial explores the tensions experienced by teachers navigating between their faith and their duty to deliver an inclusive, rights-based sexuality curriculum. Drawing on policy frameworks, such as the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) model endorsed by the Department of Basic Education and international bodies like UNESCO and WHO, this paper highlights the necessity of equipping learners with accurate, age-appropriate, and inclusive information about gender, sexuality, consent, and relationships. However, strong resistance from religious communities, parental groups, and conservative teachers has generated fear, misinformation, and policy pushback. The editorial argues that while faith and cultural identity are valid and deeply personal, they must be balanced with the constitutional mandate to uphold learners' rights to education, safety, and health. It calls for open dialogue, teacher support systems, inclusive policy design, and faith-sensitive training that can help reconcile this divide. Ultimately, it contends that teaching ISE is not about undermining faith but fostering respect, dignity, and informed decision-making among youth. In this delicate balancing act, the role of the teacher is both challenging and pivotal, standing at the crossroads of faith and duty in shaping an inclusive and just education system.

II. TEACHING INCLUSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Tension at the crossroads: Between cultural conviction and constitutional duty

South Africa stands at a pivotal crossroads in its education landscape. As a constitutional democracy committed to dignity, equality, and non-discrimination, the country's educational framework is expected to reflect and promote these values. The South African Constitution (1996) is often lauded for its progressive character, particularly in safeguarding children's rights to education, health, and protection from harm. Within this context, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has attempted to strengthen Life Orientation curricula by integrating Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), guided by the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE). However, this well-intentioned move has been met with widespread resistance, largely from religious communities, traditional leaders, and conservative political actors. Critics argue that CSE introduces learners to content that is misaligned with their moral and spiritual values, particularly topics related to sexual orientation, gender identity, contraception, and sexual rights. Many claim such content undermines parental authority, religious teaching, and African values (Francis & Msibi, 2022).

In 2019, when the DBE piloted Scripted Lesson Plans (SLPs) for CSE in selected provinces, backlash was swift and intense. Social media campaigns like #StopCSEinSchools gained traction, with some alleging that CSE was "pornographic" and an imposition of Western liberal ideologies. Religious leaders, including major Christian and Muslim organisations, expressed concern that CSE was an attempt to normalise "immoral behaviour," while advocacy groups called for parental consultation and curriculum transparency. As a result, the DBE was

forced to delay broader implementation and initiate further consultation processes (DBE, 2020). This moment illustrates the deep tension between constitutional imperatives and sociocultural realities. On one hand, the South African state is legally bound to promote health education, reduce teenage pregnancies, combat gender-based violence, and promote inclusive environments for all learners, including those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ)+. On the other hand, many schools are situated in communities where religion and tradition serve as powerful anchors of identity and morality. Teachers and principals often members of the same communities, find themselves caught in the middle, expected to teach material they may not fully support or understand.

As Francis and Reygan (2020) observe, the opposition to CSE is not just about content it was also about power, trust, and the perceived erosion of communal autonomy. In many rural and peri-urban communities, schooling is viewed not simply as a government function, but as a collaborative social institution where religious, cultural, and familial norms should be respected. Policies that are introduced without meaningful engagement are likely to be interpreted as external impositions rather than legitimate developmental tools. Additionally, the postcolonial context of South Africa complicates the picture further. Many conservative actors argue that CSE promotes a Western model of sexuality that conflicts with "African values," often invoking traditional ideals of gender roles, virginity, and family honor. Yet, critics of this stance highlight that invoking "African culture" to resist sexuality education often reinforces patriarchal norms, heteronormativity, and silence around abuse (Msibi, 2021). Therefore, the debate around CSE is a curricular disagreement and a broader ideological struggle over whose values should shape the national imagination. While opponents cite moral decay, supporters argue that silence and ignorance have done far more harm, as reflected in rising rates of child sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and teenage pregnancies. For example, research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2022 confirmed that one in three girls in South Africa will have given birth before age 20. Many of these pregnancies occur in contexts of coercion or misinformation and disproportionately affect poor and rural communities. In such cases, the absence of sexuality education perpetuates cycles of inequality and disempowerment (HSRC, 2022).

Furthermore, LGBTQ+ learners often find themselves invisible in school curricula and vulnerable to discrimination. When schools omit topics like gender identity and sexual diversity to appease religious conservatives, they send a message that certain learners' realities are unworthy of recognition or protection. This creates hostile learning environments and contradicts constitutional promises of dignity and inclusion. In short, the South African state faces a moral and legal challenge: How can it deliver equitable, evidence-based education while respecting its population's religious and cultural heterogeneity? Many scholars suggest that the answer lies in dialogue, mutual understanding, and localised adaptation rather than blanket resistance or top-down imposition (Chinyana et al., 2023). Inclusive sexuality education must be approached not as a threat to tradition, but to equip learners for the realities of modern life, including relationships, identity, safety, and autonomy. By creating participatory spaces for parents, faith leaders, and community representatives in curriculum development, the DBE can help reframe the discourse from moral panic to collective responsibility.

Case for inclusive sexuality education

Inclusive sexuality education goes beyond the traditional "sex education" model that focuses solely on reproduction and disease prevention. It represents a transformative approach to education that promotes equality, challenges harmful gender norms, and protects learners from violence and exploitation. In a country like South Africa, where societal inequities and health disparities persist, inclusive sexuality education is not simply important; it is urgent. South Africa is grappling with a convergence of sexual and reproductive health challenges. Among the most pressing are the high rates of HIV/AIDS,

adolescent pregnancy, and gender-based violence (GBV). According to the 2022 South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, the HIV prevalence among young women aged 15-24 is over 10%, a staggering statistic that reflects the country's ongoing vulnerability to HIV transmission (HSRC, 2022). Biological factors aside, power imbalances in relationships, sexual coercion, and lack of access to information remain key contributors to this epidemic.

In addition, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) reported that more than 90,000 school-aged girls became pregnant in 2022 (DBE, 2023). Teenage pregnancies not only disrupt educational attainment but also perpetuate cycles of poverty, marginalisation, and poor maternal and child health outcomes. Alarming, many of these pregnancies result from exploitative relationships with older men, often referred to as "sugar daddies" or from sexual violence. Inclusive sexuality education is uniquely positioned to interrupt this pattern. Educating learners about bodily autonomy, consent, gender norms, and healthy relationships fosters resilience and agency among young people, particularly girls. The UNESCO (2021) technical guidance on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) stresses that high-quality sexuality education leads to delayed sexual debut, reduced frequency of sex, fewer sexual partners, and increased contraceptive use.

Promoting gender equality and human rights

Inclusive sexuality education incorporates a human rights-based approach, rooted in inclusivity, dignity, and non-discrimination values. It recognises that gender inequality and patriarchy lie at the heart of many sexual health crises, including GBV. In South Africa, the South African Police Service (SAPS) Crime Statistics Report (2024) reveals that over 50,000 cases of rape and sexual assault were reported in the past year, an indicator of pervasive gendered violence. When sexuality education includes lessons on gender identity, sexual orientation, consent, and respect, it provides learners with tools to challenge entrenched patriarchal beliefs and discriminatory attitudes. It helps dismantle toxic masculinity and promotes respectful masculinities that value equality. Such content is also aligned with Section 9 of the South African Constitution, which guarantees the right to equality and non-discrimination based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Furthermore, inclusive curricula promote tolerance and reduce bullying of LGBTQ+ learners. A 2021 OUT LGBT Well-being study found that 56% of LGBTQ+ students in South African schools had experienced bullying because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Inclusive sexuality education responds by validating diverse identities and creating safer learning environments.

Bridging cultural sensitivities and evidence-based practice

One of the most contentious debates around sexuality education in South Africa relates to the perceived clash between cultural or religious values and the content of inclusive sexuality education. Critics often argue that discussing sexuality in schools undermines moral teachings or promotes promiscuity. However, a growing body of research indicates that comprehensive sexuality education does not increase sexual activity; instead, it delays initiation of sexual intercourse and promotes responsible behaviours (UNFPA, 2023).

The tension is not unique to South Africa. Globally, UNESCO, WHO, and UNAIDS have emphasised the need to contextualise sexuality education to suit local cultural and religious frameworks without compromising the rights of learners. The Revised Comprehensive Sexuality Education Scripted Lesson Plans (SLPs) rolled out by the DBE in 2020 reflect this balance; they integrate South African values with scientifically accurate content. These materials were developed in consultation with parents, teachers, and faith-based organisations, underscoring that inclusive sexuality education can coexist with religious and cultural beliefs when approached with sensitivity. Moreover, the Constitutional Court ruling in MEC for Education v Pillay (2008) reaffirmed the importance of reasonable accommodation in education, suggesting that religious or cultural beliefs cannot override a learner's right to inclusive education. Inclusive sexuality education, therefore, affirms learners' rights, while offering space for

parents and guardians to be involved through structured consultation mechanisms.

Reducing school dropout and improving educational outcomes

Teenage pregnancy is one of the primary contributors to school dropout among girls in South Africa. The 2023 DBE General Household Survey showed that over 30% of female dropouts in secondary schools cited pregnancy as the reason. The long-term consequences are severe: early childbearing often leads to economic exclusion, poor health, and reduced life opportunities. Inclusive sexuality education provides young people with the tools to understand reproductive choices, navigate peer pressure, and access health services. It supports school retention and progression, key priorities outlined in the National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy (2021). This policy also mandates schools to reintegrate learners' post-pregnancy and provide psychosocial support, which aligns closely with inclusive sexuality education objectives. Learners, particularly girls, are empowered to take charge of their futures by fostering body literacy and self-awareness from a young age. In addition, male learners benefit from understanding the consequences of their actions and the importance of mutual respect in relationships.

Building safe, inclusive learning environments

Addressing health outcomes, building safe, inclusive, and enabling learning environments played an essential role in making schools safer. However, children are often victims of sexual abuse, and most perpetrators are individuals known to the child's family members, teachers, or community leaders. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (2023) warns of the alarming prevalence of abuse within the education system, including cases of teacher misconduct and failure to report incidents. Inclusive Sexuality Education can empower learners to recognise abuse, understand their rights, and report violations. When embedded into the school culture, it strengthens the protective environment envisioned by the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) and the South African Schools Act.

Additionally, including content on digital safety, cyberbullying, and online sexual exploitation is now more relevant than ever in the age of social media and smartphones. Teachers also require training and support to implement inclusive sexuality education effectively. The Department of Basic Education's National Policy on Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and Tuberculosis (TB) (2017) underscores the need for capacity-building programmes for teachers, ensuring they are confident, competent, and sensitive when delivering sexuality education.

Global commitments and sustainable development goals (SDGs)

It is important to note that South Africa is signatory to numerous international commitments that uphold the right to sexuality education. These include the Maputo Plan of Action (2016-2030), which promotes universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and information. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action similarly calls for comprehensive education on human sexuality. Aligning national education frameworks with these global goals affirms South Africa's commitment to a just, equitable, and healthy society. Inclusive sexuality education is also central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially:

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all.

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies and protect children from abuse and exploitation.

III. CONCLUSION

The case for inclusive sexuality education in South Africa is compelling and urgent. It is not merely about teaching young people about sex; it is about equipping them with the knowledge, confidence, and values to make informed decisions, respect others, and protect themselves. In a context marked by high HIV rates, GBV, early

pregnancy, and widespread misinformation, ISE is a critical tool of empowerment and prevention. More than a curriculum topic, it catalyses systemic change, a bridge between health, education, and human rights. If we are serious about protecting our youth, we must embrace inclusive sexuality education not as an optional extra but as a fundamental part of quality, life-saving education.

IV. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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