

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Challenges of Including Sex Education in the Life Orientation Programme Offered by Schools: The Case of Mahikeng, North West Province, South Africa

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Akim J. Mturi<sup>1</sup>\* and Andre L. Bechuke<sup>2</sup>

Director of Postgraduate Studies and Research, Kampala International University in Tanzania (KIUT), Dar es Salaam, Tanzania<sup>1</sup>; Qualification and Academic Programme Planning (EDULEAD Research Entity), North-West University, South Africa<sup>2</sup>

\*For Correspondence: Email: [akimmturi@gmail.com](mailto:akimmturi@gmail.com); Phone: +255 744 412 339

## Abstract

Teenage pregnancy and the prevalence of HIV among school girls are very high in South Africa, despite the introduction of sexuality education in schools since 2002. A qualitative approach of inquiry was used to investigate challenges faced by schools offering sexuality education in Mahikeng, South Africa. Four school principals, seven teachers and 39 learners were interviewed. The curriculum on sexuality education indicates that sexual matters are introduced to learners only when they reach Grade 8, whereas pregnancy is already common among girls as early as Grade 3. Participants from all groups represented in the study revealed that Life Orientation was not taken seriously in schools compared to other subjects. Although learners are very much interested in the subject matter, there were no qualified teachers and the content of the curriculum is very shallow. In addition, schools paid very little attention to this subject since it is not considered for admission into tertiary institutions. There is need, therefore, for the South African government to revise the curriculum content and presentation of Life Orientation to ensure the improvement of sexuality education in schools. The appropriate age-specific topics on sexual matters for learners should also be revised and the qualification of teachers considered. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2019; 23[3]: 134-148*).

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**Keywords:** Teenage pregnancy, Sexuality education, Life Orientation, Curriculum

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## Résumé

Les grossesses précoces et la prévalence du VIH parmi les filles scolarisées sont très élevées en Afrique du Sud, malgré l'introduction de l'éducation sexuelle dans les écoles depuis 2002. Une approche d'enquête qualitative a été utilisée pour examiner les difficultés rencontrées par les écoles qui assurent une éducation sexuelle à Mahikeng, en Afrique du Sud. Quatre directeurs d'école, sept enseignants et 39 apprenants ont été interrogés. Le programme d'éducation à la sexualité indique que les questions sexuelles ne sont présentées aux apprenants qu'après avoir atteint la classe de 8e année, alors que la grossesse est déjà courante chez les filles dès la 3e année. Les participants de tous les groupes représentés dans l'étude ont révélé que le programme de l'Orientation à la vie ne retient pas l'attention de l'administration dans les écoles par rapport à d'autres matières. Bien que les apprenants soient très intéressés par la matière, il n'y avait pas d'enseignants qualifiés et le contenu du programme est très superficiel. En outre, les écoles ont accordé très peu d'attention à cette question car elle n'est pas prise en compte pour l'admission dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Il est donc nécessaire que le gouvernement sud-africain revoie le contenu du programme et la présentation de L'Orientation à la vie pour assurer l'amélioration de l'éducation sexuelle dans les écoles. Les sujets appropriés en fonction de l'âge sur les questions sexuelles pour les apprenants devraient également être revus et la qualification des enseignants prise en compte. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2019; 23[3]: 134-148*).

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**Mots-clés:** Grossesse à l'adolescence, éducation à la sexualité, orientation de la vie, programme d'études

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## Introduction

Transition from childhood to a young person is a challenging period for many young people and usually happens when most of them are still attending school. This is the period when many begin to have sexual intercourse<sup>1</sup>. It is reported that the number of teenagers who admit to a sexual debut before the age of 15, is increasing in South Africa<sup>1</sup>. A recent qualitative study conducted among young mothers in the North West Province, South Africa revealed that many teenagers get pregnant out of ignorance (lack of knowledge with regard to the physiology of their bodies and the consequences of sex)<sup>2</sup>. For instance, some young women reported that they did not know that they would get pregnant if they had sexual intercourse on rare occasions. Many young women also knew very little about contraception until they conceived. In fact, most young mothers revealed that they were informed about sexual matters and contraception during antenatal and postnatal visits<sup>2</sup>. Such declarations motivated the researchers to undertake this study in order to examine the sources of sexuality education available for teenagers. South African teenagers get information about sexual matters through six different channels as follows: initiation schools; clinics and health centres; mass media; peers and friends; parent-child communication; and school-based curriculum<sup>3</sup>. The only avenue that is regulated is the school-based curriculum and, therefore, the focus of this study. In other words, although there are other modes of assisting teenagers to know and understand sexual matters in South Africa, the only programme in schools that is regulated, and which can be assessed, is sexuality education.

Using the South African National Youth Risk Behavioural Survey of 2011, Day and Gray reported that 22.2% of women aged 15-19 were either mothers or have been pregnant before<sup>4</sup>. Mturi moots that the consequences of teenage pregnancy are associated with schooling (majority of teenagers are still attending school), health (teenage girls are not mature enough for

childbearing), marriage prospects (marriage can be affected both positively or negatively), economic difficulties (future prospects can be negatively affected by having a baby at a young age), and psychological factors (stress, depression and other psychological problems that arise with having a child at a young age)<sup>2</sup>. Of these consequences, schooling, economic difficulties and their interrelationships have attracted greater attention from social researchers. In South Africa, girls are allowed to attend school while pregnant and can go back after the birth of the baby, however, only one-third of them return to school.<sup>5</sup> Many of those who return to school do not perform well since they have to struggle to meet the demands of looking after the child and schooling<sup>6</sup>. This implies that teenage pregnancy affects the future of girls enormously. Research conducted in the USA<sup>7,8</sup> and South Africa<sup>9</sup> show that even teenage fathers are affected negatively. Another consequence of indulging in early sexual behaviour is infection with HIV and other STIs. Although the rate of HIV prevalence in young people has been on the decline in South Africa, the levels are still unacceptably high<sup>1</sup>.

### *Life orientation as a subject in schools in South Africa*

Life Orientation (LO) is defined in the National Curriculum of South Africa as a holistic study of the self and the self in society. It provides an opportunity to develop the emotional side of young people, the citizenship aspects of life in South Africa, democracy and human rights<sup>10</sup>. LO basically involves the accretion of many different things, including health care, lifestyle, healthy living and physical fitness. Life Orientation (in the Senior and Further Education and Training phases) and Life Skills (in the Intermediate Phase) is a compulsory school subject. As stipulated in curriculum policy documents, Life Orientation:

- i) Empowers learners to use their talents to achieve their full physical, intellectual, personal, emotional and social potential;

- ii) Enables learners to develop skills to relate positively and contribute to family, community and society, while practising the values embedded in the Constitution;
- iii) Allows learners to exercise their Constitutional rights and responsibilities, respect the rights of others and show tolerance for cultural and religious diversity in order to build a democratic society;
- iv) Enables learners to make informed, morally responsible and accountable decisions about their health and the environment; and
- v) Encourages learners to acquire and practise life skills that will assist them to respond to challenges and to play an active and responsible role in the economy and society.

It is thus, obvious that LO is a crucial subject that could be used to develop and support learner to become fully functional individuals, responsible citizens of a democratic society and who are able to cope with life and all its challenges<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Structure of the LO programme in South Africa***

#### ***Teaching sexuality education in schools in South Africa***

At the foundation phase (grades R-3), Life Skills, as a learning area, is the mechanism expected to create awareness on aspects of HIV and AIDS and sexuality education. However, the reality is not true for sexuality education. Life Skills, at this phase, is concerned with social, personal, intellectual, emotional and physical growth of learners<sup>12</sup> and to guide and prepare learners for life and its possibilities. In the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement, Life Skills in the foundation phase has been organised into four study areas as follows: Beginning knowledge; personal and social well-being; creative arts; and physical education. The aim of such organisation is to ensure that foundation skills, values and concepts of early childhood development are taught and developed

in grades R-3. A closer look at the four study areas shows that the curriculum content of beginning knowledge is drawn from social sciences, natural sciences and technology. At the intermediate phase (grades 4-6), Life Skills deals with the holistic development of a learner throughout childhood<sup>13</sup>. At this phase, it focuses on assisting learners to achieve their full physical, intellectual, personal, emotional and social potential. At the intermediate level, the aim of Life Skills is to develop learners through three different but interrelated study areas as follows: personal and social well-being; physical education; and creative Arts.

At the senior phase (grades 7-9), the purpose of Life Orientation is to create awareness on issues of HIV and AIDS and sexuality education. Life Orientation, at this level, is central to the holistic development of learners. It addresses skills, knowledge and values for the personal, social, intellectual, emotional and physical growth of learners<sup>14</sup>. The focus of LO, at this phase, is on the development of self-in-society and is intended to assist learners develop beneficial social interactions such as respecting the rights of others and values and promote lifelong participation in recreation and physical activities. Life Orientation, at this phase, contains five important topics as follows: development of self in society; health; social and environmental responsibility; constitutional rights and responsibilities; physical education; and the world of work. Sexuality education is covered in the broad topic "development of self in society".

At the final phase (grades 10-12), Life Orientations is one of the four fundamental subjects required for the National Senior Certificate, which means that it is compulsory for all learners in grades 10-12 and so too is the mastery of its content. It is unique at this phase as it applies a holistic approach to the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners. At this phase, LO focuses on six key topics as follows: development of self in society, which deals with issues of sexuality; social and

environmental responsibility; democracy and human rights; careers and career choices; study skills; and physical education. Under development of self in society in Grade 10, changes towards adulthood, decision-making regarding sexuality and recreation as well as emotional health are covered. In Grade 11, relationships and their influence on well-being and gender roles and their effects on health and well-being are also covered. Nothing is mentioned about sexuality in Grade 12<sup>15</sup>. The structure of LO provides the background information that is important for this study.

The teaching and learning of sexuality education constitute a heated and continuous debate in schools and societies all over the world. The dynamics and severity of such debate raises several issues that need to be resolved such as: at what age should the teaching and learning of sexuality education be introduced in schools; the appropriate content to include in the curricula; and availability of suitably qualified teachers. The National Department of Basic Education in South Africa has designed a number of strategies in the form of policies to guide the implementation of sexuality education in schools. As appealing as these endeavours may seem, they are plagued with challenges that affect the process. Faced with challenges such as teenage pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, and child abuse, the government of South Africa resorted to a number of primary intervention programmes; one of them being the introduction of the teaching of sexuality education in schools. The Department of Basic Education's Sexuality Education Programme (SEP) became part of the Life Orientation (LO) learning area in 2002<sup>12</sup>.

There are several challenges to overcome if sexuality education is included in the LO curriculum at schools in South Africa. It is important to explore these challenges in different settings for decision-makers to have all the information needed to formulate policy and its implementation. The four categories of challenges are discussed next. The first category relates to how sexuality education is taught in schools. There

is still a general misconception that sexuality education contributes to promiscuous sexual behaviour<sup>16,17</sup>. This misconception has a lot of implications to teaching sexuality education because there is a tendency for some teachers to simply tell learners to abstain from sex<sup>18</sup>. Some teachers have been found to express fears that prevent them from openly discussing sexual matters with younger learners<sup>19</sup>.

The second category relates to the LO policy environment and its implementation. As stated by Naidoo, the policy on sexuality education, through LO, was formulated within the public health framework, and focuses on discourses related to diseases (i.e. HIV and AIDS) rather than on broader issues of sex<sup>20</sup>. This has given room to provincial guidelines and schools to interpret and implement the policy differently. Francis argues that lack of training of LO teachers is due to poor implementation of the policy<sup>17</sup>. It is further argued that implementation of the LO programme operates under the assumption that learners need protection instead of relevant information about themselves and their sexuality<sup>21</sup>.

The third category relates to how seriously sexuality education is considered in schools. Many school principals are not serious about the LO learning area. For instance, Smith and Harrison reported that most principals encourage female teachers, with or without experience, to attend workshops concerning LO-related matters, and after the workshops; there are usually no proper mechanisms to share details of such workshops with staff members<sup>22</sup>. It was thus, concluded that this shortcoming hinders teaching sexuality education in most schools. Smith and Harrison further stated that LO teachers do not perform their duties properly due to time constraints, heavy teaching loads, no dedicated time in the school schedule for LO curriculum and schools mainly focus on subjects with formally acknowledged examinations<sup>22</sup>. In addition, some schools fail to fulfill their curricular obligations because of overcrowded classes and limited resources. Indeed,

it has been noted that there are huge inequalities in schools in South Africa, an indication that some schools are seriously disadvantaged<sup>23, 24</sup>.

The fourth and final category is the willingness of teachers to teach the subject. On the one hand, some topics on sexuality education can create anxiety while others can be very embarrassing, thus a teacher who specialises in sexuality education should have in-depth knowledge and be comfortable on the subject matter<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, some teachers skip certain topics (e.g. condom demonstration) that are against their religious beliefs<sup>25</sup>.

This study aimed to provide findings from the North West Province, which just like all other provinces of South Africa faces the problem of teenage pregnancy and HIV and AIDS. Day and Gray reported that the North West Province (22.4%) has the fourth highest teenage pregnancy rates after KwaZulu-Natal (32.8%), Limpopo (26.4%) and Northern Cape (24.8%). However, a declining trend in teenage pregnancy has been observed in public schools<sup>4</sup>. The Annual Schools Surveys show that teenage pregnancy has dropped from over 8 pregnancies per 1000 female learners to just fewer than 4<sup>3</sup>, but these rates are still quite high by any standards. With regard to HIV and AIDS, Shisana *et al.* maintain the North West Province registered the third largest HIV prevalence rate for youth aged 15-24 years (8.2%); KwaZulu-Natal has the highest rate (12.0%) followed by Mpumalanga (10.0%)<sup>1</sup>.

In this study, the researchers investigated whether or not the results of the LO programme in schools effectively equipped learners in terms of sexuality education. The specific objectives of the study were to: -

- a) Investigate the profile and qualification of LO teachers and challenges faced with regards to teaching sexuality education;
- b) Explore learners' understanding of sexuality education in order to establish how much they have learned with regard to the current LO curriculum; and

- c) Seek opinions from teachers and learners on how to improve sexuality education through LO.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study is underpinned by the Behaviourist Theory on behaviour change. Behaviour change is considered in this study in terms of curriculum relevance. Behaviourism, as the curriculum theory of Ralph Tyler, in the traditional paradigm, became the most popular and influential theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>26</sup>. In terms of curriculum relevance, the Behaviourist Theory states that each lesson in the curriculum should result in a desirable change in the behaviour of learners<sup>27</sup>. In achieving this, the curriculum should be divided into definite components as determined by the state and the teacher should implement such curriculum in a systematic manner. Behaviour theorists define learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviour. In the behaviourist approach, behavioural objectives provide the underpinning of the design. As such, the success or failure of the curriculum is based on pre-defined changes in the behaviour of learners. The assumption of the theory is that learner outcomes that matter in the lives of learners should be measured<sup>28</sup>. In order for learners' behaviour to be measured, classroom tasks are expected to be split into smaller parts to have tasks that can be aligned with a particular skill or behaviour to which it can be measured so as not to lose their authenticity or meaningfulness.

By implication in this study, knowledge on sexuality education embedded in the curriculum of Life Orientation should necessitate a desirable change in the behaviour of learners. Kirby *et al.*, confirming the impact of sexuality education curriculum on learner behaviour, measured the impact of curriculum-based sex and HIV education programmes on the sexual behaviour of young people throughout the world<sup>29</sup>. They reported that more than half of curriculum programmes on sexuality education do not lead to increase in

sexual behaviour, but rather, delay or decrease sexual behaviour. The effectiveness of these curriculum programmes in changing learners' sexual behaviour is true across a variety of countries, cultures and groups of youth. Measuring the impact of sexuality education programmes across 36 countries revealed that sexuality education programmes do not hasten initiation of sex and some delay the initiation of sex. It further decreases the number of sexual partners, reduces frequency of sex and increases the use of condoms and contraceptives among learners. Nonetheless, such programmes also lead to a significant reduction in sexual risk-taking<sup>29</sup>. Other researchers also believe that sexuality education programmes emphasise the consequences of sexual activity, emphasise careful decision-making and responsible behaviour, help students clarify their values and behave consistently with them, thus discouraging sexual activity<sup>30</sup>.

The world today seems to depend strongly on sexuality and HIV and STD education curriculum programmes as the most reliable partial solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy.<sup>31</sup> If that is the case, then it is a cause for concern as South Africa is experiencing unacceptably high rates of teenage pregnancy and the prevalence HIV even though the country offers programmes on sexuality education in the formal curriculum of Life Orientation. It is strongly believed that formal sexuality, HIV and STD education programmes embedded in the curriculum of the subject in schools, clinics, and community empowerment centres are the most promising type of interventions needed in society today to reduce adolescent sexual risk behaviours<sup>29</sup>. This view is shared by the researchers of this study. Curriculum programmes of this nature are well-designed and could be used to reach as many learners as possible. However, studies on the impact of sexuality and HIV curriculum on learner behaviour are still uncommon in Southern Africa. Most of the glorious studies in this area have been done elsewhere<sup>32, 33</sup>.

### **Research design and methods**

This study was conducted within Mahikeng Local Municipality, North West Province, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was considered as the most appropriate to explore the experiences and views of learners, teachers and school principals about teaching and learning sexuality education as part of LO. Individual in-depth interviews (semi-structured interviews) were conducted during the months of October and November 2015. Three different but related interview guides were prepared for learners, teachers and principals. The questions included in the guide were meant to solicit information on participants' experiences and understanding of sexuality education in schools. Using purposive sampling, five schools were selected for the study, two in rural areas and three in the urban centre of Mahikeng. The sampling decision was taken in order to cut across schools from socially and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Two research assistants (a male and a female) were recruited for purposes of data collection and worked under the supervision of the principal investigators (authors). The minimum qualification of the research assistants was a university degree and fluency in both English and Setswana (the local language spoken in the area). The research assistants were briefed about the sensitivity of the research topic and asked whether they were comfortable with interviewing people about it or not. After accepting the conditions, the research assistants were trained for two days on qualitative methodology in general and details of the study provided to them, including the interview guides. A pilot study was organised on the third day of training for the research assistants to practise and especially, to test the interview guides prepared for the study.

Proposal for this study was approved by the North-West University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the District Director, Ngaka Modiri Molema District Municipality. School

principals, who are considered as gate-keepers in each school, also granted permission to conduct the study. Furthermore, school principals were also available for interviews, with the exception of one. The list of LO teachers in each school was obtained from principals and teachers, who were available and willing to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select learners for interviews. The selection criterion for learners was either those who were in secondary school or in the final years (i.e. Grades 6 and 7) of primary school. A total of 50 interviews were conducted: 39 (21 males and 18 females) with learners, 7 with LO teachers and 4 with school principals. Learners who participated in the study were attending grades 6–12 and aged 13–21 years. All interviews were recorded. English was used to conduct most of the interviews, however, in some cases, learners preferred to use Setswana. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The 50 transcripts were uploaded into Atlas-ti, the software used for analysis. Six themes were identified as follows: 1) situation of LO in schools; 2) learners' understanding of LO and its content; 3) learners' understanding of the curriculum of sexuality education; 4) challenges faced by schools with regard to teaching sexuality education; 5) opinion of learning sexuality education through LO; and 6) opinion on how to win the war against teenage pregnancy. However, only five (1–5) themes were analysed and presented in this paper. The sixth theme was not presented because responses obtained were not directly related to the other five themes. Data analysis involved coding the textual data according to themes and analysed using thematic analysis. Verbatim quotations from participants were used to illustrate key issues or patterns of experiences.

## Results and Discussion

### *Situation of LO in participating schools*

The study revealed that Life Orientation is taught in all the schools that participated in their search.

However, there were some disparities in terms of the profile of teachers and the teaching of the subject. The study further revealed that more female educators were involved in the teaching of LO. All LO educators in rural schools were females, however, in urban schools, male educators were in the minority. The rural–urban differentials were not only observed in the sex of educators. It was established that rural schools only concentrate on teaching the theory of LO, whereas in urban schools, both theory and presentations were equally important. It was also reported that LO educators in urban schools usually invited experts such as nurses to address different topics, something that was rarely done in rural schools.

The wide range of qualifications of educators can be grouped into three categories as follows. First, LO educators who were well-qualified because they studied the subject as part of their training. With regard to this category of educators, one of the teachers had an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) in Life Orientation while the other studied the subject as part of the Life Skills module at the University. Second, LO educators who believed they had sufficient knowledge in the subject matter because they studied Psychology, which has a component of guidance. Most of such educators were exposed to other LO topics through workshops. Third, educators who taught LO without any qualification or any form of training. For instance, one educator was assigned to teach LO because she was a female and had been teaching in the school for a very long time. It can, therefore, be concluded from the self-reported qualifications that most of the teachers were not qualified to teach LO, including sexuality education.

It is usually assumed that any educator can teach LO. Some school principals do not believe that special training is required for the teaching of LO. For instance, one of the principals in a rural school selected for the study was asked how he assigned teachers to teach Life Orientation and he responded as follows:

*We take any teacher qualified to teach Life Orientation because they did Psychology at the university. Most of them did guidance, so there is no teacher who is not qualified to teach Life Orientation (Principal in a rural school).*

Majority of learners believed their teachers were adequately qualified to teach the subject. The assessment of teachers by learners, sometimes, did not make much sense as it was based on weak arguments. The following are excerpts of some of the responses obtained from learners regarding the qualification of their teachers:

*Because of the way they explain and encourage us to do what is right— that is what makes me think that they are qualified (Female Grade 9 learner in an urban school).*

*They always tell us that they are trained for this and the way they teach it, everyone passes LO. That becomes the only distinction mark in the report for many learners (Female grade 11 learner in an urban school).*

However, some learners held a contrary view with regard to the qualification of their teachers. For instance, when asked if LO teachers were qualified to teach the subject, one learner from an urban school felt they were not qualified as captured in the excerpt below:

*To tell you the truth, I would say I take Life Orientation as a subject that a person who is in life is qualified to teach it because I do not think they went to study for it. They felt that it is easy, so they just read the text book and teach (Female grade 12 learner in an urban school).*

Some teachers were able to identify gaps in their skills and suggested that more effort be devoted

regarding their development such as sending educators for further training. Teachers suggested that if such training was not possible, they should, at least, attend workshops that focus on improving the skills of LO teachers. Some teachers suggested that in addition to the teaching of Life Orientation in schools, the involvement of parents was necessary in order to complement the work done by schools. One teacher recommended that parents should start talking about sexuality education to their children prior to the introduction of the topic in schools.

Although there were many learners who were happy about the way LO was taught, some were not satisfied. For instance, regarding the question on how LO was taught in the school, some female learners responded as follows:

*To be honest, our Life Orientation teacher only comes to class to give us exercises and goes away and then comes back the following day to give us corrections (Female grade 10 learner in a rural school).*

*The teacher who teaches us does not teach us well. She reads things from the book and she does not explain some of the things (Female grade 9 learner in an urban school).*

One of the objectives of the study was also to investigate if schools had the necessary resources to teach LO. Majority of teachers and learners maintained text books were the sole resource used to teach LO. Some classes had pamphlets posted on the walls on topics. Some teachers and learners maintained they used drama and videos to emphasise messages on certain topics. Furthermore, some teachers and learners maintained they used the Internet to complement what was provided in textbooks. It was surprising to note that even demonstrations of contraceptive methods, such as condoms, were very rare in schools. Almost all teachers interviewed maintained they never thought about taking

condoms to class because they believed learners knew about them. One of the teachers in a rural school confirmed she took condoms to class, but never demonstrated to learners how to use them.

### ***Learners' understanding of LO and its contents***

Learners in both rural and urban schools had a very strong interest and desire for the knowledge, skills and values associated with the LO learning area, particularly on sexuality education. Learners proposed the expansion of the content of the curriculum to include certain aspects that were excluded, which they considered relevant. Learners' desire for the expansion of content issues in the curriculum was similar across all schools that participated in the study. The similarity and consistency of the topics they wished should be included and their discussions thereof was an indication that their understanding of the subject focused along those lines. Based on how their understanding of LO, learners expressed their desire of what should constitute the content of the subject. Some learners expressed dissatisfaction in the LO curriculum. For instance, some female learners expected topics such as menstruation, body development, and feelings to be covered in greater detail during LO classes, which was not the case. Male learners were determined to know more on issues that were not properly covered in class such as body development and when do girls conceive. Both male and female learners wished to know the right time to begin engaging in sexual activities and details on experiencing emotions.

Despite the disparity in the expression of desires on areas of expansion in the curriculum of LO between male and female learners, the central idea for all learners was geared towards preventive strategies. This mentality largely shaped the understanding of LO by learners in schools visited. Some learners expressed their understanding through the expression of desires as captured in following excerpts:

*Life Orientation is the subject that teaches us sex education and it teaches us not to be involved in sexual activities (Female grade 12 learner in an urban school).*

*I like LO because Life Orientation teaches us about teenage pregnancy and how not to get HIV (Female grade 11 learner in a rural school).*

*Life Orientation is a good subject that teaches us about life, respect, HIV and looking after our body (Male grade 7 learner in a rural school).*

The data also revealed that schools in rural and urban areas had a common understanding of Life Orientation. Learners in these areas understood LO according to the content covered, thus spreading the preventive campaign. However, some disparities were noticed regarding the content covered in rural and urban schools. Urban schools focused more on sexuality issues, while schools in rural areas focused more on HIV and AIDS. Although learners across all grades also understood LO, according to what was taught, there were also disparities in their understanding of LO across grades. Senior primary school learners (Grades 6 and 7), for example, had no idea of sexuality education as it was not part of their curriculum. As such, the focus of LO at this level was more on HIV and personal hygiene. On the contrary, secondary school learners (Grades 8–12), who were exposed to the curriculum on sexuality education, considered LO as a subject that focused more on sexuality education and very little attention on citizenship education and orientation to the world of work.

Teachers also considered LO in line with the content of the learning area, however, their knowledge base was broader compared to learners. The data also revealed that teachers' understanding of LO consolidated all disparities regarding issues raised by learners. However, in expression such understanding, teachers in rural schools placed

greater emphasis on other study areas and very limited emphasis on issues of sexuality. For instance, they focused more on healthy living and prevention of diseases and citizenship education. However, teachers in urban schools inculcated all the study areas of LO with special focus on issues of sexuality education. Regarding urban-rural contradictions to the teaching of sexuality education, female LO teachers were more knowledgeable on issues of sexuality education and more confident in teaching the subject compared to their male counterparts as captured in the following excerpts:

*LO teaches learners how to look after their life; how to live a healthy life and avoid diseases such as HIV and AIDS, and how to prepare for their future (LO teacher in a rural school).*

*LO is a very good subject and I feel incredible about what it is intended to do in the life of learners. That is why I feel passionate when I teach it. LO is a subject that creates awareness on learners about life, about their health and body, about their career, about their decisions, issues of sexuality and diseases such as HIV and AIDS (LO teacher in an urban school).*

The data also revealed that learners' understanding of the subject was shallow and misleading. The nature of such understanding greatly affected learners' ability to be self-motivating in mastering and practising life and behaviour inherent in the content of the learning area. Learners expressed the shallowness of the level of their knowledge, skills and values of LO through their understanding of the learning area. According to some learners, LO was all about topics. Learners referred to topics studies in LO to express their understanding of the subject. For instance, they linked their understanding to interest and motivation that shaped their behaviour about the subject. If a topic was interesting, it was understood to be LO. In

such situation, learners would desire more on the subject. A less interesting topic was received negatively and made learners to be less motivated about the subject. When such situations became recurrent, learners expressed dissatisfaction with the content of the subject as captured in following excerpts:

*I do not think Life Orientation is appropriate because I am still young for my age to be talking about sex. So, I do not like it, but to know the things teachers are scared to tell before I can reach that age that I want to do something like that it was good (Female grade 8 learner in a rural school).*

*I like LO because it is all about one's life, our career, when and how to start having sex, how not to get pregnant and how to look after our body (Female grade 10 learner in an urban school).*

Teachers also attested to the life and behaviour of some learners, reflecting how little they knew about LO. Thus, an indication that the level of learners' knowledge on LO was expected to be evident in their daily behaviour. For instance, learners who had exposure to LO and who still got pregnant were considered not to have paid attention to LO lessons. A School Principal expressed this concern as follows:

*The way some of these learners are behaving, you will think that they know nothing about LO. Some will say they only got pregnant before they knew about pregnancy. But these things are taught in class (Principal in a rural school).*

Learners' understanding of LO is symmetrical to the content covered. Their understanding limits LO to just a learning area that creates awareness of how to avoid sexual matters. The avoidance mentality takes precedence over the decision on

how to tackle the general problem and not just one piece. The symmetrical balance of learners' understanding of LO and the content covered in schools, shows the shallow coverage of the content of the curriculum. The LO curriculum in schools today, is understood to focus more on abstinence rather than on the general mandate of the learning area.

### ***Learners' understanding of the curriculum on sexuality education***

Understanding LO, as expressed by learners, releases sparks that light up on issues of curriculum inefficiencies. Learners' understanding revealed a worrisome proportion of untaught curriculum on sexuality education in LO. This is an expanding trend in schools today<sup>34</sup>. It further revealed the need to expand certain areas of the curriculum to include solutions to contemporary problems in society. The curriculum on sexuality education is not limited to taught and untaught curriculum, but also involves the planned and unplanned. The breadth and depth of the LO curriculum, particularly the content on sexuality education was examined in this study in order to uncover inherent weaknesses of the policy document or its implementation that may warrant intervention. Analysis of data to this effect revealed the following:

### ***Content fitness and malfunctioning of curriculum breakdown***

The planned curriculum on sexuality education in LO is structurally fit to purpose and goes to great length and depth in terms of the scope of its content. Topics outlined in the curriculum policy address a wide range of issues on sexuality education. Nonetheless, the curriculum breakdown of the entire subject framework of topics to yearly work schedule, is problematic. According to the yearly work schedule, sex as a concept, is first mentioned in Grade 8. This is considered a late introduction, especially as reports indicate that in

South Africa, learners get pregnant as early as Grade 3<sup>3,35</sup>. They only get to hear or know about sex in class long after they have been victims.

### ***Disparity between planned and taught curriculum***

What is planned and evident in the policy document as core content to be taught on sexuality education was totally different from what was practically taught in schools. Moreover, the content in the general curriculum of LO that speaks to issues of sex is very limited and cannot quite address the intended consequences in society as captured in the following excerpts:

*The content that they teach us is only issues of using condom for prevention, menstruation, changes in our body and falling pregnant (Female grade 11 learner in a rural school).*

*I was taught about child abuse, ahhm..... substance abuse, I was also taught about careers that lead to health and medicine. Other topics I do not remember, those are the ones I can remember (Female grade 10 learner in an urban school).*

Teachers also confirmed that it was quite challenging for them to completely teach all the content of LO. Some LO teachers maintained they were overloaded, while others did not prioritise LO, given its status of countless points in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams.

*The content of LO is very broad and given that we are teaching LO and other subjects, we find it difficult to cover all the content (LO teacher in a rural school).*

*At times, I cannot teach all the content as in the work outline, but we try to cover the important topics. Remember, we are only two LO teachers for the whole school (LO teacher in an urban school).*

### ***Challenges faced by schools with regard to teaching sexuality education***

This section focuses on challenges faced by schools with regard to sexuality education. Some of the problems are part of the broad LO learning area while others specifically focus on sexuality education. One of the problems already discussed above is lack of resources, including failure to invite professionals such as nurses, who may be in a better position to clarify certain matters than LO teachers. Another issue is the fact that schools and learners do not take this subject seriously. This has negative implications to the programme. It has been reported that some teachers and learners are not comfortable to discuss sexual matters for cultural and/or religious reasons. Some believe it is a taboo among Setswana people to discuss sexual matters, especially across generations. Some participants indicated that it was against their Christian values to discuss sexual matters openly. This issue has also been linked to the resistance by parents/community and is more of a rural problem than among urban-dwellers. It was reported that some parents would go to schools to complain if they found out that their children had been exposed to sexual matters as captured in the excerpt below:

*Topics are relevant, but some families are against them because of their Christianity....you get a parent the next day asking you why are you teaching this?*  
(LO teacher in a rural school).

At least, one LO teacher denied the fact that sexuality education was part of the syllabus for Grades 9 and 10. LO teachers reported several challenges they faced in the teaching of the subject, thus contributing to their inability to deliver as expected. Most of these challenges had to do with the behaviour of learners. For instance, it was reported that learners became extremely excited when exposed to sexual matters as captured in the excerpt below:

*Teenagers—when you talk about sex, they do not listen, they all just get excited, they do not get focused on the main issues* (LO teacher in a rural school).

LO teachers also revealed that some learners were either uncomfortable, shy or offended when sexual matters were discussed in class. It was also reported that some LO teachers intentionally skipped certain topics or hesitated from teaching such topics. In addition, some teachers did not provide adequate information on certain topics to the frustration of learners.

### ***Opinion on teaching and learning sexuality education through LO***

Participants were requested to provide their opinions on how the teaching and learning of sexuality education could be improved through LO. One of the points raised by teachers, principals and some learners had to do with ensuring that learners and schools take LO more seriously by introducing the subject in the final National Senior Certificate examinations in Grade 12. Participants indicated that as long as there was no final examination for LO, and the fact that it was not a requirement for further studies in higher education, the LO learning area, in general, and sexuality education in particular, will continue to be ignored.

Other suggestions given by learners included the following: a) avoiding classroom or formal settings when teaching sexual matters; b) involving parents in learning sexuality education in order to complement what was taught in schools; c) inviting professionals to talk to learners and improve on demonstrations; d) laying more emphasis on girls when teaching sexuality education to prevent teenage pregnancy; and e) encouraging teachers to be more confident and comfortable when teaching sexuality education. Participants maintained there was no need for teachers to be embarrassed or ashamed to teach sexual matters as captured in the excerpt below:

*I would say teachers should not be ashamed to teach learners about sexual matters because after all, we need to be educated about sexual matters and we need to know how to live a good life (Female grade 11 learner in an urban school).*

The five points suggested above are an indication that learners do not understand the complexity of delivering sexuality education within communities. Such point of view was expected, given their young age and low level of education. However, this goes a long way to show learners' concerns, which might assist in efforts to change their attitudes towards teaching and learning sexuality education. Unfortunately, LO teachers and school principals did not provide as many suggestions as expected on how to improve the teaching and learning of sexuality education, with the exception of the point mentioned above.

## Conclusion

There are still high levels of teenage pregnancy and HIV prevalence among learners in South Africa, even though sexuality education was introduced in schools in 2002. Challenges faced by teachers with regard to delivering sexuality education in selected schools in Mahikeng, North West Province, South Africa were examined and discussed. The study was underpinned by the Behaviourist Theory on behaviour change by finding out whether the Behaviourist Theory could be applicable to the South African setting or not.

The study revealed several challenges which negatively influenced the delivery of sexuality education in schools. These challenges defined the current state of LO in schools and learners' understanding of sexuality education. The first challenge relates to the design of the curriculum that introduces sexual matters for the first time in Grade 8. Since learners get pregnant as early as Grade 3, it is problematic to wait that long

before its introduction. This justifies the current situation in schools, where Grades 6 and 7 learners are still ignorant on issues of sexuality education even though they have been studying LO for years. Lebesse *et al.* emphasise that knowledge on sexuality will only be meaningful to young people's sexual lives if they get it well before their sexual debut<sup>36</sup>.

Participants revealed, in different ways, that the LO programme in general, and sexuality education in particular, are not taken seriously in schools. Among the reasons stated included the fact that there is no examination for the terminal grade (i.e. Grade 12) and hence, LO does not account for further studies. Thus, school principals do not take this subject seriously. For instance, some school principals believed that any teacher can teach the subject. In some cases, especially in rural schools, LO is associated with female teachers, with the pious hope that they will use their position as mother figures towards learners instead of teaching the curriculum. This was supported by the fact that most LO teachers were not qualified to teach the subject. Hence, the content of sexuality education was shallow, and some teachers skipped certain topics. This also explains why learners had shallow and complicated ideas on the understanding of sexuality education. Since LO is not taken seriously by school principals, teachers and learners, topics do not receive the required attention, as such, learners' understanding of LO is only limitedly aligned to the little that was covered.

It seems, therefore, that, the main problem is on the design of the curriculum and how it is taught. It is recommended that government goes back to the drawing board with regard to the design of sexuality education curriculum in schools. The teaching of sexual matters should begin in Grade 3 and appropriate age-specific topics on sexual matters for learners should be well thought out. There is need for the qualifications of LO teachers to be taken very seriously to ensure that qualified teachers are appointed or assigned to teach the

subject in schools. In addition, since schools do not take LO seriously, because there is no terminal examination, there is need to introduce an examination for Grade 12 learners and to ensure that the results are considered for university entrance. This will also ensure that schools take the subject more seriously than what currently obtains. It is only after rectifying challenges with regard to the curriculum on sexuality education and the way the subject is taught, that change in learners' behaviour can be assessed.

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