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Keywords: comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), early grade learners, child sexual abuse, cultural factors, genital organs.

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Cultural Factors Affecting the Teaching of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Early Grades in Zimbabwe

Thaddeus Mahoso [α], Roy Venketsamy [σ] & Michelle Finestone [ρ]

Abstract- This case study was conducted in Chipinge district in Zimbabwe to investigate the cultural factors that influence the instruction of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in early grades, and subsequently identifies effective strategies to address these factors. The study employed a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. A purposive sample of ten parents and ten early grade teachers was selected to participate in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using a thematic approach. The language used in the instruction of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) was found to be restrictive, impeding the effective delivery of CSE content due to cultural taboos surrounding the explicit mention of anatomical terms referring to genital organs. Teachers' reluctance to teach CSE and their apprehension of potential victimisation by parents were identified as significant factors inhibiting the effective implementation of CSE in the early grades. Furthermore, the study revealed that within Zimbabwean culture, CSE is primarily perceived as education intended for individuals approaching marriage and adolescence. The study revealed a prevailing belief that introducing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to young children may encourage them to engage in sexual experimentation. As a recommendation, the study suggested the formulation of a policy that explicitly permits the teaching of CSE to young children, while advocating for the repeal of existing policies that hinder its implementation.

Keywords: comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), early grade learners, child sexual abuse, cultural factors, genital organs.

I. Introduction

Reports indicate widespread global child sexual abuse on a significant scale (Collin-Vezina, Sablonniere-Griffin, Palmer & Milne, 2015; Wangamati, Sundby & Prince, 2018). Child sexual abuse is not an isolated incident in Zimbabwe; rather, it is pervasive and continues to happen without any recourse to the perpetrators. Various factors contribute to this issue, including children's limited understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse, their lack of awareness regarding preventive measures, and their uncertainty about appropriate actions to take when they experience sexual abuse (Mteto, 2017). As a result of poverty and poor socio-economic condition in the country, young people are forced engage in prostitution. Furthermore, cultural factors are also responsible for impelling young children to engage in illicit sexual activities (Feltoe, 2017). This phenomenon knows no boundary; hence it occurs in all types of societies and families across the globe (Mantula & Saloojee, 2016; Muridzo & Malianga, 2015). This is a worrying situation as it has a detrimental impact on child development and mental health (Mantula & Saloojee, 2016; Nguyeni & Chang, 2020) often scarring and traumatising children as they progress into adulthood (Venketsamy & Kennear, 2020). Children are affected socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively (Feltoe, 2017). It is imperative to address this issue to facilitate optimal child development since the future success of a child is hinged on optimal childhood development (Morrison, 2015). Implementing effective strategies to combat this phenomenon is crucial in restoring normalcy. One such strategy is the implementation of a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programme for children at school level, commencing from the early grades with age-appropriate content (Maviya, 2019). With regards to molestation in Zimbabwe, children in early grades are in a precarious situation because they are mostly molested by people like their parents, teachers, close relatives as well as their minders who must protect them (Feltoe, 2017); hence they need to be taught CSE for them to know what child sexual abuse involves, be in a better position to avoid it and to know what to do if abused. In Zimbabwe, early grade children encompass two age groups: three to five years, referred to as ECD A and B (Early Childhood Development), and six to eight years, encompassing grades one and two (Nyarambwi, 2020).

The adoption and implementation of International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE) on the teaching of CSE to children starting from the early grades has proven effective in addressing such issues (Ivanova & Michielsen, 2022). These guidelines are accessible to all nations for utilisation. Despite the existence of these guidelines, Zimbabwe has yet to fully integrate CSE into its educational system (Gudyanga, De Lange & Khau, 2019).

This study aimed to gain comprehensive insights into the cultural factors that impede the teaching of CSE to children in the early grades of education in Zimbabwe. By thoroughly understanding these factors, the researcher seeks to identify effective strategies to address them, ultimately promoting the integration of CSE into the early grades of education in

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Zimbabwe. This promotion of CSE in early grades has the potential to enlighten Zimbabwean children and equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to reduce their vulnerability and exposure to sexual abuse. Moreover, it is anticipated that such comprehensive education may contribute to improved sexual health outcomes by reducing the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. Ultimately, the study aspires to facilitate the optimal development of children in the early grades of education in Zimbabwe through an age and content-appropriate CSE programme.

a) Research questions

This study was guided by the research questions which follow:

- What are the cultural factors that affect the teaching of CSE in Zimbabwe?
- What is the Zimbabwean believed consequences of teaching CSE to young children?
- What strategies can be employed to promote the teaching of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe?

b) Objectives of the study

The study pursued the following objectives:

- To investigate cultural factors that hinder the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to young children.
- To explore how the perceived consequences of teaching CSE to early grades in Zimbabwe affect the actual implementation of CSE.
- To identify effective strategies that can be utilised to promote the teaching of CSE in the early grades in Zimbabwe.

II. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory which regards a human being as the product of the ecological systems that a person is brought up within (Paquuette & Ryan, 200l). These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Morrison, 2015). Given that the research topic focuses on the cultural factors influencing the teaching of CSE in early grades, particular attention is directed to the macrosystem, where culture is deeply rooted which makes this theory a perfect theoretical framework for this study since the study focuses on cultural factors that affect the teaching of CSE in early grades. This system significantly impacts human development, meaning that cultural elements such as belief systems, knowledge, customs, norms, values and taboos within a specific culture must be considered as determinants of how individuals within that cultural context perceive the teaching of CSE to young children. Consequently, in cultures where the teaching of CSE to young children is deemed acceptable, it may be embraced, while in cultures where it is considered deviant, it may face resistance.

III. Literature Review

One of the basic rights of children is education (Shibuya, Estrada, Sari, Teuchi, Sasaki & Wanaini, 2023); hence children are entitled to CSE because it empowers them to face the present and the future real life challenges. Moreover, it is anticipated that CSE empowers children to know and understand their bodies and further, create an awareness to ways of reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The World Health Organisation also advocates the provision of CSE to children on the premise of its capacity to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are integral in preventing children from becoming victims of health problems that emanate from the lack of CSE (Shibuya et al. 2023). Although CSE is now a global imperative, it is still replete with challenges that should be addressed in order to promote its provision globally.

IV. Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive sexuality education refers to scientifically accurate sexuality education that caters for all domains of human development (UNESCO, 2015). This education is grounded in evidence-based information tailored to appropriate age and culture of learners, and is designed with the aim of mitigating risks arising from misconceptions about human sexuality (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2016; UNESCO, 2015).

a) CSE in Europe

In Europe, CSE started in Sweden in 1955 whilst Germany started offering it in 1968 (Ketting, 2013). More countries adopted it between the 1970s and 1980s (Ketting, 2013). For example, Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland embraced it in the 1970s (Ketting, 2013). France and the United Kingdom joined later. The Ireland made it obligatory in 2003, even though the culture was strongly opposed to it just like in other European countries (Ketting, 2013). In some of these European countries, it is comprehensive whilst in others it is not as comprehensive as it should be (Ketting, Broadschmidt & Ivanona, 2018). For example, in Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, it is provided by well trained teachers who are capable of applying the participatory methodology which is the most effective approach to teach CSE (Ketting, 2021).

In the Netherlands, it is offered and is bearing its much expected dividends with regards to the containing of sexually transmitted infections and other aspects even though a national curriculum is not existent in these (Ketting et al, 2023). In this country it is offered in a developmentally appropriate way to children

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starting from the age of four years (Parry, 2020). In Germany, comprehensive sexuality education is offered as well to young children and is obligatory (Ketting & Ivanova, 2018). Its provision is backed by policy and is offered by trained teachers who are effective (Ketting & Ivanova, 2018).

Although some countries are successfully offering CSE right from early grade classes in Europe, opposition to it is existent. This conflict stems from incompatibility between what should be taught in CSE and the culture of the people as well as religious conservativeness (Parry, 2020). People prefer abstinence-only education which has principles that are favoured by the culture of the people even though abstinence-only education is not efficacious in dealing with the health challenges that should be addressed by CSE. According to Parry (2020), those who oppose provision of CSE to young children often manage to adversely affect educational policies in Europe that are in place to promote the provision of CSE to young children. In some countries in Europe, such as Bulgaria, Georgina, Russia and Serbia, CSE is not existent (Ketting & Ivanova, 2018, Ketting, et al. (2023).

b) CSE in United States

In the United States, discussing sexuality was and is still a contentious issue (Hall, Sales, Komro & Santelli, 2016). Despite this situation, sexuality education is well taught in some states in the United States, however, in some states of America, abstinence-only education is preferred to CSE, even though it has compromised efficacy in producing the much desired results (Ketting & Ivanova, 2018). CSE in the United States is also not favoured just like in some European countries because of it being at variance with United States culture; hence the rate at which children contract sexually transmitted infections in the United States is alarming (Bell, 2016). In some Asian countries, the delivery of CSE is similarly minimal due to cultural prohibition (Parry, 2020).

c) CSE in Africa

Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa appreciate the need for children to be taught CSE because of the AIDS pandemic which is highly characterised by the skyrocketing of new HIV infections (Wekesah, Nyabangi, Onguss, Njagi & Bangha, 2019). Countries in East and Southern Africa followed as well. In 1994 after the International Conference on Population and Development, the delivery of CSE by many countries in sub Saharan Africa flourished (Wekesah et al, 2019). This followed the coming to existence of policies and laws that support the offering of CSE to children (UNESCO, 2016). Currently most countries in Africa are offering CSE. However, socio-cultural norms are still thwarting the implementation (Wekesah et al, 2019).

Some countries in Africa such as South Africa and Namibia offer CSE as a stand-alone subject whilst others such as Mozambique, Rwanda and Zambia have CSE integrated in other subjects (Wekesah et al, 2019). However, discomfort to teach sensitive topics due to culture, impel these teachers to skip such topics when teaching (Wekesah et al, 2019). For instance, in Kenya where CSE is at cross road with culture, the content is adopted to fit the culture at the expense of the core content of CSE. The training of teachers to teach CSE and the provision of teacher support materials to teachers is also not adequate. This inadequacy of materials is coupled with opposition from parents, religious leaders and community members.

Wekesah et al (2019) points out the need for extensive training of teachers, both in-service and pre-service teachers to teach CSE arguing that it would equip them with enough appropriate content to teach using effective approaches. Wekesah et al (2019) further advises that the training of the teachers to teach CSE could enable teachers to teach CSE with comfort even when dealing with topics that are considered culturally sensitive.

d) CSE in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the endeavour to provide CSE to children in early grades and even in upper grades is influenced by several factors of which culture is one of them (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017; Bhebhe, 2018). CSE is taught in secondary schools as a stand-alone subject under the name Guidance and Counselling (Gudyanga, De Lange, and Khau, 2019). Some selected aspects of CSE are factored in the primary school curriculum. Again, some selected components of CSE are taught, primarily in higher grade levels, while others are omitted due to cultural influences.

Even the mandatory aspect of CSE is not fully subscribed to due to cultural factors (Gudyanga, De Lange, and Khau, (2019). Gudyanga, De Lange, and Khau (2019) point out that discussing anything related to sexuality with children is considered taboo in Zimbabwean culture: thus open dialogue with children on this subject is avoided. The Zimbabwean culture further discourages discussions about sexuality with children, as it is believed that such conversations may encourage premature sexual experimentation (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017). Compounded by this cultural perspective, teachers in Zimbabwe have been raised under the same cultural norms that discourage the teaching of CSE to children. As a result, they often feel uncomfortable teaching CSE and are apprehensive about potential opposition from parents, who also come from cultural backgrounds that oppose the teaching of CSE to their children.

In Zimbabwe, there is a cultural belief that young children are inherently innocent, and teaching CSE to them could potentially corrupt their innocence (Chitando & Moyo-Bongo, 2015). Therefore, it is expected from adults to not have discussion on sexual

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issues with children and even in the presence of children to ensure that their perceived purity is preserved. This cultural belief contributes to the relegation of the delivery of CSE, principally in the early grades of education in Zimbabwe. As a result, these children become vulnerable to the risks and dangers that arise from a lack of knowledge and understanding of CSE.

V. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting a case study design. The qualitative approach focuses on the collection of non-numerical data for answering questions pertaining to beliefs, attitudes experiences and norms of people on a phenomenon (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). The researcher opted for this approach because it accommodates data gathering strategies which allow the researcher to interact directly with the participants which enables the two parties to create a friendly atmosphere and trust which is necessary for propelling the participants to elicit all the necessary information to the researcher (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Interpretivism was opted for as the research paradigm because it concedes to the subjectivity of reality since reality is socially constructed which causes it to differ from one culture to another, one social setting to another, and from one individual to another (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Thus, this advice informs the researcher to consider the background of the participants in the interpretations of the data obtained from them (Saunders., Lewis. & Thornhill, 2012; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This was taken cognisant of in data interpretation. Thus, accuracy in terms of what they communicate could be apprehended.

The choice of a case study design allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination (Yin, 2014) of the cultural factors impacting the teaching of CSE in the early grades in Zimbabwe. This in-depth investigation facilitated a better understanding of this phenomenon (Bartletta & Vavrus, 2017), thereby facilitating the identification of strategies to promote effective CSE instruction in the early grades. This, in turn, would enable children in Zimbabwe to exercise their right to education by gaining access to CSE, which is crucial in promoting their overall health and well-being.

The study was conducted in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe, which was selected as the research site due to its high prevalence of child sexual abuse attributed to the lack of CSE (Bande, 2015). Cultural factors in this particular location act as barriers to the teaching of CSE (Platform for Youth Development Trust, 2018).

The population of this study were early grade teachers and parents of early grade children in Chipinge district in Zimbabwe. Ten teachers and ten parents were purposively selected for this study. Purposive sampling was chosen in this study with the aim of selecting participants who possessed rich relevant information that could address the research questions effectively (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015; Ames, Glenton & Simon, 2019). The researcher utilised semi-structured interviews as the data gathering instruments for this study. Following the recommendation of Adams (2015), the choice of semi-structured interviews permitted probing into ambiguous participant responses and exploring areas where the initial responses were insufficient to address the research questions. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to seek clarifications from the interviewer regarding any questions they found challenging or unclear. This approach facilitated the acquisition of comprehensive and sufficient information to effectively answer the research questions.

To collect data, the researcher interviewed ten early grade teachers and ten parents of early grade children from Chipinge district in Zimbabwe. The work experience of the teachers as early grade teachers in Chipinge district ranged from five to thirty years. Well before the interview date, the researcher made an agreement with the participants and their school heads on dates and time to meet for the interviews. Each participant was visited at school, some after work and others on weekends. The researcher opted for the time that was convenient to each one of these early grade teachers. Parents were interviewed in the comfort of their homes on dates pre-arranged with the researcher. The parents comprised five women and five men. Their ages ranged from twenty-four to forty-two years.

Effort was made to ensure trustworthiness in this study. The four aspects, which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability that account for trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020) were considered in this study. Credibility which concerns about the reality of the study was catered for through prolonged engagement with participants before actually interviewing them to create a good rapport between the researcher and the participant as advised by Stahl and king (2020). This good rapport created by prolonged engagement according to Polit and Berk (2014) could enable the participant to provide authentic information to the researcher. Credibility was further considered by interviewing two parties, teachers and parents which was data source triangulation (Yin, 2018; Fusch, Fusch, Ness, 2018). Dependability which refers to stability of research findings over time (Polit & Berk, 2014) was ascertained by succinctly describing the research process in a way that convinces the readers on the authenticity of the study (Stahl & King, 2020).

The other aspect considered was confirmability which is about getting closer to objective reality (Stahl &

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King, 2020). The researcher well attempted to eliminate the researcher's bias in this study especially in the interpretation of data. Last but not least to be considered in the endeavour was transferability which pertains to the usefulness of the research findings to other similar situations (Cuba & Lincoln, 1994; Polit & Berk, 2014). This aspect was catered for by precisely describing the population, the sample and how data were collected and analysed as advised by (Connelly, 2016).

Research ethics were diligently followed throughout this study. This article is derived from the researcher's PhD thesis, and as such, ethical clearance was obtained from the ethical committee of University of Pretoria, the ethical clearance number being EC18/07/01. No participant was coerced into participating in the study, and their informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable continuing. Confidentiality was maintained in handling the data collected from participants, ensuring their privacy and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the teachers and parents who participated in this study. Teachers were named as TA, TB, TC, TD up to TJ since they were ten whilst parents were named PA, PB up to PJ as well in order to hide their true identity.

The thematic approach was used for analysing the study's data. The analysis of the collected data led to the emergence of the following themes:

- The influence of culture and language on teaching the human anatomy in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).
- Beliefs about the consequences of teaching CSE to children.
- Culture and teachers' comfort to teach CSE.
- The relationship between comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and age.
- Strategies that can be used to promote the teaching of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe.

VI. Findings and Discussions

The following themes are subsequently discussed one at a time in this study. Verbatim responses of the participants are given.

a) *The influence of culture and language on teaching the human anatomy in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).*

Several cultural factors that stifle the teaching of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe were acknowledged by participants. When teachers were asked to explain challenges that they encountered in trying to teach CSE to early grade children, they provided information that was replete with culturally based factors. One of the teachers whose pseudonym was TG provided an explanation that indicated language as one of the hindrances to the teaching of CSE to young learners by saying:

> *It is difficult for us to teach it because we were brought up in the Zimbabwean culture which does not permit anyone to teach CSE to children in early grades especially when it comes to teaching the names of private body parts. Such words are not acceptable to mention in our culture. Names of sexual organs are vulgar to say them out. They should not be said out.*

What TG said is consistent with what TE, one of the teachers said about language as one of the factors that prohibit the teaching of CSE to children. This participant said:

> *When you try to teach about sexuality, the words that you are likely to use are not acceptable in our culture. Names of sexual organs are regarded as vulgar. They should not be talk about.*

TH, another teacher participant had this to say about language:

> *The language is the problem. When you try to teach about sexuality, words like those referring to human private parts are used yet they are not acceptable in our culture. Names of sexual organs are vulgar in the culture of our society. They should not even be mentioned, even when an adult is talking to another adult.*

The information obtained from the interviewed teachers revealed a common challenge: their reluctance to mention the names of the private parts of the human body. This hesitation is rooted in their cultural background, which prohibits the explicit mention of these body parts. In the context of CSE, teaching human anatomy is a crucial aspect that requires careful attention and proper articulation. Consequently, it is vital to include the teaching of the names and functions of the human genital organs in early grade education. Ojoye (2017) further emphasises the importance of educating early grade children about their private parts, including their proper names, functions, and appropriate actions to take if anyone touches them inappropriately. Such education can help children comprehend and recognise possible occurrences of sexual abuse. However, the cultural restraints within Zimbabwe prevent the application of these teachings, thereby harmfully impacting the education of children about human anatomy. In South African study, Venketsamy (2018) identified similar findings among black teachers who were reluctant to use the correct and appropriate language to teach young children CSE content.

It is important to note that children often hold misunderstandings regarding human anatomy. For instance, construed from Freud's psychosexual theory, girls during the phallic stage may believe that they lack a penis and develop a sense of "penis envy" due to the belief that they have been castrated (Mwamwenda, 2015). These misconceptions can be effectively

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addressed through the provision of CSE to children in the early grades (Ojoye, 2017). CSE can help clarify such misconceptions and provide accurate information about human anatomy, promoting a better understanding among children in this age group.

The language barrier in teaching CSE to children is not limited to teachers alone; it affects anyone in Zimbabwe who wishes to educate young children on this topic. This sentiment was echoed by PF one of the interviewed parents, who expressed the following opinion:

> *The language used in the teaching of CSE is regarded as bad language to children in early grades. People believe it is bad to expose children to language related to sexuality,* especially names of human private body parts.

b) Beliefs about the consequences of teaching CSE to children

The data collected also shed light on the cultural beliefs held in Zimbabwe regarding the consequences of teaching CSE to young children. TE expressed his beliefs as follows:

> *They also believe children will indulge in sexual activities too early if they are to be taught CSE. Community members also believe that teaching CSE propels children to engage in sexuality.*

The views expressed by TE align with the sentiments shared by TF, who stated the following:

> *Some teachers believe that if children are taught CSE, may like to experiment.*

The statements made by these participants highlight the belief among Zimbabweans that teaching CSE to young children may encourage them to engage in inappropriate sexual activities. This cultural belief acts as a barrier to providing children with the necessary knowledge and empowerment to protect themselves from sexual abuse. However, it is important to note that research has consistently shown that this belief is unfounded. In fact, numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of CSE in equipping children with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to protect themselves from the risks associated with harmful sexual practices (Chahwahwa et al., 2021). These findings emphasise the importance of providing CSE to children in early grades.

There are other cultural beliefs that were brought to the fore by participants. TJ, another teacher interviewee also had this to say:

> *Children at our school come from a community that does not even want to hear that children are taught anything that is related to sexuality. They regard it as a taboo. They believe talking about sexuality with children can offend the ancestral spirits may punish them by causing drought or the outbreak of deadly diseases.*

Furthermore, TJ shared the following perspective:

> *It spoils the innocence of the children that they are born with.*

This information was also obtained from PA who said:

> *People believe if it is done it will cause drought in our nation. We call that makunakuna in Shona language, which refers to things that cause drought.*

The aforementioned information highlights the cultural association in Zimbabwe between the teaching of CSE to young children and negative connotations such as evil and defilement. This cultural perspective suggests that obtaining consent from Zimbabweans to teach CSE to their children may be challenging. The belief that teaching CSE can spoil children's innocence aligns with Rousseau's philosophical notion that children are born good but influenced negatively by society (Onder, 2018). Notably, this cultural belief extends beyond Zimbabwe and appears to be prevalent in other African cultures as well. For instance, in Nigeria, it is culturally expected that no one should be taught about sexuality until the eve of marriage (Esohe & PeterInyang, 2015). Additionally, Akpana (2013) points out that in Nigerian culture, the teaching of CSE to children is viewed as a sinful behaviour.

Furthermore, the belief that teaching CSE to children in early grades can lead to drought adds another layer of fear and apprehension. Drought, which can result in famine and the loss of human and livestock lives, is seen as a significant threat to the community's well-being and livelihoods. Therefore, any attempt to introduce CSE could be perceived as not only endangering the individual but also jeopardizing the entire society. Violating this cultural belief would be seen as posing a risk to the collective, making anyone who attempts to teach CSE to young children potentially viewed as an enemy of the community. Consequently, many people may go to great lengths to avoid engaging with CSE due to the perceived consequences associated with it.

However, it is important to recognise that these beliefs are unfounded as they lack scientific confirmation. In fact, scientific evidence suggests the opposite. UNAIDS (2016) and Mudhumo (2021) assert that CSE provides learners with strategies to reduce sexually related risks and equips them with knowledge to protect their health.

c) Culture and teachers' comfort to teach CSE

In this study, the teachers acknowledged the importance of teaching comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to young children, but they expressed their inability to do so. They identified cultural discomfort as the primary obstacle. This sentiment is reflected in the statement provided by TE, which is as follows:

> *I really see the need for children to be taught CSE. It is crucial but the problem is that I cannot teach it, … I am not comfortable. I was brought up in a culture where it was regarded as taboo to talk about sex and it is still taboo in my culture to address it especially to young children.*

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The teachers' awareness of the need for CSE to be taught to young children was further expressed by TG who said:

> *Myself as it stands, I want CSE to be taught to early grade children. However, it is difficult for us to teach it because we were brought up in the Zimbabwean culture which does not permit anyone to teach CSE to children in early grades. We are uncomfortable to mention the names of these private body parts. This is because we also grew up in the same culture which prohibits mentioning private body parts. People do not feel free to talk about sexuality. Adults also feel uncomfortable to talk about sexuality among themselves and even a wife and a husband are not free to talk about it even in their bedrooms.*

Despite recognising the importance of teaching CSE, teachers in Zimbabwe face significant discomfort in doing so, largely due to cultural factors. This discomfort, stemming from the Zimbabwean culture, is identified as a prominent hindrance. Gudyanga, De Lange, and Khau (2019) also acknowledge this discomfort among Zimbabwean teachers when it comes to teaching topics related to sexuality, particularly in secondary schools where CSE is included in guidance and counseling. They note that teachers tend to avoid teaching culturally sensitive topics in this regard.

Culturally, in Zimbabwe, the expected reaction when someone uses vulgar language during a conversation poses a significant challenge to teaching CSE. This reaction is expressed by TH, who stated the following:

> *When a person speaks in vulgar words to another, you are required to react by running away from that person. That is our cultural norm.*

The culturally expected reaction of avoiding discussions on CSE and discomfort in addressing the topic hinders the teaching of CSE in Zimbabwe. This cultural avoidance of discussing sexuality education is deeply ingrained in Zimbabwean society. It is not limited to Zimbabwe alone, as similar cultural practices of avoidance exist in other nations, particularly in Africa.

In Malaysia, a study conducted by Kee-Jiar and Shih-Hui (2020) revealed that both parents and teachers expressed discomfort in teaching children about sexuality. Similar findings were observed in Nigeria, where studies by Esohe and Petrifying (2015) and Akpama (2013) highlighted the reluctance of teachers to address CSE. Adesina and Olufadewa (2020) also confirmed the common occurrence of teachers' discomfort in teaching CSE across Africa. Additionally, in Uganda, there is a cultural perception that children are asexual, leading to the belief that there is no need to teach them about CSE (Robert & Yawe, 2022; Kenny, Dinehart & Wurtele, 2015). These studies demonstrate that discomfort and avoidance in teaching CSE exist not only in Zimbabwe but also in various countries, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to address these barriers.

Conversely, studies carried out in Canada, the Netherlands and in some of the states of United States indicated the absence of cultural barriers among parents to the teaching of CSE to their children (Ram, Andajani, Mouhammadnezhad, 2020) but these parents expressed their unwillingness to teach CSE to their young children on account of a lack of competence; hence they wanted teachers to teach this subject to their children as they believed that teachers could be more competent in teaching this subject.

d) The relationship between comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and age

Age of readiness for children to learn about CSE was identified as another significant theme based on the data collected. The participants highlighted that the Zimbabwean culture perceives children in early grades as too young and not yet ready to receive CSE. This sentiment was echoed by PB, one of the interviewed parents, who expressed the following viewpoint:

> *In our culture sexuality education is regarded as education for adults. Whenever people want to talk about it, children are asked to go and play away from adults. Even in churches, when adults want to talk about anything that relates to sexuality, the junior Sunday school teachers are asked to take children out of the church and entertain them with other things.*

Another parent, PD was explicit about the position of Zimbabwean culture on age of children for teaching CSE by saying:

> *Early grade children are too young to be taught about CSE.*

PG uttered the same message by saying:

> *Traditionally CSE should not be taught to early grades. They are too young. Why rushing? Their time will arrive for them to be taught. In the meantime, let's just protect our children very well. It will be well with them.*

The issue about age of readiness to learn about CSE was not accounted for by parents only. Some of the teachers who were interviewed also elicited information that succinctly portrayed the Zimbabwean culture as prohibitive to the teaching of CSE to young children. TB, one of the teachers, shared similar views as the parents regarding the age of readiness for teaching CSE. Additionally, TB highlighted the potential repercussions and victimization that individuals may face if they go against this cultural belief in Zimbabwe. TB expressed the following statement:

> *Teachers are not allowed to discuss sexuality with children because they are too young to be taught about it. Even our culture does not allow. We cannot teach anything to children about sex. You could be victimized if you do so because the culture of people in this community denies it. They believe that children should be protected rather than being taught because teaching them spoils them.*

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TF further supported the notion:

Talking about sexuality education is taken as a taboo. Community leaders do not want their children to be exposed to sexuality education at a tender age.

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The belief that teaching CSE to early grade children is inappropriate due to their age is not limited to Zimbabwean culture alone. Similar beliefs are observed in other countries as well. For instance, in Uganda, CSE is not provided in pre-schools due to the belief that young children are not ready for such education. Teachers in Uganda also strive to maintain a positive image in the society they serve, which further hinders the teaching of CSE (Ozgun & Capri, 2021; Dehas & Hunter, 2020). This situation is also evident in Turkey (Kahraman, 2017). Hence, the prohibition of teaching CSE to early grade children extends to certain parts of Europe and Asia. Ojoye (2017) acknowledges that age is a common factor across cultures that limits children's access to CSE, and in many cultures, children are discouraged from asking questions related to sexuality.

e) Strategies that can be used to promote the teaching of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe

One of these strategies is to educate stakeholders about the importance of CSE. Participants emphasised the significance of starting with Early Childhood Development (ECD) stakeholders. This approach aims to engage and inform those involved in early childhood education about the benefits and necessity of teaching CSE to young children. By raising awareness and providing information about the positive impact of CSE, it is hoped that stakeholders will become advocates for its implementation. TB said:

All those who may resist teaching CSE to children must be taught this form of education to make them value it and become aware of the dangers of staying with a child who is uninformed about CSE.

TD also said:

There is need to educate everyone in Zimbabwe about the need for CSE in early grades.

PC provided the following information:

Chiefs are custodians of culture. They are the ones who enforce culture by punishing those who violate the culture of their land. These chiefs are the ones who should be taught about the significance of sexuality education to young children so that it should be taught.

PE advised as follows:

Everyone in Zimbabwe must be taught about CSE, its importance especially parents because they are the ones who do not want their children to be taught about it.

TI also replied as follows:

Community members should be taught about the importance of teaching CSE to children.

Creating awareness among stakeholders about the importance of CSE for early grade children is crucial in dispelling the cultural misconception that CSE promotes early engagement in sexual activities. Haberland and Rogow (2015) also highlight the parents' lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of CSE in empowering children with the skills to minimise the risks associated with a lack of sexual education.

If all involved parties are effectively educated about the significance of CSE, it has the potential to clear cultural misconceptions held by stakeholders. This, in turn, can lead to increased enthusiasm among teachers to teach CSE and create an environment where opposition to CSE is eliminated. Teachers may overcome the belief that teaching about CSE degrades them and undermines their professionalism, as mentioned by De Haas & Hunter (2020). SIDA (2016) emphasises the importance of training teachers to effectively deliver CSE, as it can enhance their teaching effectiveness

The participants emphasized the importance of the government legalising the teaching of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in early grades in Zimbabwe. TC specifically stated:

What I think can work best is for the government to craft laws that promote the teaching of CSE to early grade children and this should be made compulsory so as to achieve the desired end.

TE also indicated:

In Zimbabwe as a whole, the government should formulate a policy that calls upon teachers to teach CSE. If we have an act, then it will be mandatory to each and every community in Zimbabwe to teach CSE to young learners.

PG subsequently replied:

A policy must be put in place that requires all early grade teachers to teach CSE. No one can go against the government. Teachers will teach because teaching CSE to children in early grades will be part of their job description.

A study by Kadonsi (2018) in Zambia recommended the legalisation of CSE as a strategy to promote its teaching. This recommendation aimed to address potential opposition to providing this type of education to young children and facilitate its implementation. UNESCO (2021) also advises countries to enact clear policies that support the provision of CSE as a way of decriminalising this exercise.

However, it is important to acknowledge that despite many nations endorsing policies such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) of 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women of 1995, which promote the

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teaching of CSE (Chawhanda, Ogunlela, Mapuroma, Ojifinni, Bwambale, Levin & Ibisomi, 2021), these policies often clash with African cultural beliefs. Moreover, there are existing policies that undermine those in favour of CSE, making it necessary to not only implement supportive policies but also repeal restrictive ones. The implementation of policies that promote the teaching of CSE should again be closely monitored as advised by UNESCO (2021). This may help to create an enabling environment to the teaching of CSE to children in early grades in Zimbabwe. The concept of involving chiefs in educating community members about the significance of teaching CSE to early grade children is commendable. This approach is valuable not only because chiefs serve as custodians of culture but also because they are respected and trusted members of their societies. Additionally, they hold positions of authority within their communities. If these chiefs are convinced of the importance of providing CSE, they can potentially influence their subordinates to support the cause, thereby creating a more favourable environment for the implementation of CSE.

The provision of materials that are needed in the teaching of CSE is another strategy that could be applied in order to promote the teaching of CSE to early grade children in Zimbabwe. The materials mentioned encompass various resources such as the CSE syllabus, teacher's guides, children's books, and teaching manuals. This information was shared by the participants of the study. TF, one of the participants, expressed the following viewpoint:

> *The teachers' guides on CSE are not also there. These have to be brought to schools as well as books for children to read. If the syllabus is available teachers must then be taught how to implement it. If this is done to all schools in Zimbabwe, these schools will become very good environments for teaching CSE to early grade children*.

In line with TF, TH also mentioned the following:

> *Curriculum and manuals for CSE should also be made available in schools for teachers to use.*

All the excerpts from the participants availed above indicate the need to provide teachers with materials that are needed in the implementation of CSE in schools in order to promote the teaching of CSE. The significance of providing the aforementioned materials should not be underestimated. It is crucial to take them seriously, as indicated by SIDA (2016), as they play a vital role in promoting the delivery of CSE. SIDA (2015) further emphasises that without the availability of these materials, the successful implementation of CSE by teachers in schools becomes unattainable; hence the provision and accessibility of these materials are essential for the effective execution of CSE programs.

VII. Conclusions

This study has highlighted several cultural factors that hinder the teaching of CSE to early grade children in Zimbabwe, subsequently leaving them vulnerable to sexual abuse. The findings revealed that while teachers acknowledge the importance of CSE for young children, they feel uncomfortable with the task of teaching it.

Some teachers anticipate encountering resistance from parents if they teach children about CSE due to cultural restrictions. The use of explicit terminology related to human sexual organs is considered taboo, making it a sensitive subject for discussion. These erroneous cultural beliefs held by Zimbabweans regarding the teaching of CSE to young children hinder those who recognise the importance of such education from providing it. There is a misconception that teaching CSE to children at a young age will encourage them to engage in early sexual activity, which has been shown to be untrue. Research actually indicated that teaching CSE helps children delay their sexual debut.

Additionally, there is a belief among Zimbabweans that teaching children about CSE could offend ancestral spirits, potentially leading to punishment such as drought. They also hold the belief that teaching CSE at a young age will spoil the innocence of children. Consequently, there is a reluctance to teach CSE to children as they perceive it to be reserved for individuals about to enter marriage, based on their cultural beliefs.

VIII. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made regarding the teaching of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe. Policies should be developed that clearly approve and legitimise the teaching of CSE to early grade children. The policies ought to provide age-appropriate and comprehensive education on sexuality. Policies that hamper the teaching of CSE to young children should be repealed. The removal of these obstructive policies may create a more enabling environment for the implementation of CSE programmes. The awareness of the significance of teaching CSE to children in early grades should be raised among parents, teachers and community members. This awareness should include the positive outcomes of CSE, that is promoting healthy relationships, preventing sexual abuse and delaying the age of sexual debut. It is hoped that by implementing these recommendations it will be possible to provide a resistance-free and amenable environment for early grade CSE teaching in Zimbabwe. The awareness may be achieved through holding organised workshops. The community chiefs have to be actively involved in these workshops as they are seen as the custodians of culture

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and have significant influence in their communities. Their involvement can help in persuading community member to accept the teaching of CSE in early grades. There must furthermore be a rigorous effort to support individuals to challenge and reject cultural norms, values and taboos that deter the teaching of CSE to early grade children. Staff development training focused on teaching CSE to early grade children should be available to teachers. A CSE tailored curriculum in the early grades has to be developed and be made available in schools. This curriculum could equip teachers with the essential framework for effective CSE instruction. Moreover, materials for assisting teachers in teaching CSE such as teachers' guides and textbooks for early grade children have to be made available in schools. The implementation of these actions may enhance the capacity of the teachers and promote the successful implementation of CSE in early grades in Zimbabwe.

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