

Balancing Faith and Duty: Challenges in teaching inclusive sexuality education

**Author:**Jane Rossouw¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Jane Rossouw,
jane.p.rossouw@gmail.com

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Background: Life Orientation educators hold great responsibility for the well-being of their students, which can be supported through imparting sexuality education. However, the absence of formal training for this subject may have negative consequences in fulfilling professional duties.

Objectives: This article intends to foreground how Life Orientation educators impart sexuality education to their students, exploring aspects of their personal attitudes and comfort in imparting education related to sexuality and queerness.

Methods: This qualitative study consisted of five Life Orientation educators in the Gauteng Province to understand their approaches to impart sexuality education to their students and the influence of their personal upbringings. The research was thematically analysed through a systems theory framework.

Results: The results emphasise how personal religious beliefs impact sexuality education's delivery and educators' discretion in implementing the curriculum. The ambiguity of the curriculum and diverse teaching backgrounds also contribute to avoidance of topics like sexuality education and queer identities. Moreover, the non-examinable nature of these topics, combined with subjective interpretations of age-appropriateness, further marginalise them.

Conclusion: This article calls for awareness of the consequences of religious convictions and subjective perceptions of age-appropriateness of educators on the delivery of sexuality and queer education.

Contribution: This study contributes by highlighting challenges faced by Life Orientation educators in creating inclusive environments when personal religious beliefs conflict with comprehensive sexuality education. It enhances understanding of areas for improvement in training and subject knowledge to ensure educators affirm diverse identities and impart sexuality education effectively.

Keywords: religious values; professional responsibilities; age-appropriateness; queer identities; sexuality education.

Introduction

South Africa's constitution asserts that its citizens have the right to freedom of religion, belief, and opinion. The National Policy on Religion and Education recognises a valuable relationship between religion and education, emphasising its contribution to teaching and learning. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) aims to equip students with practical knowledge and skills applicable to their daily lives (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2019). The curriculum strives to promote social transformation and respect for human rights by inclusively representing the country's diverse population (DBE, 2011). However, despite these constitutional and policy frameworks promoting freedom and acceptance in education, there exists a notable tension and disparity between religious freedom and education practices (Russo, 2014). Christianity permeates laws, policies, and school environments, privileging adherents and shaping educational norms (Ferber, 2012). Sexuality education, often influenced by educators' strong religious beliefs, tends to prioritise heterosexuality (Aston, 2017), and promotes abstinence (Brewer et al., 2007). This emphasis on heterosexual narratives reinforces traditional notions of the nuclear family (McEwen, 2018; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019), limiting discourse on queer identities. Consequently, students may face challenges expressing their gender and sexual identities openly within educational settings guided by educators with entrenched religious values.

Note: Special Collection: Care and Support for Queering the Role of Educators in the Workplace.

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In 2000, the DBE integrated sexuality education into the Life Orientation (LO) subject in response to high rates of teenage pregnancy and HIV infections. Initially, the focus was on addressing sexual risks and promoting protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. In 2018, UNESCO updated the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, which emphasised the importance of incorporating social, cognitive, emotional, and physical health aspects of sexuality into education. The guidance also acknowledged the necessity of including queer identities in the curriculum, although it highlighted a lack of research on effectively integrating queer identities and understanding their sexual health needs (UNESCO, 2018).

In 2015, the DBE developed and piloted sexuality education Scripted Lesson Plans (SLPs) to aid educators and learners to address important sexual health topics in a structured manner and to empower them to address topics that they would otherwise be uncomfortable discussing. While these SLPs included content on queer identities, focusing primarily on definitions and addressing stigma and discrimination, they fell short in adequately addressing the specific sexual health needs of queer individuals compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. Educators, learners, parents, and religious organisations expressed varying opinions that either supported or opposed this piloted rollout. The key concerns expressed about the curriculum included it being a western import not suited for local cultural norms and values. It was regarded as immoral and a topic that should be reserved only for the private household environment (Family Policy Institute, 2019). Mcewen and Francis (2022) have highlighted the vulnerability of queer students in South African schools because of the persistence of conservative Christian groups advocating for safer schools that exclude knowledge about queer identities and the enactment thereof. This underscores the influence of Christian values and teachings in shaping attitudes and knowledge surrounding queer identities within South African educational settings. Despite ongoing reservations about the appropriateness of the educational environment for sexuality education, schools remain the primary source of information given that children and adolescents spend most of their time in these settings. As a result, there is heightened emphasis among educators to convey this content confidently and accurately to students.

Research on sexuality education in LO has revealed the nature on the content being driven by being disease-ridden (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019), abstinence (Mstuwana & De Lange, 2017), and the reinforcement of heteronormative narratives (Brown, 2022). Within discussions surrounding gender and sexuality, heteronormativity and cisnormativity are legitimised (Francis, 2018) through teaching and learning materials (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2018), curriculum policies, and the words and actions of educators (Reygan, 2016). Francis (2018) contends that an educator's discomfort and silence regarding non-heterosexual and non-cisgender

identities serves to uphold heteronormativity and invalidate non-conforming identities. Against this backdrop, this research aimed to investigate how five LO educators conveyed sexuality education to their students, exploring aspects of their personal attitudes and comfort in teaching the sexuality education, particularly regarding content on queer identities.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was implemented alongside a purposive sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five LO educators who taught the subject from grades 6–12. The participants were prompted to share their personal experiences of sexuality education during their own developing years and the impact of that on their sexuality education teaching style. The educators were selected from a Johannesburg-based primary school and its sibling secondary school, which included all LO educators from those schools. Johannesburg, in the province of Gauteng South Africa, is the hub for diverse populations with varying cultures, values, and religions, making it a favourable environment for sexual and gender diverse identities. In recent years, Gauteng has seen an increase in acceptance and visibility of diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations across various sectors, including educational settings. For this reason, investigating the teachings of diverse sexual and gender identities in Johannesburg schools was conducive to this research.

The data collected formed part of a larger research project. The participants were purposively sampled based only on being LO educators for the respective grades required for the research. All participants identified as heterosexual and cisgender. Table 1 details specific information about the participants.

The data was analysed through an ecological systems theory framework, which informed the study by considering the various systems and contexts that influence educators' delivery of sexuality education, such as their personal upbringing, religious beliefs, and the school environment. The six-step process of thematic analysis, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), was also used to analyse the data. Ethical approval for the overall study was provided by the Faculty of Education [Stellenbosch University] (Project ID: 28756). Each participant granted verbal informed consent, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality through the application of pseudonyms and the redaction of identifying details in transcripts.

TABLE 1: Participants' details.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	Grades taught	Years teaching	Religious affiliation
Priya	40	Female	Indian	6	5	Christianity
Samantha	41	Female	Caucasian	7	14	
Stacey	23	Female	Caucasian	8, 12	2	
Michael	40	Male	Caucasian	8, 9, 10	5	
Emily	35	Female	Caucasian	10, 11, 12	9	

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to Social, Behavioural and Education Research (SBER), Stellenbosch University and ethics consent was received on 23 November 2023. The ethics approval number is 28756.

Findings and discussion

The analysis of the interviews revealed two predominant themes: 'Religious contestations and professional responsibility' and 'Assessing age appropriateness'. These themes highlight the educators' individual religious beliefs and convictions and its relationship with their ability to fulfil their professional responsibilities. It further centres the consideration of age appropriateness in the delivery of sexuality education, including education on queer identities.

Religious contestations and professional responsibility

While significant strides have been made in the integration of sexuality education within South African schools, the pivotal role of teachers persists in ensuring its effective implementation. Shefer and Macleod (2015) underscore that educators' personal religious and cultural convictions influence their pedagogical approach to this subject matter, raising concerns about the extent to which educators can fulfil their professional obligations in offering comprehensive care and support to students, particularly in the domain of various topics within sexuality education.

The analysis of data indicated that educators' approaches to imparting sexuality education are significantly influenced by their religious beliefs. All participants were raised in Christian households, with Priya having an additional layer of Indian cultural practices. Priya recounted being instructed to regard sex as reserved for marriage and not a topic to be spoken about with children:

'For me, sex was not something we spoke about growing up. My family viewed this topic as taboo and avoided it for my own safety. The less you know, the safer you are.' (40 years old, female, teaching Grade 6)

Priya further expressed apprehension about potentially disturbing the sexual innocence of her grade 6 students, approximately age 12, by providing them with comprehensive information. Despite acknowledging that her students possessed greater sexual knowledge and exposure than she did at their age, Priya felt inadequately prepared and uneasy about engaging in detailed discussions. Samantha, Michael, and Emily shared similar sentiments as Priya. Hailing from deeply religious households, these participants lacked formal sexuality education because of its taboo nature within their households and school curriculums. Stacey, the youngest of the participants, and in the early stages of her teaching career, had greater exposure to sexuality education owing to evolving social norms:

'I had education from my family and school because the time I grew up in there was a lot of peer pressure about drugs and alcohol and sex. They taught me about my body and what will happen to me if I have sex; that it will have a negative effect on

me emotionally and I am not ready for it. I should wait until I'm married before I have sex. This is what I tell my students; that they are not emotionally ready for sex, they will get pregnant and infections.' (23 years old, female, teaching Grade 8 and 12)

Stacey's sexuality education revolved around biological aspects and advocated abstinence to safeguard innocence and emotional development. She shares these views with her students because of their perceived deficits in emotional maturity. The analysis revealed that the participants' upbringing, characterised by the taboo nature of sexuality education, predisposed them to either avoid the subject altogether, or to approach it solely from an abstinence-only perspective.

Influenced by conservative Christian values, which uphold heterosexuality and disapprove queer identities, the participants felt uncomfortable discussing diverse identities. Responses to interview questions on discussions about queerness in the classroom were met with hesitancy and were short-lived. This alone highlights the resistance and/or avoidance of queer identities in their teachings of sexuality education. Samantha remarked 'we don't talk about that' (41 year old, female, teaching Grade 6), while Stacey expressed that 'it is not good for the students to know about those things' (23 year old, female, teaching Grades 8 and 12).

Michael and Emily, although aware of queer identities in the school, either did not feel equipped enough to navigate this conversation or viewed other topics as more important, which would ultimately lead to an overall avoidance of it. Michael revealed that:

'I know that there are students in the school who are not straight. They've never come out directly, but I know that there are. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and all that are not part of the textbook, so I don't talk about it, and the students don't ask questions about it. I wouldn't know what to say if they did ask.' (40 years old, male, teaching Grades 8, 9 and 10)

On the other hand, Emily emphasised the safety of the students:

'I just think it is more appropriate to teach them about safety, especially because the grades I teach are older and the matrics [grade 12] will soon be going to university and exposed to a lot more danger and pressures so I tend to focus on that.' (35 years old, female, teaching Grades 10, 11 and 12)

Conservative Christianity reinforces traditional roles, emphasising the male/female binary, primarily within the context of reproduction. This perspective often serves to marginalise diverse gender identities. Given its emphasis on family values, Christianity strongly opposes non-conforming gender identities, sexual orientations, and relationships. Research by Peter (2018) suggests that educators' religious affiliations significantly influence their inclination towards practicing inclusive and diverse education. The participants indicated that their approach to sexuality education was guided by their personal religious beliefs and comfort levels with the

topic, which were shaped during their upbringing. Furthermore, the nature of responses from the participants revealed that discussions on queerness were absent from their teachings.

Embedded religious convictions influenced the educators' capacity to address non-conforming identities. To reconcile the tensions between their religious beliefs and the effective teaching of sexuality education, the participants proposed delegating this topic to an external professional. While educators bear the responsibility of caring for and supporting their students, relinquishing the responsibility to an external provider hinders their ability to fulfill this aspect of their role. In the event that a student is provoked by a discussion with the external provider, it would fall upon the on-site educator(s) to provide further support should the student have additional concerns or queries. Although providing students with comprehensive sexuality education inclusive of queer education is advantageous, deferring this responsibility may have broader implications for educators in meeting the supportive dimension of their professional obligations. Ultimately, the participants grapple with a conflict between their religious beliefs and their professional duties.

The narratives provided by the participants highlight religious convictions and personal discomfort as key factors in restricting sexuality education and evading discussions on queer identities. This avoidance consequently perpetuates non-affirming narratives surrounding queer identities and raises concerns about their safety within school environments. When educators are guided by their personal and religious convictions, they may be unable to effectively fulfill the caring and supportive element of their professional role.

Assessing age appropriateness

Like the contestations encountered concerning the intersection of their religious beliefs and professional duties, they further grappled with the concept of age appropriateness. Narratives by Priya alluded to considering age appropriateness when educating students about queer identities, coupled with her personal exposure.

'I don't know much about it. It wasn't something that I was taught when I was growing up, so I don't want to tell the students something wrong. I also think that in grade six they are too young to know about gay and lesbian and those things.' (40 years old, female, teaching Grade 6)

Stemming from their religious convictions, Priya and Samantha specifically did not believe it was an age-appropriate time to teach children about non-normative identities as they feared corrupting their innocence. Samantha believed that 'It is important to protect them. At this age they are still innocent, and I do not want to damage that' (41 years old, female, teaching Grade 6).

The religious perspectives on innocence, emotional development, and heteronormativity afford educators' significant discretion in determining the age-appropriateness of content for students.

Developmental theories propose suitable sexual health knowledge to share with children and adolescents based on the life stage they are in. Research has shown the value in initiating sexuality education as early as the age of 5 years old as it can foster body awareness and confidence as individuals progress through developmental phases (Bonjour & Van Der Vlugt, 2018). Furthermore, with the growing visibility of queer identities, it is imperative to recognise that children possess an awareness of diversity in identity and expression, even if they lack the vocabulary to articulate it. Nevertheless, anti-gender movements vehemently oppose queer education in schools, fearing that it may compromise children's innocence and lead them away from Christian values and the traditional concept of the nuclear family (Mcewen & Francis, 2022). The adherence to conservative religious values had hindered educators like Priya and Samantha from addressing queer identities in their teachings.

Regarding the evaluation of age-appropriateness, the educational backgrounds of LO educators play a significant role. Often, these educators originate from diverse teaching backgrounds (Koch & Wehmeyer, 2021), and are tasked with teaching LO to manage their workload and bridge gaps in the curriculum. Consequently, not all LO educators possess the fundamental subject knowledge requisite for LO. The absence of this foundational understanding prompts educators to approach the content using their personal inventory. For these participants, the structure for LO and age-appropriate sexuality education is largely undefined, except for what is outlined in the provided teaching materials. DePalma and Francis (2014) observed the lack of structure in how sexuality education is addressed within LO. The ambiguity surrounding the design of age-appropriate content, coupled with the unstructured nature of LO, allows educators to personally determine the scope of what should or should not be covered (Shefer et al., 2013). Furthermore, all participants disclosed that they had not received any formal training in sexuality education. This revelation suggests reliance on personal experiences in the absence of formal training and structured guidance.

To resolve their uncertainty with age-appropriateness, the educators again recommended the development of a distinct sexuality education programme tailored to each grade and facilitated by an external profession. This solution involves deferring the subject altogether. It could further have implications for educators' ability to fulfil their professional responsibilities of care and support effectively. When questioned about the appropriate grade for initiating sexuality education, Priya, Samantha, and Stacey collectively advocated for commencing such education from grade seven (approximately 13 years old), albeit without inclusion of queer education. Their reasoning stemmed from personal exposure to sexuality education at that age and the perceived necessity of imparting lessons on 'the importance of reputation and the element of respect associated with sex' (23 years old, female, teaching Grades 8 and 12). Notably, these justifications were not grounded in objective foundational subject knowledge.

Moreover, there is a tendency to allocate more instructional time to topics that are subject to examination, as noted by

DePalma and Francis (2014), with sexuality education not falling within this category. Each participant expressed, in their own manner, the non-examinable nature of sexuality education. Through the lens of prioritising examinable topics, educators are presented with the opportunity to avoid sexuality and queer education under the guise of prioritising students' academic progression and success.

These narratives highlight the nuances and complexities of providing sexuality education and education on queer identities, which are often explored separately in research on LO educators. In summary, various factors serve as avenues to evade discussions on sexuality education and subsequently queer identities. Driven by personal religious convictions, the deferral of sexuality education impedes educators' ability to fulfil their professional roles. The subjective view of age-appropriateness is utilised to further reinforce religious convictions. Moreover, the lack of foundational subject knowledge leads to the exercise of individual discretion and prioritisation of examinable topics, thereby providing additional leeway to avoid addressing the subject altogether.

Conclusion

South Africa's constitution and educational policies acknowledge the intersection of religion and education, granting educators the autonomy to decide how to approach sexuality education and discussions on queer identities. However, this discretion can sometimes lead to the avoidance of providing comprehensive and affirmative education. The study findings revealed a tension between religious beliefs, subjective perceptions of age-appropriateness, and the fulfilment of professional obligations among educators. Clear guidelines are needed to define age-appropriate sexuality education content to ensure educators fulfil their duties objectively. Furthermore, educators lacking foundational knowledge in LO may make biased decisions regarding the provision of sexuality education. The non-examinable nature of sexuality education may also lead to selective discussions and perpetuate hegemonic narratives of heteronormativity and cisnormativity rooted in universalised Christian values. These contestations between religious and professional values can hinder students' access to care and support, potentially exacerbating unsafe school environments for queer students. It is crucial to examine how educators' religious biases can be addressed to promote affirmative and protective narratives of queer identities while adhering to constitutional and NCS objectives of human rights, inclusion, and diversity. The discrepancy between policy and practice underscores the need for further interrogation and alignment to ensure equitable educational outcomes for all students.

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Author's contributions

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study is available from the author, J.R., on reasonable request.

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