Sexuality education in Uganda

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CHAPTER 6
Ambivalent Cultural Schemas:
Why Teachers Feel Uncomfortable
Teaching Comprehensive School-based Sexuality Education in Uganda

As discussed in Chapter 1, studies indicate that teachers’ cultural values and beliefs can conflict with teaching comprehensive sexuality education, but they do not explain why these conflicts lead to feelings of discomfort and how these conflicts can be overcome to increase teachers’ comfort to teach comprehensive sexuality education. Also, in the broader research field of teaching improvement initiatives, it has been observed that research tends to focus on ‘rational’ factors such as knowledge and skills, whereas the influence of teachers’ emotions on teaching is often ignored (Chen, 2016, 68).

This chapter aims to obtain a better understanding of the role of sociocultural aspects and emotions in teaching sexuality education by exploring teachers’ cultural values and beliefs and how these relate to their experienced level of comfort to teach comprehensive sexuality education. To do so, teachers’ cultural values and beliefs were studied and analysed using cultural schema theory, as explained in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The findings of this study are presented in a way that reflects the interaction between theory and data that has guided the analytic process, whereby the theory was used to interpret the findings further.

The first section describes the participants’ cultural schemas of young people’s sexual citizenship and sexuality education in ‘traditional’ Uganda and in ‘present’ Uganda. The second part identifies conflicts between these schemas of ‘traditional’ and ‘present’ Uganda and discusses the strategies teachers adopt to deal with these conflicts.
6.1 Cultural Schemas of Young People's Sexual Citizenship and Sexuality Education

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, schemas develop throughout life in interaction with the context in which people live, and individuals reconstruct their past experiences and knowledge based on their present constructions of the cultural meaning system (D'Andrade, 1992; Garro, 2000). When individuals consider the pace of cultural transitions in society to be overwhelming, they may separate the present from the past and "reconsider and restructure past elements from the point of view of the present" (Harkness et al., 1992, 172). This section describes how the participants also did this, by separating their cultural schemas of young people's sexual citizenship and sexuality education in 'traditional' and 'present' Uganda.

6.1.1 Cultural Schemas of Young People's Sexual Citizenship and Sexuality Education in 'Traditional' Uganda

Many of the teachers interviewed belong to the Buganda tribe. They described how their culture used to consider young people's sexual citizenship and how it taught sexuality education: traditionally or from their own experience. Other teachers interviewed who belonged to other tribes related similar stories from their tribe or 'African traditional society' as a whole.

The teachers explained how sex used to be regarded as something for adults, not for young people. One teacher clarifies:

If young people are found into sex and the rest, huh? They won't hesitate to say that these people have been found practising... things of the elders, huh? That's how we term them in Luganda [language spoken among the Buganda]. [...] And everyone will know what you're talking about. So, it's like... these things have been reserved for the adults. (Male teacher, age 30)

Society wanted young people to remain virgins until marriage, which was highly valued and provided dignity or respect. Sex was a seen as a biological urge; therefore, it was important that young people's sexual urges were controlled until marriage. One of the ways to do this was by silencing issues of sexuality, so that unmarried people would not hear about them:

You know, in our culture, [...] sex is supposed to be kept... a secret, such that these young people are not supposed to know anything about it. [...] Traditionally, things related to sex were not supposed to be... to be exposed to the young people until they have reached the age of marriage. [...] And even as they were teaching them, they would... they weren't so straightforward. They would either do it [...] in taboos, in proverbs... and the children would discover the meanings of those taboos when they have grown up. [...] As they're... entering into marriage, then they would be taught: what was the meaning of this? (Female teacher, age 32)
Society considered sex before marriage a taboo or a sin, and it was considered immoral to discuss it in public, especially as adults to young people. Because it could undermine their respect, parents were not supposed to discuss sex with their children either.

Silencing issues of sex is a directive function of teachers' cultural schemas of sexuality education in ‘traditional’ Uganda (see Chapter 3). The teachers mentioned more directive functions. For instance, the teachers related how, as youngsters, elders could impose restrictions on them without explanation. At the time, they did not understand what it was for; only later did they learn that these restrictions were supposed to protect them from engaging in sex before marriage:

So you find that... [...] they were trying to protect them from engaging in sexual practices before marriage. [...] Hm. So you find that they would just put their restrictions, don't do this, don't do this, but they were not telling them for what reason. [...] They were not telling them, why. [...] Yeah, that is how it was done in African tradition. (Female teacher, age 32)

Elders could also scare young people to make them delay sexual intercourse. For instance, one teacher explained how elders would ensure that boys and girls did not interact by telling them that:

You see, in between the legs of a woman, there is fire. So the boys feared! [...] And they would tell the girls that in between the legs of a boy, there is a snake. And you know, the girls fear snakes and caterpillars. (Female teacher, age 32)

The teachers said that young people would only be provided with sexuality education at the time of marriage. According to the abovementioned female teacher, this would be around the age of 15, when young people had physically matured and were expected to put the information they had learned into practice.

Specific older members of the community were appointed to teach sexuality education, which illustrates the constructive function of teachers' cultural schemas of sexuality education. It was up to the ssenga, or paternal aunt, to teach sexuality education to the nieces, and the koija, or maternal uncle, to teach the nephews. Although the role of the ssenga was mentioned by almost every participant, only a few mentioned the role of the koija. In instances where the ssenga or koija were not present, grandparents or elder siblings could take on this responsibility.

Until the moment young people were to receive information about sexual issues, they could be prepared for married life without being informed about the aim of these preparations, as the following quote explains:

In my culture [Luo tribe], if you are a girl child, [...] they don't talk about it [sexuality] to you, when you are still a child. [...] So as we grow, they teach us how to prepare this [traditional dishes], they are preparing us eh? ...for that time. But they do not tell you that [...] at some point, you'll get married. [...] When you get your first period, that's when eh the sex education starts with an aunt, she tells you this is how you look after yourself, [...] you
now have become a woman, don't try to mess up with men [...] Yes, they say, we want you to be the pride of our community, the pride of family, so don't see any man until, you know? Yes, that's how they prepare us. (Female teacher, age 39)

In addition to these ‘silent’ preparations, a male participant explained that sex education could consist of implicit messages, such as proverbs or riddles. According to him, this was a ‘test of maturity’ — i.e. only those who could understand the messages were considered mature enough to be given the information:

Like here in Africa, in Uganda, sorry, Buganda, they even got decent names to represent private parts, huh? Somebody talks about this and... [chuckles] Unless you expose, you can't know. And this was a test of maturity, those that can understand go along with the sex educator. Those that can't... [are] not yet perhaps fitted for that topic. (Male teacher, age 30)

The participants recalled that the traditional sexuality education was mainly focused on girls; boys, on the other hand, were expected to know, and society felt that they did not need this guidance:

Hm... They feel [...] a man or a boy, you can find your way... in the world, you don't need advice. And the sexual, the, the, maybe the gender, it's a gender bias. It's a gender bias and a cultural aspect where the girl... when the girl gets to puberty, they believe that she should be prepared for... for marriage. [...] So that is why the attention is on the girl rather than on the men or the boy. [...] To prepare her for... marriage, to make sure that she will be able to please... a man in the right way. (Male teacher, age 32)

Some participants felt that sexuality education was more of a preparation for marriage than sexuality education in itself. Girls could live with their ssenga for a few months and be taught the roles and duties they were expected to fulfil within marriage, how to prepare dishes, and to be humble and submissive to their husbands:

They usually take you to your maternal auntie and she tells you... you get married... this is what you are supposed to do in your, you know, when you are with a husband... there is that body change you are supposed to do... They call it the extension of the labia, yeah, we got that, but this is as far as it went for sex education, it was more of marriage education than sex education, yeah. (Female teacher, age 29)

The act of elongating the labia minora through manual manipulation, or ‘visiting the bush’, is a Buganda tradition (Tamale, 2006). Some female participants described this act as empowering, because it is an erotic feature of the female body and is said to increase women’s satisfaction. However, others indicated that they had been forced to do this, under the threat that no husband would want to marry them if they had not ‘pulled’, and that pulling was actually supposed to increase the man’s sexual satisfaction.
6.1.2 Cultural Schemas of Young People’s Sexual Citizenship and Sexuality Education in ‘Present’ Uganda

The teachers indicated that society had changed, which had consequences for how young people’s sexual citizenship was viewed. They said that, for instance, the increased age of marriage has introduced, and prolonged, an adolescent period in which young people have physically matured but are not supposed to be sexually active yet.

Many of the teachers felt that, due to this prolonged period, it is difficult for young people to abstain until marriage because they have sexual urges that are difficult to control for such a long period of time. Therefore, some of the teachers hoped that if students are not able to abstain until marriage, they will at least be able to abstain until they have finished secondary school or until they are 18, which is the age of majority.

The teachers felt that traditional sexuality education messages are no longer adequate because nowadays young people are already sexually active before marriage. Furthermore, they felt that young people already receive information from the media and peers, due to societal changes, which makes it no longer workable for elders to keep silent or to only provide threats and restrictions:

It is only when you…when I have grown up now that we can sit and talk with her [mother] about relationships. But when you are still in school at a tender age, she fears to talk about such. Because what… what African parents think that… when you talk about sex, so you are introducing your kid into… sex. So what… what they tend to do is to keep it as a secret, not knowing that these days everything has changed. You get information from the newspapers, from the radios, from televisions, internet and schools. Previously they could always confine you at home so […] it would always be easy… to keep it as a secret until the right time. But these days, kids tend […] to know about sex as early as Pt [first class of primary school]. […] culture has created a gap between the… the young and the old. Simply because the old fear to talk about sex. They always want to keep it as a secret yet it can never be a secret in today’s society. (Male teacher, age 26)

The teachers felt that not only the media, but also young people’s peers, encourage sexual activity by spreading incorrect messages about sex and emphasising the positive sides of sex.

Whereas, traditionally, abstinence until marriage used to be seen as important because of the cultural values attached to virginity and the risks of pregnancies, teachers indicated that being sexually active in present times has additional risks, with the risks of becoming infected with HIV and being expelled from school because of a pregnancy the most significant. The teachers felt that respectable elders should step in to provide young people with correct information and to balance positive messages circulating in society by emphasising the risks of sex. In addition, a majority of the teachers regarded teaching sexuality education as an opportunity to teach the students good morals and values that can help them abstain and resist ‘temptations’ in society. This was provided that the sexuality education emphasises abstinence-only and teaches methods to control sexual urges.

The ABC campaign — i.e. Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom — has often been advocated in the context of HIV prevention in Uganda (Parkhurst, 2011). In line with this
campaign, a third of the teachers said that they advise students to practise abstinence-only, and another third said that they advise students to abstain but to use a condom ‘as a last resort’ if they are unable to abstain. By saying ‘being unable to abstain’, the teachers referred to sexual urges that can make it difficult for students to abstain. Another third of the teachers wanted to teach both abstinence and contraception. Whenever the teachers advised students to use a condom, they often mentioned this without detailed explanations or condom demonstrations. Furthermore, the teachers tended to emphasise the disadvantages of contraceptive methods, to discourage students from using them.

Despite the perceived need for young people to receive sexuality education, and the messages the teachers interviewed gave their students, the teachers indicated that young people no longer automatically receive this education. They explained that the cultural traditions of ssengas and koijas teaching sexuality education are fading due to societal changes, such as urbanisation, education, nuclear families and working parents. Although some teachers felt that it is the parents’ responsibility to teach sexuality education to their children, a majority of the teachers interviewed thought that teachers should be teaching sexuality education at school as well, especially in cases where parents are not taking on this responsibility. They argued that students should not be denied sexuality education because, when ‘left in the dark’, students may be confronted with the risks of unprotected sexual intercourse:

Yes! The whole system has to change. So I do hope that people will drop the mentality of thinking that sex education... spoils young people. It’s not true. It is a lie. It is because they [lack] sex education, that’s why many of them are messing up, that’s why many of them want to find out [...] the information for themselves. And at the end of the day, some of them end up in wrong sources of information, which would have been... prevented.
(Female teacher, age 37)

The representational function of teachers’ cultural schemas of sexuality education and young people’s sexual citizenship has changed, as shown by the difference between their cultural schemas of ‘traditional’ and ‘present’ Uganda. Their ‘traditional’ representative function of teachers’ cultural schemas links with their constructive and directive functions, such as the provision of sexuality education by ssengas and koijas (constructive function) and keeping silent or providing threats and restrictions (directive function). However, in the ‘present’ representative function of their cultural schemas, teachers are required to develop links to new constructive and directive functions, such as who is to teach sexuality education and what kind of messages are to be provided.
6.2 Conflicting Schemas between ‘Traditional’ and ‘Present’ Uganda

The previous section showed the importance teachers attached to sexuality education. However, many of the teachers felt uncomfortable teaching sexuality education because of the conflicts they experienced between their related cultural schemas of ‘traditional’ and ‘present’ Uganda. This section identifies these conflicts, as presented in Table 11. Then, to further interpret the data, it discusses strategies teachers adopt to deal with them.

Strauss (1997) describes several mechanisms for internalising conflicting schemas, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Of these mechanisms, the following three strategies were found to apply to the teachers’ internal conflicts: compromise, integration, and ambivalence. As Table 11 shows, teachers have been able to find a compromise between conflicting schemas: rather than expecting young people to abstain until marriage, which teachers acknowledged is very difficult due to the increased age of marriage, they suggested students abstain until they have finished their education or have reached the age of majority. In some other conflict situations, teachers have been able to integrate the conflicting schemas into the following new cultural schemas:

1. Elders can no longer be silent regarding sexuality issues because young people already receive information about sexuality from other sources;
2. To encourage young people to abstain, the health risks of sexual intercourse should be emphasised, especially HIV and AIDS; and
3. Teaching sexuality education can be moral, rather than immoral, behaviour when teachers feel that this education leads students to delay sexual intercourse or to have protected, rather than unprotected, sexual intercourse.

In the other conflict situations, the teachers have not been able to integrate the conflicting schemas into new schemas or to find workable compromises. In these cases, the teachers remained with ambivalent cultural schemas, which caused them to feel uncomfortable about teaching sexuality education.
Table 11. Compromise, integration and ambivalence: teachers’ strategies for internalising conflicting cultural schemas of teaching sexuality education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Traditional' Uganda</th>
<th>Present Uganda</th>
<th>Conflicting schemas: ambivalence, compromise or integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex is a biological urge, which needs to be controlled up to marriage.</td>
<td>It is difficult to control sexual urges until marriage (too long).</td>
<td>Compromise: Sex needs to be controlled until students have finished their education or have reached the age of majority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In public: Sex is taboo, silenced; immoral to discuss. Elders should put restrictions on young people. Boys and girls should not interact; Sex is silenced; Fear-based messages.</td>
<td>In public: Sex is no longer silenced: discussed at school, among peers, in media ('permissive' society). Boys and girls interact at school.</td>
<td>Integration: Elders need to change their approach; they can no longer be silent about sexuality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginity gives respect.</td>
<td>Virginity is no longer always a reason to abstain. HIV and AIDS has become a new health risk of unprotected sexual intercourse.</td>
<td>Integration: Increasing emphasis on health risks in abstinence messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality education is preparation for marriage: At time of marriage, when needed to put into practice. Emphasis on girls. Sexuality education encourages sexual activity: Providing information is sign of maturity; approval (elders instruct young people, so they can only teach morality). Implicit messages are test of 'maturity'. Young people are young and innocent; sexuality education arouses curiosity.</td>
<td>Sexuality education as guidance: Young people need moral and correct information to balance information from other sources. Elders cannot stay silent.</td>
<td>Integration: Teacher is a moral guider and guides young people from immoral behaviour to moral behaviour.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.1 Ambivalence (1): Sexuality Education both Encourages and Prevents (Unprotected) Sexual Activity

Some teachers feared that teaching sexuality education will ‘spoil’ students’ ‘innocent’ minds because the information may arouse their curiosity about sex and, subsequently, lead students to become sexually active:

One thing is, we fear, for example, if you demonstrated how... eh, a condom is used in a secondary setting, we fear that maybe a student... they go and practise [laughs] But eh, well, of course, that is... what we think. [...] So we prefer that you'd rather keep... a student in the dark, when they don't know particular things than [chuckles a bit] exposing them and then they go ahead and practise with the... Yeah... That's what we think. (Female teacher, age 37)

The teachers feared that students might interpret comprehensive sexuality education messages as approval from their teacher to become sexually active: “If I told to them, eh, they would say, after all, [...] the tools [condoms] are there, and we have been shown how to use them, then we should go ahead” (Male teacher, age 29).

One male teacher described how a condom demonstration held by his ssenga when he was 12 years old developed curiosity in him to become sexually active. Although she told him and his older brothers to abstain, she also showed them how to use a condom in case “the worse came to the worst”:

You know in life, we look at options provided. Eh, and I want to admittedly say that we concentrated much... on the options that say that if the worst gets the worst, right? You look at the options provided and you choose appropriately. You say: Okay, auntie said, we’re not yet of age. But if the worst gets the worst is our situation. Right. The worst is supposed
to be worst! Otherwise she wouldn’t have turned to us. Why, why would she... give us the alternative as well? So, we concentrated more on this... alternative because it worked in our favour. Yeah. And... and... [chuckles] that’s it. I mean.. [...] the alternative was less costly to us. Two, it was within the range of what auntie was saying, talking. (Male teacher, age 30)

Although this teacher admitted that he preferred to interpret his ssenga’s message as approval to become sexually active rather than an instruction to abstain, he felt that by providing him with this information, his ssenga indirectly suggested that it is too difficult to resist sexual urges and that she felt that he was mature enough to practise this information. He felt that her talk developed curiosity in him towards sex, which would not have happened if she had not talked to him. At the time, he felt that the content of her talk was not suitable for his age; therefore, he looked at her as an immoral person.

6.2.2 Ambivalence (2): Teachers Need to Teach Sexuality Education, but it is Immoral to Teach it

In the same way this teacher saw his ssenga as an immoral person, teachers were afraid that society would consider them immoral persons for encouraging young people to become sexually active. They feared that their teaching of sexuality education, especially demonstration of condoms or other contraception, may be interpreted as an approval for students to become sexually active. This fear may be prompted by their teaching style, which is embedded in a culture in which elders instruct young people how to behave and to follow instructions from elders: “Telling them they can put on a condom, they would take it as... Bible truth” (Female teacher, age 40). This culture of instructing young people what to do may be contributing to teachers’ perceptions that they should only tell students what is considered moral behaviour and to leave out behaviours considered immoral:

We just tell them: don’t have sex [...] or use a condom. But so much it is that when you teach a kid how to use a condom, then the kid will go and, and use it! [...] So... that idea of sharing... information, it’s more of ordering, I think, it’s from the side of the teachers, because we are used here more to give in commands rather than discussing and sharing experiences, it makes it difficult for the student to take that information as information that is going to help them. And the teacher fears if I teach this kid this, than they are likely to do it. (Male teacher, age 32)

Therefore, teachers did not acknowledge students’ sexual citizenship by providing them with alternatives to abstinence, because they feared that students and society might interpret those messages as approval or encouragement to become sexually active. Rather, teachers wait for students to become sexually active or to receive the information from other sources first, and then they provide them with correct information to refine their knowledge and behaviour. In that way, teachers reasoned, they will not have encouraged students to behave immorally, but they will have guided them towards moral behaviour.
Ambivalent Cultural Schemas

6.2.3 Ambivalence (3): Sexual Innocence versus Sexually Active Young People

Some of the teachers recognised the importance of sexuality education for their sexually active students who need sexuality education to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health. Others did not perceive their students as sexual beings but as young and innocent. They felt that their students know little about sex, that they are not yet sexually active, and that they are not ready or mature enough yet to receive sexuality education: “But they are still very young. I do feel they, they, they should miss out certain topics, certain things, until when they are above a given age, when they are ready to consume it...” (Female teacher, age 35). Often, teachers found it complicated to teach sexuality education to a group of students, because they felt that some of the students were sexually active whereas others were ‘sexually innocent’, which they felt required heterogeneous messages.

6.3 Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to obtain a better understanding of the role of sociocultural aspects and emotions in teaching sexuality education by exploring teachers’ cultural values and beliefs and how these relate to their experienced level of comfort to teach comprehensive sexuality education.

Teachers’ cultural values and beliefs regarding sexuality education and young people’s sexual citizenship showed a separation between the situation in ‘present’ Uganda and in ‘traditional’ Uganda, which can happen when individuals consider the pace of cultural transitions in society to be overwhelming (Harkness et al., 1992). The teachers explained that in the ‘traditional’ setting, ssengas and kojjas would teach young people sexuality education and that sexuality was silenced until the time of marriage. However, they indicated that culture has changed — i.e. traditions have faded — and that young people have other needs than before. This requires new constructive and directive functions, such as who is to teach sexuality education and what kind of messages are to be provided.

The teachers have adopted strategies to deal with conflicting schemas between ‘traditional’ and ‘present’ Uganda, leading to: (1) a compromised schema that students need to control sex until they have finished education or have reached the age of majority; and (2) integrated schemas that abstinence messages should increasingly emphasise health risks and that teachers are moral guiders who should guide young people to moral behaviour. These new schemas show a reasoning that supports abstinence-only education based on fear and sex-discouraging messages.

The use of cultural schema theory has shown that in cases where teachers were not able to integrate or compromise conflicting schemas, they were left with ambivalence which evoked negative emotions — i.e. feeling uncomfortable teaching sexuality education. This evocative function is one of the four functions of cultural schemas (D’Andrade, 1984). The findings suggest that this ambivalence occurs because the teachers realise that the current abstinence-only education, or lack of sexuality education in general, does not cater to the needs of those students who are sexually active. To construct and negotiate their sexuality, sexually active students, but also young people in general, require comprehensive sexuality
education which embraces a positive approach to their sexuality, including information about contraception (Bhana, 2007a; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Robinson, 2012). The findings show that teachers can feel uncomfortable providing this kind of information because they feel it is immoral to discuss sexuality with young people. They fear it may encourage young people to become sexually active and lead teachers to lose the respect they have in society. Although various teachers indicated that moral teaching means teaching abstinence-only, teachers also believed that teaching accurate information is part of their professional identity as a teacher and could, therefore, be considered moral teaching. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.