Sexuality education in Uganda

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CHAPTER 7
Teachers' Professional Identity and Students' Sexual Citizenship in the Context of School-based Sexuality Education in Uganda

As discussed in Chapter 1, school-based sexuality education has the potential to reach large numbers of students, but it is also a place where teachers live up to their professional identity by executing their roles as a teacher. This chapter aims to obtain a better understanding of the meaning of school-based sexuality education in Uganda by studying teachers' professional identity and how this motivates them to teach school-based sexuality education. The theory and methodology for this chapter are described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.
7.1 Interacting Cultural Schemas

This section describes the participants’ cultural schemas of the school setting, including school regulations and the school image, and of students and their sexual citizenship. These cultural schemas were found to interact with teachers’ cultural schemas of professional identity. Teachers’ cultural schemas of professional identity in relation to teaching sexuality education are described in the second section of this chapter.

7.1.1 The School Setting: Regulations and the School’s Image

In discussions about the content of their sexuality education messages, teachers regularly mentioned the need to adhere to school regulations and to protect the school image. With regard to the school regulations, teachers explained that government policies instruct the promotion of abstinence and prohibit the promotion of condoms, including condom demonstrations, within schools. They indicated that school regulations and the school syllabus are embedded within these policies and within sociocultural beliefs about young people’s sexuality, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. According to the teachers, school regulations are often strict when it comes to students’ conduct, which is expected to be morally upright. This means, for instance, that they need to dress decently. It also means that students are not allowed to have romantic or sexual relationships, carry condoms, or stay in school while pregnant. At the start of the term, boarding schools may examine girls for pregnancy and check students’ properties for illegal items, including condoms and other contraception.

Morality makes the school a restrictive environment in which students are punished for bad behaviours, conduct or performance. Such punishments may include counselling, caning or being suspended or expelled. The punishment may depend on the severity of the offence and the type of school, such as a school’s religious foundation:

The first schools in Uganda were either started by the Catholic Church or the Anglican Church. [...] So these guys had that strict moral code, the idea of purity, the idea of having the sexual purity and nothing going wrong. [...] It has spread out to even the schools that have come later [...] in school you don’t talk about sex openly. (Male, age 32)

Teachers stated that they experienced various power relations within the institutional context of the school that could restrict them from teaching comprehensive sexuality education. Important stakeholders in this regard could be colleagues, students, parents, the school administration and the owner or founder of the school. Although teachers said that they were allowed to discuss contraception with students, they also indicated that most schools prohibit teachers from demonstrating condoms in school because of the school’s religious affiliation or because it may harm the school’s image: “If the school has discipline, then it is a marketing principle. If he doesn’t have discipline, then you are condemned!” (Male, age 27).

Due to high level of competition between secondary schools, the teachers interviewed felt that they needed to protect the image of the school, which was largely dependent on their students’ behaviour. They explained that parents expect schools to have strict regulations
that teach their children good values and that create a protective environment free from relationships and sexual practices. Teachers feared that parents might take their children to other schools or start to complain once it became known that a school is not morally upright. As a result, keeping up a good school image discouraged the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education because this was perceived to encourage 'immoral' behaviour. In addition, keeping up a good school image also encouraged the punishment of 'immoral' behaviour:

If students are caught in school, having sex, they are expelled. They [...] are looked at as the worst, the worst form of example you can give. [...] A school which is supposed to be the arcades of morality. [...] We are not honest... to ourselves and to the children. [...] If a school or a high school is branded 'bufumbo college' [a college of marriage], then that is a bad name for it. [...] Morally... a parent can't take a, their child to such school, because they know now... this school is spoiled. Immoral. (Male, age 32)

### 7.1.2 Students and Their Sexual Citizenship

Most of the teachers perceived their students as children, who are still young and whose brains have not yet matured. They felt that a majority of students act out of excitement instead of acting responsibly. They said that students cannot make objective decisions because they do not set goals in life and cannot foresee risks.

The teachers said that they adjusted the content and detail of their sexuality education messages to the perceived maturity of their students: "But of course, depending on the age, there is a way you present it. [...] Not mentioning it directly, you know? Because someone is... they are still young, you know?" (Female, age 37). Teachers determined students’ maturity by their perceived age, bodily and mental maturation, academic level and sexual activity:

From Senior 1 to Senior 4, I feel they are still children [...] they can't make objective judgments over issues to deal with sex, with relationships, [...] they are not mature yet in their brains [...] By 18, at least, [...] they have moved from the stage of being young person, and body... has now matured. (Female, age 39)

For instance, many teachers said that they feel more comfortable discussing condom use with A-level students, who are about to reach the age of majority, than with younger O-level students, who are in Senior 1 to Senior 4. In general, the teachers felt that O-level students are too young to be taught about contraception and that they should be advised to abstain.

Teachers assumed that students reach maturity at the age of 18 and when they have finished secondary school. At that age, teachers thought that most of their students would be sexually active because sex is considered to be for adults. Until that time, many teachers considered most of their students to be sexually innocent. They believed that most of their students have never had sex and that sexuality is a silenced topic in students’ lives. Most teachers did acknowledge that some of their students are sexually active, but, as the following quote illustrates, they preferred to assume that their students know nothing about sex:
Sometimes we live in denial, for example, we assume, we can assume that erm... a student is in Senior 1 and they know nothing about sex, we believe that these students are innocent, that’s the premise we use most of us who look at it. So, we don’t really go for it and talk to them in a... a more, in a serious way. We just... we just make hints. Yet it is serious [...] many of them are sexually active. But when they come here, we look at them, we take an assumption that they are angels, yet they need that information to, to... to back them up, because the world, when they leave school, there are so many forces that are after them. But at school we tend to think that they are, they are... innocent. (Male, age 32)

Some teachers felt that students should not be taught sexuality education because it might encourage them to become sexually active. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Teachers indicated various risks that students can face when becoming sexually active. First, teachers felt that students in secondary school are not ready to be sexually active because they are vulnerable and easily deceived by older sex partners. Furthermore, teachers feared health risks for students, including HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancies, and abortions in cases of unwanted pregnancy. They worried that pregnancies can stigmatise girls and make them drop out of school, and that boys can be imprisoned for defilement. In addition, many teachers argued that sexual relations can make students lose focus on their academic studies.

Another concern expressed by some teachers was societal disapproval of promiscuity. They feared that the earlier the onset of sexual intercourse, the more sexual partners students will have before marriage. This concern was linked to teachers’ perceived risks of premarital pregnancies and their expectation that male partners will lose interest in a girl after having sex. In this respect, financial security and social norms appeared to be important, as explained in the following quote:

Ey, when you’re ready to settle down with maybe a husband or wife... that means eh... you can take in anything, you, you, you are pregnant, there is a man responsible for the what, the pregnancy. You have given birth, then somebody should take care of the what, of the baby and the mother. But, it doesn’t... give a good impression, when you have... when you have... a girl at home, the mother is breastfeeding, the girl is also breastfeeding, you don’t know the father... of the what, of the kid... (Male, age 37)

Many teachers felt that contraception has negative side effects, is unreliable, is used inconsistently, promotes promiscuity, compromises the abstinence message, and its access is restricted to students. Due to these perceived disadvantages, many teachers advised their students to abstain because “there is nothing they lose from abstaining” (Female, age 40).

Although most teachers preferred their students to abstain, some teachers felt that sexual urges hamper young people’s ability to abstain until marriage:
About abstinence until marriage. [...] it’s very rare to find someone who has managed to abstain from that eh puberty stage up to marriage, it’s very, very hard. [...] because now as you grow up, the emotions that are there, [...] it has to come... whether you like it or not, you have to feel it, hm, so I really feel it’s hard, though, though I mean though most parents they do encourage it. Yeah. It’s very hard. (Male, age 24)

At most, teachers wanted to teach students good values that could help them resist peer pressure and ‘temptations’ in society. However, there were other teachers who blamed these teachers for being overprotective and for pretending. They said that students are already sexually active and that they need information about sexual and reproductive health and rights to make informed decisions. Also, some teachers felt that it could be good for students to have romantic relationships because it helps them to socialise with the opposite sex and to prepare for future relationships. When teaching a heterogeneous group of students in terms of their level of maturity and sexual activity, some teachers indicated that they found it difficult to decide on the content of their sexuality education messages.

7.2 Cultural Schemas of Professional Identity

The following cultural schemas were found to give meaning to teachers’ professional identity in relation to teaching sexuality education:

- Teacher as an ‘executor of ethics and regulations’ (1);
- Teacher as an ‘authority figure’ (2);
- Teacher as a ‘counsellor and guide’ (3);
- Teacher as a ‘role model’ (4); and
- Teacher as a ‘guardian’ (5).

7.2.1 Teacher as an 'Executor of Ethics and Regulations'

The teachers interviewed felt that students need a good upbringing at home and at school. They argued that many parents are too busy or shy to teach sexuality education to their children and that traditional avenues of teaching sexuality education are fading, which has increased the need for teachers to teach sexuality education: “So you find that when they come at school, that is the only place where, if you can help them, at least give them the knowledge. [...] The need is there, they love it [...] they can really appreciate it” (Female, age 26).

Some of the participants had been appointed to teach sexuality education by their school administration, whereas others had initiated this themselves. Although they all felt that it is important for students to receive sexuality education, not everyone felt that it is a teacher’s duty to teach it: “Teachers’ duty is to teach in class... and walk out. Most of the teachers know their jobs are to teach” (Female, age 40). Rather, they felt that their only responsibility is to teach according to what is in the syllabus for their subject: “I teach it because it is part of the [Christian Religious Education] syllabus. Otherwise, [...] I would not teach it” (Female, age 35).

The interviews indicated that the teachers obey school administrators and adhere quite
closely to the syllabus and school regulations. As teachers, they felt that they are obliged to teach what is morally upright, keep up the school image, execute the school regulations and teach according to what is in the syllabus, whether they personally agree with these regulations and contents or not. They said that this is part of their professional ‘code of conduct’ — i.e. their ethics as a teacher. Some of these ethics were written policies; others were unwritten cultural rules.

Some teachers wanted to be more open about sexuality in their sexuality education, but at present they felt vulnerable and not supported to do this. First, they said that they lacked the knowledge and skills to teach sexuality education. Second, teachers indicated that their ethics did not allow them to use obscene language, including words related to sexuality. They feared that students would regard them as obscene persons for using such language:

Yes, there are times when they ask you something, when [...] you are ignorant about it, other times, you may be knowing... but you feel explaining it to them as a teacher, [...] it’s like [...] you have gone against your professional code of conduct, other times you don’t know the... the language, how to phrase it, such that it does not appear too obscene. (Female, age 35)

Third, teachers feared the risk of losing their job because teaching comprehensive sexuality education is against government and school policies.

Due to this vulnerability, teachers preferred to stick to the contents of the syllabus. However, several teachers felt that the school syllabus does not provide the comprehensive sexuality education their students need: the information is limited and primarily provided in the subjects Divinity and Biology, which is only taken by some of the students (see Chapter 1).

Other options for teachers to teach sexuality education are in after-school clubs, which can, however, also only be attended by some of the students. In these after-school clubs, some teachers felt more open to discuss sexuality freely:

You may say it at the risk of your job. [...] So we hide in the... [...] safety of the curriculum or the club [...] So you need some insulator, something to insulate you from... the culture and the religious and [...] ... the other pressures that try to inhibit people doing such sexuality education. (Male, age 32)

Although teachers wanted to follow their ethics as a teacher, they found some ethics conflicting — for instance, conflicts between providing students with complete and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and teaching according to the contents of the syllabus and school regulations.
7.2.2 Teacher as an 'Authority Figure'

The teachers felt that their job gives them respect, status and authority within the school: “In schools, teachers are superior because they are the ones in authority, and the students have to respect authority. […] The academic bit of it… lowers them [students] […] and understand that this one must be […] better than us” (Female, age 35). To maintain this authority over students, the teachers interviewed indicated the importance of having a clear boundary between ‘us’ (teachers) and ‘them’ (students):

So many of them [teachers]... have maintained that culture of erm... keeping that distance... from the student. But I think it’s also a deception really to, to begin thinking that you can keep these children young... and you know, innocent, and they should not speak anything! [...] They want to maintain that [...] hierarchy of respect. [...] Teachers are looked at as disciplinarians, they are very tough, they are very strict. [...] So one is just to command without any question, without any challenge. So you find that eh, there is no relationship established. (Female, age 37)

This hierarchy between teachers and students appeared not only to be shaped by differences in age, knowledge, economic independence and experience but also by sexuality and morality. Maintaining the hierarchy between teacher and student was important to many of the teachers interviewed: they wanted to be respected in society, but also they wanted students to have respectable elders in their lives who guide them and show them how to behave morally. In this respect, teachers’ understandings of their professional identity were interlinked with how they constructed their students. For instance, when students are constructed as (sexually) innocent, a teacher can be the knowledgeable and experienced elder to give guidance.

Fear of losing students’ respect and their authority could motivate teachers not to discuss sexuality issues with students. They could feel that providing sexuality education endangers their moral authority as a teacher, as explained in the following quote:

If you have to talk to a Form 1, huh? You have to be very careful about... what you say out because... behind there is integrity. Once somebody loses it as a teacher, then... you have virtually no control over this person... because you’ve lost the moral authority. [...] So in a way we fight to maintain that integrity, to allow us chance to address them... on certain issues and earn their trust... (Male, age 30)

In addition to the fear of being considered an immoral person by their students, teachers could fear losing students’ respect and their authority when students are more knowledgeable on the topic than they are. In addition, they feared that students would ask too personal or off-topic questions, which could make teachers feel uncomfortable.

Some teachers were not worried about the abovementioned considerations, but they consciously maintained a hierarchical boundary between themselves and their students because they feared that misinterpretations of friendly conversations with students could lead to suspicions of student–teacher sexual relationships within the school. For some
teachers, such suspicions were barriers to teaching sexuality education freely.

To receive respect from students, some teachers could use fear to enforce respect — for instance, through punishments. Other teachers believed that being feared does not mean being respected and that it is better to earn respect from students by being friendly. Also, when teaching sexuality education, some teachers could use fear messages to encourage abstinence, such as in the cases of boarding schools where teachers knew that protective sex is not an option because students are not allowed to bring condoms:

So, in shorter perspective it works [using fear messages to make students abstain] because they are youngsters [...] You like to scare them, [...] try to control them. [...] So what you do, [...] because you know they are not... having any protective tool [e.g. condoms], is to create a scare mood. (Male, age 27)

These fear messages and maintaining a hierarchy between the student and the teacher seem to coincide with an autocratic teaching style. Teachers found it difficult to put themselves at the same level as the student, for the student to feel safe about discussing issues of sexuality, because they felt that this jeopardises their authority.

7.2.3 Teacher as a 'Counsellor and Guide'

The teachers explained that children's upbringing was traditionally seen as a communal responsibility. Older persons in the community were respected and supposed to guide young people into adulthood. Being teachers, they regarded themselves as these older persons in the students' lives, especially for students in boarding schools, who did not have their parents around. Accordingly, teachers felt that it is their role to make students behave morally, to guide their conduct and to create positive behaviour change:

My role basically is to form them. Hm? To help them change, behaviour change. That is my role. I do it in many ways. I talk to them, I've told you when we needed a reprimand, we do that... when it need counselling, we do that, we involve parents... [...] Because... you know, when you are dealing with discipline, changing somebody's behaviour is not simple. (Male, age 37)

Many teachers thought that guidance from an older person is important because they see students as minors who are not yet able to make their own right decisions:

Those ones who are just becoming active, in sex matters, adolescence stage, is the most dangerous one. Because if the kid is not well-guided, can land into many problems [...] when you're guiding, you show them the bad, the problems, then you put them right. [...] You show them the proper ways [...] to live with this future. (Male, age 25)

Teachers may advise or counsel students, or they may discipline them to correct their behaviours. They usually took a moral approach in their guidance and told students which behaviours are considered good and which behaviours are considered wrong. Some took this
moral approach in their sexuality education as well. Many teachers told students how to behave; only a few of the teachers interviewed seemed to take a more facilitative approach in their teaching, such as the following teacher:

My role is to educate them the best that I can and the choice is always theirs, [...] it’s not me to be the moral soldier, you know? To guard them. [...] Luckily also my morals are a bit skewed up [chuckles] so, it helps me... I, I loved wearing the miniskirts, so... it’s hard for me to stand in class: ‘Now, how do you dare dress like that!’ [chuckles] [...] I don’t take that moral high ground... (Female, age 29)

7.2.4 Teacher as a 'Role Model'

To advise students, and for students to take this advice, teachers felt that they have to be knowledgeable, experienced and a role model to their students. For instance, they did not want to share negative personal experiences with their students, as illustrated in the following quote and discussed in more detail in Chapter 8:

You know, if you shared your personal... experiences... the students maybe not like respect you or... there is a way they review you, and maybe they will say: ‘Ah! If the teacher did it, I can also what... I can also do it.’ But at the end of the day, really, we are not supposed to depict ourselves as if we are so holy... [...] We have also made mistakes as we grew up. (Female, age 37)

Teachers could feel bound to teach what is morally upright, even when they feel that it is not addressing the real issues students are facing: "As a teacher, you have to emphasise what is morally upright all the time. Even if, you yourself, you don’t do it. To your students, you should give them a different scenario and a different picture" (Female, age 26).

7.2.5 Teacher as a 'Guardian'

The teachers felt that it is their role to protect students by controlling their sexual practices while they are in school, whereas they considered this the parents’ responsibility after school hours and during holidays:

So my emphasis is always on abstinence. [...] I give them so many scenarios that are going to at least protect their lives for these six years they are in school until they go out there. [...] But when they are on campus, because I talk to a number of them, there I can freely discuss with them anything... [...] But you will never find me telling an S1, S2 or S6 when they are in school that this is what you have to do. (Female, age 26)

Partly, this is because they want to protect the image of the school and adhere to school regulations, but it is also related to their constructions of, especially female, students as vulnerable children in need of protection and to their fear that sexual activity will interfere with students’ academic performance. The following quote illustrates how the perceived duty of having to control students’ sexuality while they are in school encourages restrictive, sex-
discouraging and fear-based sexuality education messages, which are supposed to discourage students’ sexual activity in the short term but may be less appropriate for the development of students’ sexual agency in the long term:

Now, when eh, I did give a talk to students how... they have a habit of standing in corners and then kissing and then, we call it coupling, boy and girl, huh? And I wanted to discourage them so I got... I talked about HPV, the cancer virus, and all that, and somehow I really scared them into thinking if you kiss, you know, cancer, you can get cancer and something like that! [chuckles] [...] [But] it’s not fair to the students; we should not scare them into doing what we think is right. And another thing what I realised, after that talk, there could have been a change in the first week, but after, these kids are going to go back to their old ways, so... (Female, age 29)

7.3 Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter aimed to obtain a better understanding of the meaning of school-based sexuality education by exploring teachers’ professional identity and how this motivates them to teach school-based sexuality education. The findings showed that teachers see themselves as a role model, authority figure, guardian, counsellor and guide, and executor of ethics and regulations.

Quinn (1992, 93) explains that cultural schemas not only characterise “understandings of the self alone” but also “culturally constructed understandings” of “interpersonal relations”. This allows individuals to conform their behaviour to the context they are in and to the relationship they have with the person they are interacting with (Quinn, 1992). The content of teachers’ sexuality education messages is situation-defined, as they are directed by the interaction between their cultural schemas of (1) professional identity; (2) students and their sexual citizenship; and (3) the school setting and wider community which prohibit young people from having romantic and sexual relationships and from using contraception. This interactional component motivates teachers to conform their behaviour to the school setting and to the relationship they have with their students. For instance, the content of sexuality education messages may be motivated by teachers’ schemas of students’ level of maturity and sexual activity. Teachers’ cultural schemas of professional identity showed that teaching sexuality education may not only be motivated by schemas of providing students with accurate and complete information about sexual and reproductive health and rights but that they may also be motivated by other schemas that support the teaching of abstinence-only messages, such as protecting the school image by controlling students’ sexuality; contributing to students’ social well-being by encouraging them to study and become morally upright individuals; and having to teach what is morally upright. The findings also showed that teachers’ perceived duty of having to control students’ sexuality while they are in school encourages the delivery of restrictive, sex-discouraging and fear-based sexuality education messages that are supposed to discourage students’ sexual activity in the short term but may be less appropriate for the development of students’ sexual agency in the long term.
School-based sexuality education makes teachers important gatekeepers to students’ access to information about sexual and reproductive health and rights. The findings of this study showed how students’ sexual citizenship is restricted by school regulations that, to control students’ sexuality, deny students access to accurate and complete information and to contraception, punish romantic and sexual relationships, and infringe their right to bodily integrity, such as through caning and obligatory pregnancy testing (Richardson, 2000).

In line with research by Valentine (1996; 2004), this chapter showed that school administrations want to construct the spatial compounds of their school as safe places where young people are protected from dangers in society. Teachers are held responsible for bringing up good, moral students and protecting them from risks by enforcing the school regulations. Their constructions of students as innocent and vulnerable may enforce their constructions of teachers’ professional identity as a guardian, counsellor and guide, and of the school as a safe, protective environment. However, rather than protecting, these regulations and constructions of students, in interaction with teachers’ professional identity, actually increase students’ risk and vulnerability.

Students can only develop their sexual agency in a context that acknowledges them as sexual subjects and in which they are given voice about their own sexual and reproductive health and rights (Bhana, 2007a; Egan & Hawkes, 2009). Based on the findings, it can be questioned whether, in the Ugandan context, the school setting is the most appropriate setting for teaching comprehensive sexuality education and whether teachers are the most appropriate sex educators to reach the objectives of sexuality education as formulated by international agencies such as UNESCO et al. (2009).