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Foundation phase male teachers' experiences of teaching comprehensive sexuality education in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa

Abstract

Children in their childhood and teenage years can acquire either healthy or unhealthy lifestyles. Without proper guidance, unhealthy lifestyles (e.g. risk-taking, substance abuse, poor family planning) may affect their psychosexual development negatively (i.e. the ability to make healthier sexual choices). Male and female teachers can be role models for learners to acquire healthy sexual lifestyles. Historically, the Foundation Phase (FP) has been a highly feminine teaching space. Lately, however, the space has seen an increasing presence and participation of male teachers. This paper shares FP male teachers' experiences of teaching comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) content within the Life Skills curriculum in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Five FP male teachers were engaged in a focus-group conversation; data were thematically analysed, underpinned by a feminist post-structural lens. Although the teachers reported a restriction of FP male teachers in teaching of CSE-related content, they also indicated that learners showed increased self-exposure to CSE-related content. To counter the censorship of FP male teachers in teaching CSE-related content, the study recommends explicit incorporation of feminist pedagogies to enable FP male teachers to be part of the delivery of SE content as equal stakeholders.

Keywords: *comprehensive sexuality education, curriculum, feminist post-structural lens, foundation phase male teachers, gender-based violence, masculinity*

1. Introduction and background

Literature underscores the importance of guidance in psychosexual development throughout early childhood and adolescence, aiming to foster the acquisition of healthy concepts related to gender and sexual feelings, self-esteem, body awareness and communication in relationships (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; DBE, 2011). The absence of proper guidance may lead children to make uninformed choices concerning their psychosexual development (Mahoso & Finestone, 2023; Mvune *et al.*, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). In South Africa, guidance is provided through the teaching of the



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compulsory school subject Life Skills (Grades R–3) and Life Orientation (Grades 4–12). In these subjects, components of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) curriculum are integrated (South Africa. DBE, 2011; see Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020). For example, in the FP, the CSE-related content is integrated through the teaching of content areas such as Personal and Social Well-being (PSW) (DBE, 2011). This paper interprets CSE-related content as a curriculum-based process of learning and teaching that focuses on the cognitive, emotional, physical and social dimensions of sexuality (Venketsamy, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). Additionally, the CSE curriculum is rights-based, socioculturally contextualised, pitched at an appropriate age, and is curriculum-based (UNESCO, 2018). Consequently, this implicit recognition positions teachers as key influencers in the lives of learners, particularly within the educational landscape of South Africa. The teaching of CSE-related content is deemed crucial in addressing social challenges, such as gendered violence, early pregnancies, abuse and rape, affecting school-going adolescents (Mahoso & Finestone, 2023; Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020). In 2020, alarming statistics in the Eastern Cape Province reported 671 deliveries by girls aged 10–14 and 17 211 by girls aged 15–17. Nationally, 90,037 girls aged 10–19 gave birth in 2022, with 8–10% of primary school-aged children experiencing teenage pregnancy, often leading to school dropouts (DSD, 2022; Masilela, 2022). The prevalence of gendered violence and statutory rape among school children is also a significant concern. Achieving a curriculum balance is crucial to address these challenges effectively through CSE, while respecting sociocultural norms (Venketsamy, 2018). The effectiveness of teaching CSE in South Africa faces hindrances related to school-based factors, culture, parental opinions, religion and poverty (Mvune *et al.*, 2019; Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020).

According to Bhana (2016) and Mayeza and Vincent (2019), teachers often avoid teaching CSE in higher grades and CSE-related content in the early years, possibly to protect learners' innocence. In South African rural contexts such as the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, teachers and parents perceive learners as sexually innocent, contributing to challenges in adhering to the CSE curriculum (Bhana *et al.*, 2022; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022). Female teachers face different challenges compared to their male counterparts, especially in the FP in their provision of care and support in their teaching (Bhana, 2016; Moosa & Bhana, 2023; Msiza, 2021). FP male teachers are often perceived with suspicion and as unsuitable to teach young children due to concerns about sexual abuse and because of the construction of masculinities as uncaring and aggressive within these contexts (Bhana, 2016; Ratele, 2014). For example, masculinity in the Eastern Cape is centred around the traditional circumcision ritual, a cultural practice rooted in stoicism and endurance to pain, perpetuating hegemonic streams of masculinity that do not align with the feminised characterisation of FP teachers (Bhana, 2016; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022; Mfecane, 2018). However, it would not be constructive to immediately assume that the experience is the same for all FP male teachers. The female-dominated teaching practices in FP further add to the challenges faced by male teachers, who are responsible for teaching perceived sensitive CSE-related topics to young children (Bhana, 2016; Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020). In rural and conservative settings such as primary schools in the Eastern Cape Province, there is a lack of research focused on understanding how male teachers deliver SE-related content. In light of this scarcity, this paper aims to contribute to providing an understanding of the experiences of FP male teachers teaching CSE-related content. By responding to the question: "What are FP male teachers' experiences of teaching CSE-related content?" The research intends to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of male teachers within highly feminine, rural and conservative settings, ultimately enhancing our understanding of CSE-related content delivery in South Africa.

2. Literature review

2.1 Comprehensive sexuality education in the foundation phase curriculum

South Africa's approach to the FP curricula aligns with UNESCO's (2018) perspective that learners should make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV/AIDS. As discussed, earlier CSE is integrated into the Life Skills subject in FP, covering Grades R to 3 for children aged 5 to 9 and the primary goal is to equip learners with comprehensive knowledge and skills for their holistic development (Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). According to Venketsamy and Kinear (2020), in the Life Skills subject under the learning area PSW, the topics relating to CSE taught to learners include and are not limited to body awareness, appropriate touching, emotions, friendship, safety, as outlined in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (South Africa. DBE, 2011). Additionally, in teaching learners such content, the aim is to address, amongst other aspects, issues of social justice, inequality and inclusivity, emphasising adaptation to learners' diverse developmental levels and unique contexts (Bhana, 2016; Venketsamy, 2018). Despite the support from scholars, there are challenges in the effectiveness of teaching CSE in South Africa's rural communities (Venketsamy, 2018).

The acceptance of teaching CSE is crucial for successful curriculum implementation, and contextual issue have a significant impact on its effectiveness (DBE, 2015; Venketsamy, 2023). One major hindrance in CSE teaching is teachers' personal biases influenced by sociocultural practices (Mahoso & Finestone, 2023; Ubisi, 2020). Venketsamy (2023) found that Life Skills teachers in Gauteng primary schools expressed discomfort in teaching some of the CSE-related content due to perceived vulgarity in reproductive health terms, reflecting conflicts with cultural and religious beliefs. Challenges also arise from insufficient age-appropriate guidelines for CSE curriculum implementation, which contribute to teachers' reluctance (Mahoso & Finestone, 2023; Venketsamy, 2023).

Teachers' approaches to CSE have tangible effects on children's lives (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Venketsamy, 2023; Ubisi, 2020). Learners in South African secondary schools attributed unwanted pregnancies and illnesses to self-researched misleading information and abstinence-only sex education (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). The lack of capacitation of teachers with confidence to tackle uncomfortable CSE topics (e.g. diverse sexual orientations), especially those who are not adaptive or traditional in their pedagogical approaches, may lead to inappropriate and irrelevant content delivery, having a negative impact on learners. Bhana (2016), together with Mayeza and Vincent (2019), postulates that sociocultural norms, assumptions about learners' sexual innocence and restricted conversations contribute to learners' seeking information from alternative sources, potentially leading to misguided knowledge.

Addressing these challenges calls for adopting Bell Hooks' (1994) notion of teaching to transgress, rooted in feminist pedagogy. This approach challenges traditional teaching practices criticised by Freire in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996), which aims to disrupt educational spaces that perpetuate racism, gender inequality, classism and binary notions of sexuality. Feminist pedagogy encourages engaging collective efforts to intervene and alter educational spaces (Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019). Teachers play a crucial role as reliable sources and co-constructors of knowledge, guiding children in making responsible sexual choices and fostering a wider understanding of self and respectful

relationships with others (Hooks, 1994; Sarroub & Quadros, 2014). This approach seeks to reshape the narrow conceptualisation of curriculum implementation and improve the quality of education, particularly in rural areas of South Africa (Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019). By challenging hegemonic educational practices, feminist pedagogy is aimed at creating an exciting and inclusive educational environment that empowers learners and teachers alike (Hooks, 1994; Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019; Sarroub & Quadros, 2014).

2.2 Gender influence in teaching CSE-related content in FP

Teaching in the FP has historically been socially constructed as feminine, leading to the perception that it is primarily women's work (Moosa & Bhana, 2023; Msiza, 2021). Globally, less than 3% of males are involved in teaching in the FP, with 79% of FP teachers in South Africa being women (Bhana, 2016; OECD, 2017). Efforts to recruit more male teachers to work with young children have been made, but the majority of FP teachers remain female (Moosa & Bhana, 2013; OECD, 2017). Men entering this field of childhood education challenge gender norms, and their underrepresentation in FP teaching offers opportunities for research (Bhana, Crewe, & Aggleton, 2019). A study conducted in the Mpumalanga Province by Msiza (2021) revealed that FP male teachers tend to distance themselves from tasks considered soft or feminine, such as feeding children or engaging in conversations about sexuality and grief. This behaviour is seen as a way for men to align with traditional notions of masculinity and maintain a higher status in societal and school hierarchy (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Msiza, 2021). However, the consequence of such actions by FP male teachers is that they limit learners' exposure to alternative forms of nurturing and masculinity, hindering the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

Xu and Waniganayake (2018) argue that inclusive learning environments are essential for fostering healthier relationships among learners, teachers and the community at large through mutual vulnerability and respect. The Eastern Cape Province in South Africa, known for its strong adherence to cultural values and intolerance towards the teaching of sexually related content in the FP (Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019), presents a unique context. Media attention in the province has focused on diverse sexual orientations, femicide and xenophobia, which occasionally result in fatal consequences (Tsewu, 2021). A study on FP male teachers' reflections of their teaching of SE-related content in the Eastern Cape Province could help to address challenges experienced by teachers and provide insights into potential avenues for sensitising diversity issues. Understanding the perspectives of FP male teachers in this region is crucial for navigating the cultural values and challenges specific to the Eastern Cape, contributing to the improvement of CSE implementation in the FP.

2.3 Children's agency and claims of children's sexual innocence

Essentialist and human development theorists have theorised ways of teaching in FP that portray children as sexually innocent. This has continued to be a prevalent view (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). Children's learning is often indiscriminatory, as they learn through every experience they encounter or are exposed to in their environment. Venketsamy and Kinear (2020) argue that teachers and parents often assume that young children comprehend the world around them by observing and experiencing the unfolding events in their daily lives. This includes aspects related to sexuality and sociocultural norms and values. Therefore, children are not as innocent or passive as commonly perceived, and they possess a certain level of awareness regarding sexuality (Bhana, 2016; Venketsamy, 2018). Bhana and Mayeza (2016) exemplify this in their study on primary-school-aged children's constructions of gender

identities through play in South African primary schools. They identified a dominant group of boys called 'charmer boys', who constructed what could be considered hegemonic masculinity on the playground. These boys were perceived as 'real boys' due to their engagement in soccer during playtime, signifying emotional and physical strength compared to other boys who did not participate in such activities or girls (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). This finding illustrates the complexities involved in how children construct, practise and recognise gender through play, which aligns with the broader definitions of sexuality (UNESCO, 2018). As such, it becomes essential for teachers and parents to acknowledge that children are not merely passive and docile individuals, but rather agentic beings eager to learn, engage with content, and reflect on their choices concerning their well-being (Bhana, 2016; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019).

3. Theoretical framework

This paper employed a post-structural feminist theory to explore FP male teachers experiences of teaching CSE-related content in their FP classrooms. Post-structural feminists are of the view that people's development is centred around their social experiences of the world and there are several "gendered ways of knowing and being that depend on the social context and the meaning circulating within a set of social relationships" (Grieshaber, 2007: 8; Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). In this study, I employed tenets of post-structuralism such as subjectivity and discourse to understand FP male teachers' experiences of teaching CSE-related content in a highly patriarchal and conservative context of the Eastern Cape Province. According to Blaise (2005: 17), subjectivity is understood to be "an individual's conscious and unconscious thoughts, sense of self, and understanding of one's relation to the world". Dominant historical and cultural discourses have played a pertinent role in constructing individual subjectivity, which has in turn influenced our multiple social subjective belief systems and practices (Grieshaber, 2007; Osgood, 2012), meaning that within different contexts there are gendered sociocultural practices and standards that determine what it means to be female or male. For example, the idea that soft work is female work and hard labour is men's work – any deviation from the norm might lead to possible alienation. Post-structuralist feminist scholars such as Weedon (2004) and Blaise (2005) postulate that a subject or person cannot claim to be the author of their own ideology. Instead, societal ideologies construct a person's understanding and subjectivity of one's self. For example, centring masculinity around stoicism and violence and femininity around care and support are societal ideologies that sustain ways in which men and women construct their subjectivities, e.g. men distancing themselves from FP teaching and the teaching of sensitive topics, as it is perceived to be women's work (see Msiza, 2020). Therefore, subjectivity offers people the possibilities of understanding the fluidity of the nature of human beings and how individuals within different contexts position themselves in accordance with contextual social norms and standards (Blaise, 2005; Fardon & Schoeman, 2010; Osgood, 2012).

According to Blaise (2005) and Fardon and Schoeman (2010), subjectivity does not exist alone; it intersects with discourse. Weedon (2004: 58) defines discourse as a "conceived set of beliefs and understandings, reinforced through daily practices, which frame a particular understanding of the way we are and our view of the world around us". From understanding discourse as an everyday practice, feminist writers argue that through language practices discourses are shaped, for instance, patriarchal cultural practices such as are re-produced to sustain particular discourses or cultural narratives (Carabine, 2001; Osgood, 2012). Moreover, there are socially, historically and institutionally specific discourses that those with

power sustain (Carabine, 2001; Osgood, 2012). An example would be the sustenance of FP teaching as a woman's work on the premise that men are not able to care and are unable to have the same courageous conversations as their female counterparts. Post-structural feminists question dominant discourses, working towards disrupting power that is located within essentialist-underpinned discourses that turn to reify normative and hetero-patriarchal notions of being human (Davies & Gannon, 2011), herein dismantling their outward rationality, dominance and inevitability (Davies & Gannon, 2011; Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019). For example, the perceived normative idea that men are unable to teach sensitive topics such as aspects of CSE is disrupted. Therefore, this disruption opens possibilities for FP male teachers, through a process of reflecting on and questioning the norm, to start thinking and engaging differently. They then become critical of the essentialist perspective on childhood innocence or knowledge and how these ideas influence their ways of teaching, thus enabling agentic teachable moments to emerge. Using post-structural tenants' subjectivity and discourse as a lens to understand the data generated with FP male teachers on their experiences of teaching CSE within the conservative context of Eastern Cape Province has enabled me to understand the multifaceted experiences of FP male teachers teaching CSE-related content. By interrogating the complex interplay between their subjectivities and the feminised discourse of FP teaching.

4. Research methodology

This paper forms part of a bigger doctoral study, for which registered and ethical permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Free State (Protocol reference number: UFS-HSD2021/1447/22 and the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Basic Education, South Africa, which granted permission to conduct the study in the province (see Kagola, 2023). The study and this paper adopted a qualitative research approach (see Creswell, 2009). It further employed a participatory visual methodology (PVM) as its design, with the hope of generating rich data and possibly allowing FP male teachers to be reflective and share their experiences of how they teach CSE-related content in their FP classrooms (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017). Proponents of participatory methodologies as a design operate from a lens enabling change, which positions the study in a transformative paradigm (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). Researchers of transformative paradigm explicitly bear social justice issues in mind and are action oriented towards generating increased fairness in society; this makes their inquiry intertwined with the broader socio-political normative social construct (Mertens, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, I focus on the data generated during focus-group conversations (FGC) embedded within PVM (see Mitchell *et al.*, 2017). The FGC was semi-structured, as the participants presented and shared their visual amongst themselves, with me as the facilitator. As indicated earlier, this paper forms part of a bigger study that explore the facilitation of nurturing masculinity amongst Eastern Cape-based FP male teachers. For this study I focus on the conversation amongst participants when answering the question:

What are FP male teachers' experiences of teaching CSE-related content?

I conducted the study in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa because of the fact that CSE-related research is relatively low within such a rural context (Bhana, 2016; Kagola & Khau, 2020). Moreover, in this study I employed a snowballing sampling approach (Creswell, 2009), due to the scarcity of male teachers employed within an FP teaching context in this province. I had to travel to different districts offices and schools where FP male teachers were

employed. Eight male teachers who taught in FP from different districts in the Eastern Cape were invited to participate in the study, but only five in-service FP male teachers¹ volunteered. I read consent forms and explained to them that they could withdraw from the study at any given time, or when they experienced any kind of discomfort. I then further asked permission to record the focus-group conversation and consent was obtained in writing.

Participants in the study were Xola, who is a Grade 2 teacher and Masi, a Grade 3 teacher, both in the Amathole District and have three years and six months' work experience in FP, as well as Thando, a Grade 3 teacher with three years' experience, and Zimasa, a Grade 3 teacher with four years and six months' experience from the Nelson Mandela Bay District. Lastly, there was also Xabiso, a Grade 3 teacher with more than five years' experience of teaching in FP. In the data generation process, I encouraged participants to use the languages they were comfortable with. The aim was to generate rich data, and therefore FP male teachers in this study code-switched between English and isiXhosa. In reflection, this made it easier for the participants to express themselves freely without any feeling of language barriers.

The data from the FGC were transcribed and translated from isiXhosa into English, where necessary. For data analysis, I used Spencer *et al.*'s (2003) thematic analysis, which helped with analysing the data systematically from the FGC with FP male teachers. The three steps of systematic analysis included firstly, the proper and ethical management of the data generated through FGC, and secondly, repeated reading of the data and then classifying the data into codes. The final and last step was to categorise the data into themes in line with the research question of the study. To produce quality data and to ensure the accuracy of the findings, member checking was done with FP male teachers. In instances where confirmation of details or information was required, it was done to maintain the trustworthiness and integrity of the study. The following section presents the major themes that emerged from the data.

5. Findings

In the quest to understand FP male teachers' experiences of teaching SE in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, the following two themes emerged: (1) learners' self-exposure to SE-related content, and (2) sociocultural practices: a restriction to male FP teacher's teaching of SE-related content.

5.1 Learners' self-exposure to SE related content

Participants' views were a combination of dismay and unanticipated awareness of learners' knowledge of their social environment, and how that influenced their planning and teaching of SE-related content found in the Life Skills curriculum. The participants postulated that the extent of their learners' exposure had an immense impact on their teaching of CSE-related content. This is how one of the participants explained his view,

Abantwana bangoku ba – exposed too much (these children are very much exposed) to sexuality my brother ... One boy in my class called other boy learners gay and evil because they were hugging as friends ... When I asked him why he called other boys evil and gay he said, "They saw men kissing on television and his mom said it is evil to be "imoffie" (derogatory term for gay) (Xola, Grade 2 teacher).

1 I used pseudonyms throughout the study to ensure participants' anonymity.

Sharing a similar experience of his learner's early exposure to SE related content, another participant added,

Yhoo ... bhuti (brother) *these are all children under 10 years of age ... At the playgrounds, some boys ... including some of my learners ... were singing this song "Asibuzi noh buza, ndizo gipsela ngomthondo" (I will not ask, I fuck you with my hard penis). I was so shocked; I stopped them and asked them where they learned the song ... one said at emgidini (a traditional [isi]Xhosa ceremony that re-integrates newly initiated men into the society). This took place in December. I wanted to ask if they know what it means (Masi, Grade 3 teacher)*

The participants' unexpected CSE knowledge of their learners revealed the extent to which learners learn from every experience. These participants are at the interface of learners' funds of knowledge, beliefs and values; different social settings such as their immediate homes, sociocultural gatherings, and playgrounds; and the curriculum content they are expected to implement. The learners' diverse early exposure to SE-related content appears to be a trilogy of mayhem to the participants as the learners illustrated some of the norms and values learned from either their homes, or social events that expose them to CSE-related content prior to their age-related curriculum content.

Xola, in his vignette about his perception of the learners he teaches, shares one of the many incidents that took place, which led him to believe that learners come to school with predisposed knowledge regarding sexuality. From the participants' conversation, the learners have learned that being affectionate towards others who are of the same sex is perceived to be gay and being gay is associated with being evil and undesirable. The learners' knowledge of masculinity relates with Ratele's (2014) postulation that masculinities are constructed within a context for others to validate or reject. The song by the learners illustrates this social construct that emanates from a celebratory ceremonial setting, which is only offered for boys at a much older age and is now being sung at school playgrounds by much younger children.

The participants had to ascertain the discrepancy between the extent to which the learners are exposed to CSE-related content and the curriculum they are expected to implement. In the conversation that followed, one participant expressed his desire to teach his learners beyond what the curriculum prescribed, but he immediately had to exercise restriction. This is how he shared his experience,

Guys, there was a desire in me to teach or have a conversation in class to talk about a similar song, but my worry was how will I justify teaching about sexual consent to grade three learners ... I looked at the CAPS and could not find any topic that might cover such ... (Thando, Grade 3 teacher)

Although teachers can implement the curriculum to suit their learners' understanding, in this case, such a decision would be interpreted with scepticism by colleagues and parents. The learners' exposure to SE-related content has implications for curriculum implementation, which is often only understood as a classroom pedagogic activity, without taking into consideration that some form of learning is simultaneously being transmitted through singing (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021). It is evident that through learners' social interactions and singing, unwarranted knowledge of sexuality is acquired by children, which perpetrates a heteronormative form of masculinity and violence. Zimasa, a less vocal participant in the FGC, shared his experience of learners' early exposure to CSE and his inability to address learners' misunderstanding of diversity due to limited CSE-related content in the Life Skills curriculum,

In my classroom, there was a girl who liked to play soccer and she seemed very boyish. She plays rough and does not do girl's activities such as sweeping but rather moves the furniture ... so my learners called her isitabane (a derogatory term for gay people). She came crying to me saying the other learners called her isitabane... I also looked at CAPS and found nothing on gender diversity in Grade 3 ... (Zimasa, Grade 3 teacher)

The participant's narrative reveals that his learners have constructed an understanding of masculinity and femininity within their context and have assigned a name to it. This learning occurred even before it was envisaged to be an element of the Life Skills curriculum content. Context seems to have played an important role in the construction of what is perceived to be masculine or feminine behaviour. Learners in their earlier years learn ways of discovering their gendered selves within their social setting. The participant's response to the learner's complaint indicates the predicament of male FP teachers in addressing CSE-related problems in their classrooms, as it could be culturally frowned upon. This makes the participants complicit to dominant discourse of masculinity and resorting to relying on the CAPS document, which appears to have insufficient information regarding learner diversity related to the age-appropriateness content of CSE in FP classrooms.

5.2 Sociocultural practices: a restriction to male FP teacher's teaching of CSE-related content

In every society, sociocultural practices set the standards of social norms. This was the case with the Eastern Cape Province where sociocultural norms are bestowed with subtle powers capable enough to accept or reject an individual in their own society, particularly when it comes to diversity differences. These norms have implications for the teaching of CSE-related content at the FP and school in general. The participants referred to some cultural barriers that hindered the implementation of some of the content found in the Life Skills curriculum. While reflecting on these hindrances, which include social values and practices, the participants also shared some of their strategies that worked towards the enablement of teaching some of the content. This is how one of the participants experienced the sociocultural hindrance,

... It took me some time ... it was difficult, I had to develop the courage to have a conversation with the boys about the song they usually sing during break time ... I called all Grade 3 boys during break and asked them about their understanding of the song and its implications [such as committing GBV] ... I still want more conversations like this with the boys, but I am thinking about the approaches that I will use ... as this content is not in our CAPS ... (Masi).

The participant expressed some discomfort in addressing some of the CSE-related content and the need to muster courage in addressing some of the social ills that might perpetuate gendered violence through conversations with boys at the playground. Talking about issues related to sexuality in many contexts is perceived as difficult, because it is considered a taboo topic to have an open conversation about (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). It appears that the current conceptualisation of CAPS as it relates to CSE-related content in the FP is not responsive to learners' prior knowledge of sexuality, which is often acquired through their socialisation. Although the participant could address some of the learners' misunderstandings without necessarily relying on CAPS, there seems to be a constant fear of going against cultural norms. For FP male teachers, it is even more difficult in the early years of learning to talk about sexuality with their learners, because in social settings women are believed to be better communicators of sensitive discussions and they are less abusive than men

(Bhana, 2016; Msiza, 2021). Perceptually, the participants are in a difficult position to engage with the learners, as evident in the amount of thinking they have to put in before having such conversations with their learners. This was not the view of some of the participants, as some of the participants expressed their desire to work towards disrupting socially constructed discourses that position men as silent and aggressive and women as caring and communicative. This is how one of the participants explained intention,

As teachers we are sometimes afraid to say anything related to sexuality to these children because not everyone is open to diversity ... but I do not think I should be scared forever, especially because I'm a man ... when you see that some learners need to understand something you need to tell them what they need to understand. But you must be careful how you say it ... (Xabiso, Grade 3 teacher)

The participant seemed willing to take a leading role in confronting social construct of gendered roles in FP teaching. There is an element of risk associated with the participant's approach and he was aware of the risk, which could be reactions from parents or even being suspected by colleagues at school; hence, caution is applied. The participant's approach to sexuality is in line with Venketsamy and Kinear's (2020) view that content should be culturally and age appropriate, meaning that teachers should meet the immediate needs of the learners. In this case, the participant's concern was that the CAPS curriculum does not require of teachers to teach learners CSE-related content in his grade. The participant's fears are articulated in literature by Mayeza (2017), who argues that central to hegemonic notions of masculinity in contexts such as South Africa, where the high prevalence of gender-based violence and homophobic attacks and aggression is at the centre of what it means to be a man. The participants' understanding of care as expressed in his desire to explain some of the misconceptions of sexuality to his learners would have to be encountered with a culturally constructed understanding of what it means to be a man.

Some participants made conscious attempts at debunking possible future gendered violent behaviour in their classrooms. This behaviour was rampant amongst learners and appeared to have had a direct relationship with how masculinity was constructed, especially as it relates to the reproductive health of girls. Thando's experience was as follows,

... A colleague of mine in grade three had a situation of one girl menstruating while in her classroom and the other learners were shocked and that led to their mocking the learner ... I created a lesson for all grade three learners; we had to talk about how our bodies develop differently. We also spoke about respect and empathy towards one another ... I must say it was difficult at the beginning ... I also wish we could have such conversations freely ... like without fear of being judged or seen as not men or women enough ... (Thando, Grade 3 teacher)

The above vignettes illustrate the discomfort and the fear of being judged or relegated to subordinate streams of masculinities by teachers faced with teaching CSE-related content. To some extent, Thando validates what Mayeza and Vincent (2019) found in their study, namely that learners and other teachers have the ability to question or validate the legitimacy of other teachers' identities. In Thando's case, he hopes for a schooling environment that perpetuates courageous conversations about CSE and not be relegated to subordinate norms just because one is comfortable teaching or talking about aspects of sexuality that are not often talked about in other social settings.

FP male teachers are often confronted with the accusations or perception that they are perpetrators of child sexual activism through the teaching of SE. In an attempt to address this presumption, one of the participants explained how he engages with parents in his planning of educational materials related to CSE. This is what he shared in his approach,

... It's not easy going against community norms, guys ... I think in order to overcome the fear of going against the norm, we should involve parents ... We share some of the planning that has sexuality issues with parents through newsletters and sometimes in meetings ... for example, we tell them that we have lots of reported dry humping in toilet amongst the learners and fights from romantic relationships ... we think there is a need to teach about sex and relationship ... this way we avoid being seen as people who have intentions of promoting sexual activities amongst young learners and parents are informed about the curriculum ... (Xabiso, Grade 3 teacher)

The participant's approach demonstrates how scepticism concerning CSE could be addressed, although this does not always guarantee that cultural norms will immediately be dissipated because parents are involved. The participant's approach also highlights the need to talk to learners about the act of sex because of the emergence of multiple reports of learners' dry humping² on the school premises and learners fighting because of the possible end of romantic relationships.

6. Discussion of the findings

The experiences and perspectives of FP male teachers in teaching CSE-related content reveal a complex landscape marked by unique challenges. These challenges range from the teachers feeling subordinate in terms of gender to being perceived as potential perpetrators of sexual abuse. Moreover, FP male teachers express a desire to challenge dominant heteronormative notions of gender diversity. The teachers navigate conflicts surrounding their learners' knowledge beyond expectations and the inadequacy of the curriculum to address these issues. The study by Msiza (2021) aligns with these findings, indicating that FP male teachers tend to distance themselves from activities perceived as feminine, including discussions on sex. Despite these challenges, FP male teachers demonstrate ongoing efforts to exercise professional responsibility, emphasising education as a powerful tool for addressing injustices, including gender inequalities and discrimination (Bhana, 2016). The teachers' concerns centre around the perpetuation of hegemonic culture within the FP schooling context, leading to a narrow understanding of diversity, masculinity and a cycle of gender-based violence. Similar views have been reported among pre-service FP male teachers (Moosa & Bhana, 2023) and align with Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi's (2021) findings on challenges in SE teaching. The study also underscores that learning in the FP extends beyond the classroom, as demonstrated by the songs learners sing, embodying sexual knowledge, violence, specific notions of masculinity, and discouraging a broader awareness of diversity. Bhana's (2016) research echoes that children actively participate in constructing their identities, despite societal perceptions of childhood as passive. Children's construction of masculinities and relationships with violent attitudes contributes to the vilification of non-heteronormative forms of masculinity. This learning sustains hegemonic identities within the FP and contradicts the notion of children as sexually innocent, supporting post-structuralist arguments on dominant discourses shaping gender orders (Connell, 2017).

² Dry Humping refers to the sexual activity that does not involve direct contact between genitals, in this study it refers to learner role playing the act of sex during playtime while in uniform.

FP male teachers struggle with the curriculum's limitations, finding it insufficient to address learners' existing knowledge about sexuality, especially regarding gender diversity and sexual orientation. Venketsamy and Kinear (2020) point out that the Life Skills curriculum in the FP lacks flexibility to address sexuality issues adequately. This deficiency leaves FP teachers disempowered to intervene and guide learners in their exploration of sexuality, potentially leading to lifelong consequences. The study suggests the incorporation of aspects of feminist pedagogy into the FP Life Skills curriculum to challenge hegemonic practices and promote inclusivity (Hooks, 1994). Teachers express eagerness to teach issues like consent to prevent gender-based violence and promote understanding of gender diversity, acknowledging learners' pre-existing knowledge. Involving parents in CSE content planning is seen as essential to protect FP male teachers from potential accusations and to align with the contextual nature of SE teaching in the FP (Venketsamy & Kinear, 2020). The study argues for a culturally responsive approach to involve parents and challenges the current conceptualisation of the FP curriculum (CAPS) for its inadequacy in addressing issues of sexuality, masculinity and gender diversity at an early stage. The study calls for a broader view of CSE intervention in the FP and recommends feminist pedagogy as a way to challenge hegemonic educational practices, promoting inclusivity and addressing issues of racism, gender inequality, classism, ethnicity and binary notions of sexuality (Hooks, 1994). Incorporating feminist pedagogy could potentially reshape the FP curriculum, making it more responsive to learners' needs, respectful of cultural norms, and inclusive of diverse perspectives on gender and sexuality. Moreover, feminist pedagogy could be incorporated and promoted through professional development workshops and continued support from Life Skills educational experts from districts and CSE specialists to help teachers be more critical of their teaching of CSE-related content, as well as further to encourage teachers to reflect critically on their own biases and assumptions about gender, sexuality and education.

7. Limitations of the study

A limitation of the study is that the views presented do not represent all male FP teachers in the Eastern Cape Province. Additionally, they do not reflect the perspectives of female FP teachers or account for parents' views. For these reasons, the findings of the study cannot be generalised and should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

8. Conclusion

The study strongly advocates the incorporation of feminist pedagogy into the FP Life Skills curriculum. Drawing from Hooks (1994), this pedagogical approach challenges hegemonic practices and promotes inclusivity, providing a transformative lens for understanding issues related to gender, sexuality and diversity. Teachers expressed eagerness to address topics like consent, prevention of gender-based violence and enhance learners understanding of gender diversity and therefore this should be taken into account during the curriculum revision process. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of involving parents in CSE content planning. This collaborative effort is seen as essential not only to align with the contextual nature of CSE teaching in the FP, but also to protect FP male teachers from potential accusations. Policymakers can use these recommendations as a guide to restructure the FP Life Skills curriculum, ensuring it reflects the needs, challenges and aspirations of co-constructing responsible future citizens.

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