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Sexuality education in Uganda

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CHAPTER 8

The Role of Personal Experiences in Teaching School-based Sexuality Education in Uganda

As discussed in Chapter 1, young people need comprehensive sexuality education to exercise their sexual agency, which requires teachers to adopt a positive approach to students' sexuality. Because little is known about the role of personal experiences in how teachers teach sexuality education, this chapter aims to understand how teachers' personal experiences of sexual initiation motivate their approach to students' sexual agency and sexual citizenship when teaching sexuality education. Teachers' personal experiences were studied and analysed using cultural schema theory, as described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

The first section discusses teachers' personal experiences of sexual initiation as a young person. The second section then compares teachers' personal experiences with the content they are motivated to teach. The last section explains how teachers' personal experiences motivate their approach to students' sexual agency and sexual citizenship when teaching sexuality education.

8.1 Teachers' Personal Experiences of Sexual Initiation

Table 12 provides an overview of 37 of the 40 participants who discussed their onset of sexual intercourse during the interviews, categorised as: (1) are virgins and want to abstain until marriage; (2) are married and did abstain until marriage; (3) had premarital sex with marriage partner only; and (4) had premarital sex. The overview shows that a majority of the teachers had premarital sex.

Table 12. Participants' experience of sexual initiation

Personal experience	Virgins (want to abstain until marriage)	Abstained until marriage	Premarital sex with marriage partner only	Had premarital sex
Male	3	1	0	14
Female	3	3	3	10
Total	6	4	3	24

Four male teachers said that they became sexually active in Senior 4 or around the age of 17; most of the other male and female teachers said that their onset of sexual activity was after finishing secondary school or reaching the age of majority:

Ey, I kept myself safe to a reasonable age. I was 17. Yeah. I was 17. Reasonably, I was old. Only one year I was left with a few months to turn 18. But even with a setting of ours, you may turn 18 but still be considered young as long as you put on a uniform [go to school].
(Male, aged 30)

Some participants said that they abstained until marriage because of their religion; others indicated that their religion has helped them to postpone sexual initiation or to control their sexual activity before marriage:

Yeah, the religion became so important because our religion emphasises, eh, emphasises the issue of... first of all, it brings out... the dangers of fornication, fornication is bad, God is against it, you'll be sinning, it's a sin. You have to wait for the person and even play sex in marriage... such things and you, those values [...]. So biblically you find that sometimes you are kept upright, huh? [...] Hm-mm-mm, the number of times, you control yourself.
(Male, aged 30)

Some teachers mentioned the cultural value of virginity and societal disapproval of premarital sex as reasons for abstaining — for instance, being known as a virgin could provide teachers with respect from society: *“I am young, but they do respect me a lot. [...] They have never heard anything ill, bad about me, like I've loved this one, I've gone out with this one, so they do respect me because I also respect myself”* (Female, age 26). The female teachers in particular mentioned that their reputations are important to them. For instance, one female teacher said that she receives respect from her husband because she abstained until marriage: *“He tells me: ‘I respect you; I found you a virgin’”* (Female, age 40).

Fear of HIV infection was another reason for the teachers interviewed to abstain. Furthermore, some recalled that the strictness of school, parents or other caregivers prevented them from having sex at an earlier age:

Yeah... I've [been] keeping myself [...] And... partly the reason as why I was able [...], I was taken to single-sex school. Boys. Right? [...] So you can see how the... keeping me off... being in a single-sex school, worked in their favour. (Male, age 30)

Reasons mentioned specifically by female teachers included fears of falling pregnant while still in school and of being abandoned or 'used' by their sexual partner and the shame attached to it, as explained in the following quote:

Maybe the urge comes, but the mind... is like... you are going to have sex now. One can [be] having sex, this boy is going to dump you. Now after breaking your virginity, what next? [chuckles a bit] I could hold me all the time. (Female, age 23)

Some male teachers mentioned fears of making someone pregnant, disappointment in relationships after being cheated on by previous girlfriends, and the importance of being financially able to care for a future family.

A reason mentioned often by both male and female participants for their onset of sexual intercourse was sexual urge. The following quote is from a female participant who had premarital sex with her future husband:

Both of us had the feelings... for each other. [...] Yes, my body wanted, definitely. But I didn't want, just because of education, sex [...] before marriage. But... this outweighed, the feelings outweighed. That's it. [...] Ah, the thinking. I was thinking with my heart now. (Female, age 40)

Another reason that many of the teachers mentioned was feeling old and mature enough to be sexually active — for instance, when participants had reached the age of majority, when they had been dating someone for a while or when they were at university. At these moments, the teachers considered themselves able to make conscious, objective decisions and to be knowledgeable of "*what was going on in the world*" (Female, age 23).

Even though teachers indicated that they felt old enough to have sexual intercourse and that they were aware of the risks of unprotected sexual intercourse, many recalled that their first sexual intercourse had been unprotected:

For the first time, I didn't have [protection]. I don't know but... curiosity was killing me... I just rushed into the whole thing. [...] Actually, even if I had the time I wouldn't use it. Because there is a lot that has been said about having it live [without a condom], like, you know... you... like out curiosity, I hurriedly, I started condomising after, after finding out the other side of life. [...] I told myself: for the worries I've gone through, I'll never do it again. (Male, age 30)

The teacher in the previous quote doubted whether he would have used a condom if he had had enough time, because he had been too curious to know what it would be like to have sex without a condom. As a result, he figured that sexuality education probably would not have prevented him from having unprotected sex. Rather, he felt that they would have only used a condom if his sexual partner had insisted:

[Sexuality education could have helped] maybe to that extent [...] I would have moved with [...] the condoms. But... To the extent that I was the desperate party, erm... [chuckles] I don't think... maybe it would have worked for the other person, like sex education for the other person, huh? [...] So I imagine if she would have... told me, without it... it's over for now. ...than perhaps I would have rushed... to get it. [...] But in this situation... uh-uh, I decline to believe so easily that it would have worked for me. (Male, age 30)

Some other male participants also mentioned 'peer pressure', 'losing sense' because of sexual urge and 'curiosity' for sex, especially for 'live' sex (without a condom) as reasons for sexual initiation, even despite their awareness at the time of the risks of unprotected sexual intercourse. Furthermore, participants often indicated that older or more experienced sexual partners were the ones who had 'seduced' or 'pushed' for sex. They trusted these partners because they took them to be more sexually experienced.

8.2 The Role of Personal Experiences in the Content of Teachers' Sexuality Education Messages

The findings show correspondence between teachers' experiences and reasoning about their own sexual initiation and their reasoning about their students' sexual citizenship, as discussed in Chapter 6. For instance, most teachers became sexually active after they had reached the age of majority and they would also prefer their students to wait until they are 18 or above. However, as shown in Table 13, comparison of participants' onset of sexual intercourse in itself shows no correspondence with the content they are motivated to teach — i.e. (1) abstinence-only; (2) including the message of condom use as a last resort for students who are unable to abstain; or (3) both abstinence and contraception. For instance, some teachers wanted to abstain until marriage because of their religion, but they feel motivated to teach contraception to students, whereas other teachers were sexually active in secondary school but teach their students abstinence-only.

Table 13. Participants' personal experiences of sexual initiation and the content of their sexuality education messages by gender and age

Personal experience	Gender	Motivated to teach:		
		Abstinence-only	Condom as last resort	Abstinence and contraception
Virgin (wants to abstain until marriage)	male	1	0	2
	female	1	1	1
Abstained until marriage	male	1	0	0
	female	2	1	0
Premarital sex with marriage partner only	male	0	0	0
	female	1	2	0
Had premarital sex	male	4	4	6
	female	2	5	3
Age range of interviewed teachers		23-43	22-53	23-26

Independently of their timing of first sexual intercourse, the group of participants spoke about both positive and negative emotions related to their experiences of abstinence and sexual intercourse. Some teachers described their abstinence as a positive experience because they had seen others, who were sexually active, drop out of school because of pregnancies. These teachers were thankful that they had not been exposed to such risks:

Absolutely, the right decisions [to abstain until age 18]. Yeah, because I've kept myself straight. Hm, I have not like messed any girl's future, nor have I messed my life in anyway, especially as far as early sex is concerned. Hm, you saw my friend, the other time, I told you. Yeah, and eh... there are many others also who messed up, then the girls... you know, maybe you got pregnant, fall out of school, and... So I feel like maybe if somehow those messages are reached to them, you know, some of those messages enter into your... subconscious, and they remain there. Hm, so before... you think, that can help. (Male, age 31)

Such positive experiences motivated the teachers to teach abstinence because they care about the well-being of their students and do not want them to be exposed to such risks either:

I've seen the good things, that, the first that come from abstinence and at least I would like to share them with my students because apart from mending my students, they are my friends. So I would like to tell them that erm... if one abstains, this is and this happens, you're free of everything, and you're free like a bird, you don't have to think about the guy who used you and dumped you, no, you're free, you do anything you want. (Female, age 22)

Other teachers described negative experiences of premarital intercourse: some when they were still in secondary school; others when they were at university. For instance, one of the male participants regretted that he had made a girl pregnant. As a consequence, she had to drop out of school and missed out on having a career. Furthermore, after finding out she

was pregnant, he had feared punishment by his parents, imprisonment for having defiled her, and the obligation of having to marry her. He said: *“So, it is not easy, and I wouldn’t like anyone to go through that experience” (Male, age 42).*

This experience motivated this teacher to teach sexuality education because he felt that if he had received more sexuality education in school, this would not have happened. On the other hand, teachers also related how sexual urge led them to having unprotected sex despite having received sexuality education. Their schemas of ‘sexual urge’, ‘the enjoyment of ‘live’ sex’ and ‘students not being able to make good decisions’ may help to explain why teachers, based on negative personal experiences of unprotected sex, preferred to teach abstinence-only rather than to teach about contraception.

Many of the teachers who mentioned negative experiences of premarital sexual intercourse felt regrets, and some even called it a ‘mistake’. Some said that they felt ‘lucky’ in cases where they had made a mistake but had not experienced any negative consequences. The following female teacher was motivated to teach abstinence-only because she became pregnant before marriage. She felt lucky because the father of the baby married her. However, she also felt that her husband had maybe been forced to marry her and wondered whether they would have married if she had not become pregnant:

I think I made a mistake, I shouldn’t have got... gotten into a relationship at the university. I should have waited! Perhaps if I had waited... I would not have married the person I married [...]. Because I acted out of... emotions, not out of... reasoning, not out of facts, it was too early for me to do that. Hmm... I believe I should have, if I had got the information, I should have acted differently. So in most of the times my... my information I give to the students is out of my own experience to stop them from... going through with my experience, so even making worse mistakes. Yeah... Because me, I was lucky, the person I married, although he may not have been the righteous [...] And society expects you to do that anyway. [...] I believe... he married me because I got pregnant. [...] That means I married for wrong reasons. So I believe I talk out of my own experience to the children so that they don’t make the same mistake. (Female, age 43)

The following female participant said that she had unprotected sexual intercourse because she was ignorant about contraception: *“Just me, I was... maybe by God’s grace, by God’s luck, as much as I had sex with the boy, it was unprotected sex, I did not get the [HIV] infection. But we [students] may not have the same chance! Like me” (Female, age 31).* This negative experience motivated her to provide students with all the information about contraception, even though her main advice to students was to abstain.

Both cases illustrate how teachers used their negative experience of premarital sex to motivate the content of their sexuality education messages to prevent their students from going through the same experience. However, some could recall a negative experience to motivate why they teach abstinence-only, whereas others could use similar negative experiences to motivate why they include contraception in their teaching. This shows that teachers can recall personal experiences to motivate the content of their sexuality education messages but that the experience itself does not direct the content of these messages. Rather,

the content of teachers' messages appears mostly directed by teachers' cultural schemas, as described in Intermezzo 2 and Chapter 6, 7 and 9.

8.3 Reconstructed Experiences to Motivate the Content of Sexuality Education Messages

Although the content of teachers' sexuality education messages appeared mostly supported by cultural schemas, most teachers did use, or reconstruct, their personal experiences of sexual initiation to support their reasoning for how they approached students' sexual agency and sexual citizenship when teaching sexuality education. This reconstruction of past experiences is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 and is illustrated by the following example from a female teacher who recalled her premarital sex as a positive experience. She had sex at age 17 during the school holidays. She said that at that time she had felt grown up, there was no pressure of studying for school, and she had been dating her boyfriend for quite a long period of time. She said that they went for an HIV test together and that they used condoms. Although her first time had been planned and protected, she worried that her students could experience negative consequences from having sex:

I have never thought of it being bad [premarital sex], because I did not have any... negative impact... [...] I feel, I feel I did it at the right time although a little bit still young. Hm. But eh, the problem with many students today, when they begin it eh, when they begin being active so early, they're usually... disturbed, they are usually... eh, off the books, much of their time, they think about their boyfriends and girlfriends. And because I told you they lack the guidance of the people concerned, they may not know what to do and how to do it so... they are likely to mess up. (Female, age 35)

She linked this schema of 'negative consequences of premarital sex' to other schemas of 'students being easily disturbed' and 'not being able to make good decisions', which motivated her to teach abstinence-only despite her own positive experience.

Another consideration for her to teach abstinence-only was her schema of professional identity, which directed her to be a role model to her students. Because of this, she felt that she could not tell her students that she had been sexually active before the age of majority: *"Of course I cannot tell them I started being active before the age of consent. I encourage them to begin it at the age of consent"* (Female, age 35). In the case of this teacher, her reasoning about teaching abstinence-only was supported by her schemas of 'professional identity' and of 'students and their sexual citizenship'. She seemed to 'reconstruct' her own positive experience of sexual intercourse to make this experience fit with her cultural schemas of teaching abstinence-only by reasoning that the conditions her students grow up in nowadays differ from the conditions she grew up in.

Even though the teachers interviewed indicated that their personal experiences were important motivations for them to teach sexuality education, their cultural schemas of professional identity, especially the one of 'being a role model to students', could have directed them not to share these experiences with their students. For instance, teachers could

feel hesitant to share any ‘mistakes’ they had made when they were young with their students, because they feared that students would not interpret the experience as a discouragement but, rather, as an encouragement to be sexually active:

Whenever I want to say something but I mind, mind myself about it and I say but: I did this also at such an age so... But I know it was wrong, right now, I tell them what is supposed to be right. [...] if I told them that you see for me when I was in Senior 4... I did this and this and this and this... I impregnated a girl, and the girl even stopped, she didn't even go for any further education. So they will start doubting me, maybe they will say.. eh, this man, now why is he refusing us to do this? If he also did it. And after all, he did it, and he is a teacher now, he is working, why is he refusing us to do? So... I feel at times I don't want to give that testimony. (Male, age 42)

Furthermore, some teachers felt ambivalent about sharing their virgin status with their students, because they feared that students would question their knowledge of sexuality due to a lack of experience: *“That’s why, that’s why, that’s why sometimes I, I, I will not prefer telling them that I’m, I’m a virgin, but you try to tell them how good it is to abstain”* (Male, age 24). In contrast, other teachers said that they are proud of being a virgin and that they do share this with their students: *“Actually, I’m proud to tell them that I abstain. [...] Yeah, and it gives me... encouragement to keep on advising them to abstain”* (Female, age 31).

8.4 Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter aimed to understand how teachers’ personal experiences of sexual initiation motivated their approach to students’ sexual agency and sexual citizenship when teaching sexuality education. The findings showed that teachers rely on cultural schemas, such as professional identity and cultural values and beliefs, to motivate the content of their sexuality education messages, which in most cases consist of abstinence-only and sex-discouraging messages, as discussed in Chapter 6 and 7.

In addition, the findings showed that teachers’ personal experiences of sexual initiation also play an important role. First, teachers’ personal experiences were found important because teachers recalled them to support their reasoning for how they approached students’ sexual agency and sexual citizenship when teaching sexuality education, such as negative personal experiences of premarital sex or positive personal experiences of abstinence. Personal experiences may have been important motivations for teachers even when they did not mention them to students, because of their schemas of professional identity, which directed them to be a role model to students.

Second, teachers’ personal experiences were found to be important because they interacted with cultural schemas that direct the content of teachers’ sexuality education messages. Due to their *evocative* function, the feelings evoked by teachers’ personal experiences lead to a higher internalisation, or centrality, of connected schemas, such as higher-level goals of protecting their students’ well-being. As a result, these higher-level goals gained higher motivational force in the construction of the type of information

teachers assumed that their students needed. Thus, personal experiences of sexual initiation enabled teachers to empathise with their students, which strengthened their motivation to teach sexuality education. For instance, teachers could be motivated to contribute to their students' well-being by preventing them from making the 'mistakes' the teachers themselves had made in the past.

However, the content of teachers' messages was not solely directed by personal experiences. Rather, teachers reconstructed, or selected, past experiences to support the cultural schemas they relied on in their reasoning for teaching sexuality education. This explains why teachers could rely on similar experiences to motivate different approaches to students' sexual agency and sexual citizenship.

During their life, teachers' personal experiences of sexual initiation and the accompanying emotions have helped shape their schemas for teaching sexuality education. These negative or positive emotions arose in interaction with the context at that time — for example, premarital sex was experienced negatively because society valued virginity highly. Based on the interaction between teachers' personal experiences and their schemas of students and their sexual citizenship, teachers may expect students to experience the same negative consequences of having sex — for instance, because teachers feel that the societal 'punishments' for having sex, such as school dropout, or the side effects of contraception have not changed over time.

Teachers' schemas of sexual urge making young people become sexually active may justify a type of sexuality education that is more restrictive, focused on self-control and abstinence-only, rather than a type of sexuality education that takes a more comprehensive approach by providing young people with complete and accurate information and the responsibility for informed decision-making. The recalled experience of sexuality education not having prevented teachers themselves from engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse may justify the abstinence-only approach that many teachers preferred to follow.

It can be concluded that personal experiences can be an important intrinsic motivation for teachers to teach sexuality education but that, considering teachers' reliance on cultural schemas that support abstinence-only education, a supportive, enabling environment is a prerequisite for the provision of comprehensive sexuality education.

