

## Chapter Four

# Questions on Sexuality from Children: A Case for Sex Education in Kenyan Schools

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### Abstract

*Children generally are shy to ask their parents questions related to sex and reproduction. It is normally challenging for parents to give factual responses to their children regardless of children's age. Talking to a teacher may be easier. Sex education is usually offered in schools or elsewhere with the aim of helping young people to learn early enough about the physiological and emotional changes that might take place in their bodies. It is offered with the hope that the recipients would consequently develop self respect and be able to make responsible decisions pertaining to their sexual lives. This paper therefore discusses the need for sex education in Kenyan schools. The focus is on questions raised by primary and secondary school students in 2010 within a context of a larger study. The students were asked to write on a piece of paper questions that they would not ask their parents or teachers. The questions are pointers to the fact that most children lack correct and useful information on sexuality and there is need to introduce sex education as a subject in the Kenyan school curriculum.*

Keywords: sexuality, sexual abuse, sex education

### Introduction

Every community has expectations and rules regarding sexual behaviour. These rules vary considerably and what is acceptable or accepted as normal in one society may be regarded as strange, absurd, deviant or even criminal in another (Khamasi & Maina, 2005; Karei, 2005). Kalat (1986) observes that customs and sexual practices differ from one society to another and that these sexual customs are intertwined with other aspects of culture such as religion, marriage, and economic systems among others. It is therefore a societal duty to find ways and means of educating the youth on sexual matters that will enable them to engage in respectful relationships and safer sex (Karongo, 2010). This attitude makes sex education important despite opposition from various sections of the society.

Until about 100 years ago religion and rumour provided most of the information about sexuality (Hyde, 1982). In many African communities however, grandparents specifically grandmothers and aunts were culturally mandated to pass on information on sex and sexuality to the young (Khamasi & Maina, 2005). Grandmothers and aunts also advised young women on sexuality in preparation for marriage and their future roles as wives. The older and at times elderly women used their experiences to discuss what could be viewed as sensitive or private matter. While there were organised learning spaces, the older women used song or any other appropriate setting to transmit relevant information (Mungai, 2011). For example, in some communities it was the paternal aunt who would counsel a nephew with sexual problems.

Presently, majority of young people are not given sex education at home or in school and therefore learn about sex and sexuality from various sources for example through peers or adults who may want to exploit them. Unfortunately information from such sources is saturated with misinformation. Today issues of sex and sexuality are commonly communicated by/through the media i.e. in a variety of adverts; through fashion, in the language used in movies and music. For most of the consumers to make informed decisions on the information from the sources listed above, they need critical thinking skills, which are lacking in majority of the populace and particularly young people. These observations are in agreement with Gleitman's (1986) who argues that human sexuality can be molded by variety of experiences, particularly early experiences and cultural patterns.

### **Goals of sex education**

School based sexuality education and reproductive education is one of the most important and widespread ways to help young people improve their reproductive health and more so understand and appreciate their own sexuality. It helps young people understand the biological changes that take place, learn how to control emotions and more so learn to respect their bodies. Another equally important aspect of teaching sex education is that of teaching healthy masculinity and femininity. Many times the only information about masculinity or femininity that is officially available to the youth particularly in a multicultural society like Kenya is, that which is sanctioned by culture (Khamasi & Maina, 2005; Karei, 2005). That information may not be adequate to equip one with life skills in the modern society. Some cultures may encourage the youth especially the boy child to engage in sexual activity to prove their masculinity while others do likewise to the girl child; often with total disregard of the consequences.

Miller (2011) argues that often parents are afraid to talk to their children about their bodies, sexuality and safer sex because they perceive these topics from an adult point of view. She further explains that it is important that children know the basic names of body parts. She adds that children who have open conversations about their bodies with their parents are safer from sexual abuse because normally sexual predators use children who are naive about sex and the body. Miller recommends sex education as an appropriate tool for prevention of sexual problems in adulthood.

Children are usually curious about sex; they want to know where children come from, which is normal and healthy. Children need answers to questions without intimidation. Their curiosity encourages them to learn and this can assist break the barriers between them and parents and likewise with teachers. However, at times adults in their lives do not know what to say when children ask questions about sex and sexuality. Most give wrong answers or a nickname to a body part instead of the appropriate name. A number of parents or teachers silence young people by telling them that discussion on sex and sexuality is bad manners, at times they change the subject or postpone the response to a day that never comes. Miller (2011) explains that parents postpone what is normally referred to as “the talk” with their children until later i.e. when the children are in high school or at adolescent stage, and even when “the talk” is finally given, it is usually full of dos and don’ts. In most circumstances, by the time the talk is given by the parents the adolescent will have learnt from peers and the media and might have already experimented. Such delays can be detrimental to the young people’s health and wellbeing. Young people therefore need relevant and correct information before they are pressured into sexual.

Debate on whether sex education should be offered in schools is a global concern. But as governments, religious authorities and parents debate on the issue, teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continue to rise. Despite the fact, sex remains a taboo topic in Kenya and African society as a whole (Khamasi & Maina, 2005, Khamasi and Undie, 2008). Infection rates of sexually transmitted diseases (NACC & NASCOP, 2012) and teenage pregnancies continue to increase prompting teachers to call for formal sex education in schools (Wanjala, 2011). Whereas religious authorities in Kenya vary in their views of sex education, they agree that if the subject is to be taught, it should be approached with caution (Wanjala, 2011).

Muturi (2011) agrees with Wanjala’s argument on sex education and asserts that children are aware of their sexuality from a tender age. They therefore recommend that sex education be offered in the early years of schooling, before young people reach puberty, and before they develop established patterns of behaviour. They argue that the precise age at which sex education should be provided depends on the physical, emotional and intellectual development of the young as well as ones level of understanding. They argue that giving young people basic information on sexuality from an early age provides the foundation on which more complex knowledge is built upon over time.

Many parts of the world face similar challenges when it comes to teaching of sex education in schools. Kappusamy (2010) reports that religious opposition in Malaysia stalled the integration of sex education in school curricula even though the government’s policy on the same was unclear. Kappusamy argues that despite the controversy, in 2006 police reported rising cases of abandoned neonates by teenage and young adults, students and foreign migrant workers. Clerics in Malaysia however

believe that teaching sex education in schools would encourage teenage sexual promiscuity and recommend that greater Islamic values be enforced.

In U.S.A the debate over whether to have sex education in American schools is over, but there is no general agreement on what should constitute sex education. There are still major differences over the issue of abstinence. A good number of the parents feel that abstinence is not the most important thing, and that sex education should focus on teaching teens how to make responsible decisions about sex (<http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=1622610>. Retrieved 9/8/2011)

Yinhe (nd) a sociologist and sexologist argue that an open and appropriate sex education is the best way to help and protect children. He argues that young children need sex education that provides basic knowledge that includes biological and gender differences, what is acceptable in terms of sex morality, and also how to protect themselves from sexual assaults.

Mbote (2010) argues that sex education would be less controversial if it was approached from a multicultural perspective that could embody the biological, psychological, cultural, sociological and historical points of view. He recommends that sex education be taught in schools with the aim of empowering students to make responsible sex decisions based on credible factual information not myths, rituals, taboos and other beliefs that our diverse cultures hold and that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Venpette (2009) emphasises that sex education will help children develop standards of sexual contact and to help them avoid cases of sex experimentation brought about by lack of information. Sex education at the early stages of life and especially targeting young people can significantly prevent this experimentation and therefore reduce new cases of HIV, other sexually transmitted infections as well as unwanted pregnancies and sexual abuse. She argues that sex education and moral values must be complimentary which means building attitudes concerning the whole subject of sexuality rather than teaching physiological facts which might only deal with the way the body responds during sexual arousal and also the mechanisms behind these responses. Venpette recommends that sex education should encompass psychological, social, economic and social factors (2009). She adds that sex education will also help answer a lot of burning questions in the minds of the youth. However one of the main fears of parents and other adults is the belief that empowering children and the youth with sexuality information may raise their curiosity leading them to becoming sexually active at an early age. While fears by parents may have a basis, the choice may be that of choosing between two evils. Teaching them about sexuality so that they can make informed decisions or letting them go without the information and face the consequences since ignorance is no defense.

As mentioned earlier in this article, sex is all around us, therefore being taught that 'sex is sinful' and that using contraceptive is equally wrong will certainly not lower risk of teenage pregnancy rates. Some young people genuinely do not know the risk

of unprotected sex simply because no one ever told them (Gamble 2010). It is not enough to be told that sex is sinful without any explanation of the context under which it is regarded so however true that may be. The youth need proper and correct information, they need alternatives or even the skills to deal with the pressure to engage in sexual activity that comes mainly from the media, and peer pressure to name a few.

In conclusion, sex education is controversial globally and difficult to implement on a national scale particularly if the quality of teaching cannot be assured. Murray et al (2004) argue that because sex education is controversial opposition can be diminished through active engagement of religious leaders, parents and teachers. They also suggest the need to use several strategies and empower parents with skills for transmitting relevant information on sexuality and reproductive health to their children.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of teaching sex education from an early age to children in Kenya school system and to highlight the role of stakeholders particularly parents, teachers and religious leaders in ensuring appropriate content is included in the curriculum.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted in four schools within Moi University Webuye Health Disease Surveillance Site (WHDSS) in Bungoma East County. The four schools were sampled on the basis that they had participated in an earlier larger study. These schools were both non-residential and co-educational. This being a mini study within a larger study, learners from class 6 to 8 and Form 2 and 3 (both boys and girls) were asked to write questions that they would normally not ask parents or teachers in a journal. The lead researcher administered the exercise in each of the schools and in the various classrooms using time scheduled for English lessons. The journals were picked immediately the students completed the exercise which on average took about 30 minutes.

The journals were read for content analysis. This entailed reading through all the narratives several times to familiarise oneself with the responses. Finally, the narratives were analysed for content – this time focusing on the issues raised. The types of questions asked by the students are a clear indication of the urgent need for sexuality education in the Kenyan schools. For the purpose of this paper, the questions were grouped into four topical areas which are discussed in the following section.

## **Findings and discussions**

In general some of the questions asked by the students are centred around the following areas: sexual anatomy, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse, zoophilia, masturbation and sexual maturation in general

among others. However, in line with what would constitute a curriculum for sex education, this paper is going to discuss the findings under four headings.

### **Lack of information**

The study discovered that both primary and secondary school students, boys and girls were uninformed about secondary sexual characteristics. Many of the questions centred on changes that take place in their bodies in other words maturation. Questions in this category are listed below and the gender of the student shown at the end of the statement. We have corrected the spellings to make the statements comprehensible and in some cases rephrased the questions which are in parenthesis. See below.

1. Why do boys have an erection early in the morning? (Form II boy)
2. If I have wet dreams at night and my sister come to see me in the morning and sit on my bed will she get pregnant? (Form II boy)
3. Why is it that when I see a girl my temperature goes up [*why do i get an erection*]? (Class six boy)
4. When the temperature is high [*when you erect*] what can you do for the temperature become low? (Class 7 boy)
5. Why do girls have monthly period? [*why do girls menstruate?*] (Class 7 girl)
6. When you are finish sexing a girl [*having sexual intercourse*] why is penis feel pain? (class 7 boy)
7. When you sex with a girl [*when you have sexual intercourse*] for a long time will the girl get pregnant?(Form 3 girl)
8. What makes the breasts become big? (Class7 girl)
9. What is the main reason why boys have hair and also girls in the private parts? (Class 6 boy)

These questions support Muturi (2011 ) and Vanpette's (2006) proposal that sex education should start before puberty and before children have developed patterns of behaviour so that the information provided helps young people understand the biological changes that take place during the maturation process. However, we are aware that school subjects like Biology and Life Skills which are offered from primary school have sexuality related topics such as human reproduction system. These questions touch on the reality which is normally not discussed in class with the teachers or at home with parents. No wonder peers become the best sources of such information.

### **Sexually transmitted infections**

Many students were interested in knowing the symptoms of sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Students asked questions that seem to suggest the possibility of them having been infected with some of the STIs and their worry was that they could not tell which one of the STIs it could be. Despite their ages, their greatest fear was HIV. The questions asked under this category include:

1. When I go for a short call or try to urinate I feel a lot of pain in my private part is that HIV/AIDS? (Class 8 boy )
2. How many times can I have sex with a girl without getting HIV? (Class 8 boy )
3. The other day a boy sexed me [had sexual intercourse with me] and now I scratch my private part a lot is that HIV? (Form 2 girl)
4. When a boy sex me hard [have sexual intercourse] why do I feel pain? (Form 2 girl)
5. One day I decided to go and wash my body and when I looked at my private part it had some wounds what could be the problem? (Class 7 boy)

These questions allude to the fact that these young people are sexually active and most of them engage in unprotected sex. There was also a high possibility that a number had STI but could not tell which type.

### **Sexual abuse, incest and deviant sexual behaviors**

**a). Incest:** From the questions asked by the children we believe that some of the boys and girls were sexually abused by people they knew and mostly relatives within the home and outside the home. Many girls wanted to know what to do when their own fathers, uncles and other older men approached them for sexual favours. Young boys wanted to know how to turn down older women who lure them into sexual activities promising to meet all their financial needs. One boy had this to say:

You know madam sometimes you can be walking in the market and you find this older lady sitting and exposing her thighs and private parts when you try to pass you, are forced to look back. Then the lady will invite you to her house and treat you well. How can you refuse that and you know that that “thing“ is sweet. What do you do? (Form 2 boy).

Other related questions were:

1. What can you do if you have been asked by a relative to have sex with him? (Class 8 girl)

2. What can I do if my father forces me to do homosexual with him?(Class 8 boy)
3. What makes many fathers to rape their daughters? (Class 8 girl)
4. What can I do if my step mother forces me to have sex with her? (Class 8 boy)
5. What makes many fathers rape their daughters yet they have wives? (Form 2 girl)
6. What makes many boys do incest with their grandmothers and they have many girls in their community? (Class 8 boy)

These questions sustain the findings of a study conducted by Khamasi and Muita in 2006, which reported that most of the child sexual abusers in Kenya are close relatives and at times parents (Khamasi and Muita, 2010)

#### **(b) Deviant sexual behaviors**

**Indecent sexual assault:**The study revealed that young boys are initiated into homosexual practices by older boys and alcoholic fathers. A number attributed the practice to the freedom accorded young boys around the study site after going through male circumcision as a rite of passage. The respondents also blamed cultural practices that forbid the young boy from entering their mother's house especially the kitchen after circumcision. Hence, most lose their mother's counsel at a tender age. Majority of the young boys therefore spend most of their time in their *simba* (cottage) with no adult supervision because they are 'culturally adults' after initiation. The adulthood label is accorded and enforced in total disregard of the chronological age of a boy. These young and under age boys are visited by older boys or men and have sleepovers where homosexuality is introduced to them. Older men including fathers take advantage of the fact that there is lack of adult supervision and therefore sexually assault the young boys. One boy had this to say:

#### **Original questions:**

- i. *(Madam utafanya nini baba yako mzazi akija usiku kama amelewa anakuamsha anakuambia upige magoti na anakufanyia vituko na huwezi kumshitaki ni baba yako?)*

#### **Translation:**

Madam what can one do when your own biological father comes home drunk, wakes you up in the middle of the night, asks you to kneel down and he does very bad things to you. And you cannot report him he is your father?

- ii. *In my village most men like to perform homosexuality with their son, what can a boy facing such problems do? (Class 8 boy)*



Under the Sexual Offences Act of 2006 (Laws of Kenya, 2007) incest, indecent assault, rape, compelled or induced indecent acts, attempted defilement are some of the terms used to explain what sexual offence could entail. For example:

Any person who unlawfully -

(a) penetrates the genital organs of another person with - (i) any part of the body of another or that person; or (ii) an object manipulated by another or that person except where such penetration is carried out for proper and professional hygienic or medical purposes;

(b) manipulates any part of his or her body or the body of another person so as to cause penetration of the genital organ into or by any part of the other person's body, is guilty of an offence termed sexual assault. (p. 6)

**Zoophilia:** The study also revealed that many young boys engaged in zoophilia. See the questions below:

What makes many children in our community to practice doing sex with animals? (Class 8 boy)

If we play sex with animals do we get HIV/AIDS and how? (Class 7 boy)

### **Parent –child communication lacking**

From the study, it is clear that many children were not free to discuss with their parents or teachers matters touching on sexuality. That is why they responded overwhelmingly to our request that they ask us questions that they would not ask a teacher or a parent. This is in agreement with Noone and Young (2010) findings in a survey conducted on parent teen communication. The study reports that although teens view parents as an important influence on their sexual decision making, many reported never having a conversation on sexuality, conception control or pregnancy with their parents. Miller (2011) explains how parents postpone “the talk” with their children until it is too late. We believe a substantial number of students asked the questions because they could not ask their parents or teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to illustrate the need of introducing sex education in the Kenyan schools. The kind of questions asked by the students is a clear indication of the urgent need for sex education and as early as in primary school.

We believe that until parents and stakeholders in education accept there is need for sex education in all schools, sexual exploitation, and abuse will remain a common threat to children and youth. Lack of factual information on sex, sexuality and reproductive health leads to misinformation. The result can lead to loose of life, unwanted pregnancy and STIs among others. This eventually becomes a national burden from a community and national development point of view.

Sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse and deviant sexual behaviours are part and parcel of a community life. The students had questions touching on sexual anatomy, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual abuse including incest, zoophilia, and generally sexual maturation among others. This is a clear indication that young people need guidance and counselling and particularly a sex education course. A national policy on what, how and when to educate young people on sex and sex related matters will go a long way in preventing some of the tragic exploitative sexual experiences that harm children and threaten their wellbeing. Having appropriate knowledge would help the youth face challenges that life may throw at them throughout life. Needless to say children of the 21st century need more education on their bodies and body imagery, reproductive rights, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse and high risk sexual behaviours and other sexually exploitative behaviours. This is because technological advancement exposes them to pornography, which entices them to premature dating and early sexual debut.

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