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‘Virginity is a Virtue: Prevent Early Sex’ – Teacher perceptions of sex education in a Ugandan secondary school

Padmini Iyer^a and Peter Aggleton^b

^aDepartment of Education, School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, UK; ^bNational Centre in HIV Social Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Sex education is a politically contentious issue in many countries, and there are numerous, competing ideologies relating to the most appropriate methods to teach young people about sexual and reproductive health. This paper examines policy and practice in Uganda in light of two contrasting ideologies, namely morally conservative and comprehensive rights-based approaches to sex education. After a brief description of these approaches, findings from a preliminary qualitative study among teachers working in a non-governmental organisation-run secondary school in Uganda are discussed. Teachers’ responses are analysed against the background of current Ugandan sex education policies. The paper considers the implications of the conservative morality informing both Ugandan government policy and teachers’ implementation of sex education at the focus school. It is argued that, in the light of young Ugandans’ attitudes towards and often varied experiences of sexuality, a comprehensive rights-based approach to sex education may be more appropriate in the described setting.

Keywords: sex education; competing ideologies; teachers’ attitudes; young people; Uganda

Introduction

This paper discusses findings from a preliminary qualitative study of teachers’ perspectives on sex education at a non-governmental organisation (NGO)-run secondary school in Uganda in 2011. Adopting a stance broadly aligned with the values implicit in comprehensive, rights-informed approaches to sex education (World Health Organisation 2004; UNESCO 2009), we offer a critique of the more morally conservative approach advocated by the teachers who participated in this study. Our paper begins with a discussion of the different ideologies underpinning contemporary forms of sex education. Following this, recent Ugandan government policy documents are analysed to reveal the dominance of a morally conservative approach to sex education in official prescriptions and policy frameworks. Findings from a small-scale, in-depth qualitative study of teachers are then described, and teachers’ accounts of appropriate sex education are considered in light of both existing policy frameworks and recent literature documenting young Ugandans’ varied experiences of, and attitudes towards, sexuality in Uganda. The paper highlights the conservative everyday realities (and associated ideologies) that teachers bring to their professional encounters, but suggests that a comprehensive rights-based approach to sex education may be more

relevant in light of young Ugandans' reported experiences.

School-based sex education: competing ideologies

School-based sex education¹ has been widely promoted for its ability to protect young people against negative sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, including unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (Stone and Ingham 2006; UNESCO 2009). However, sex education is a politically contentious issue in many countries, and there are many different forms that such education can take. For example, morally conservative approaches to sex education usually seek to promote abstinence, delay and partner reduction, with the goal of limiting young people's sexual activity (Stone and Ingham 2006; Jones 2011; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). By contrast, other strategies recognise and value young people's often varied experiences, aim to encourage personal decision-making, and seek to safeguard and promote rights. These more holistic approaches are often described as 'comprehensive' in character, especially when they introduce young people to a range of risk and vulnerability reduction options, and promote the more positive and affirming aspects of sexual health (Jones 2011; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011).

The starting point of comprehensive approaches to sex education is the right to SRH, as affirmed in several international conventions and agreements. For example, the 1994 Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development recognised that the 'rights of women and men to reproductive choice' include the right to safe and affordable sexual and reproductive care services, and stressed the importance of addressing SRH issues affecting adolescents (WHO 2004, 8; Obare, Birungi, and Kavuma 2011, 152). Education on SRH has also been viewed as an 'entitlement' (Stone and Ingham 2006, 195) if young people are to achieve the highest attainable standard of health as expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Approaches to sex education seeking to fulfil these rights stress the importance of broad-based curricula that provide young people with a broad range of options and information on sexuality and sexual health. This places the emphasis on young people as social actors, and promotes their ability to make informed decisions about their sexual lives according to their own interests, circumstances and needs (Stone and Ingham 2006; Jones 2011; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011).

The 'protectionist' discourses stressed by conservative approaches to sex education exist in tension with notions of empowerment through sex education found in more comprehensive frameworks (Aldred and David 2007, 9). Contrasting with the idea that 'adults have a moral obligation not to limit the power that children could have' is the argument that 'adults have a moral obligation to protect children' (Aldred and David 2007, 9; emphasis added), with 'protection' often being defined in terms of limiting children's sexual knowledge and activity. The fear that school-based sex education may encourage sexual experimentation and risk-taking among young people is commonly associated with a protectionist position (Stone and Ingham 2006; UNESCO 2009;

Parkhurst 2011).

Protectionist approaches often give rise to restrictive and morally conservative approaches to sex education advocating abstinence, delay, partner reduction and restraint (Jones 2011; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). Many, but perhaps not all, tend to normalise heterosexuality, portray young women's sexuality as potentially problematic, and see legitimate sexual expression as occurring only within the context of established heterosexual marriage (Jones 2011, 374; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011). Sex education based on these views is often characterised by 'narrow religiously-based encouragement to abstain from sexual activity' (Stone and Ingham 2006, 194).

Both 'comprehensive rights informed' and 'morally conservative' approaches to sex education are based on particular moral ideologies. The former is seemingly more positive in the assumptions made about young people's capacity for sexual decision-making when provided with the resources to do so safely, while the latter is more sceptical concerning the outcomes of the decisions young people may make. This has important consequences for the public attitudes and responses to sex education, as well as its delivery by teachers. As Alldred and David (2007, 7) have noted, constructing sex education as a 'basic human right' or as 'corrupting of children's innocence' has important implications for the content and delivery of school-based sex education programmes.

Methods

During the first stage of the present study, a critical analysis of current Ugandan sex education policies, including the Presidential Initiative on AIDS Strategy for Communication to the Youth (PIASCY – 2006) and the National Policy Guidelines on HIV and AIDS (2006), was carried out by the first author. After this, a qualitative study took place at Bright Future High School² a co-educational, private day/boarding secondary school around 30 kilometres from Kampala, Uganda. The school opened in 2008, with 500 students enrolled at the time of the study (July 2011), and is supported by a UK–Uganda NGO, which aims to provide 'low-cost, high-quality' secondary education in sub-Saharan African countries. According to the school's headmaster, students largely come from economically disadvantaged families, and the majority face problems paying their school fees.

The first author carried out a focus group discussion with seven teachers at Bright Future High School, and a total of 11 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine teachers and two members of staff working for the NGO that runs the school. Interviews generally lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and were carried out in English. They were digitally recorded and then transcribed. In line with our desire to give value to teachers' own perspectives and accounts, the focus lay on eliciting in-depth, textured narratives suggestive of some of the complexities underpinning teachers' orientations and responses.

Teachers and other members of staff at the school were asked to discuss any experiences of teaching sex education at the school, and the main SRH issues that they thought were relevant to students. Through the semi-structured, conversational style of the interviews, participants were also encouraged to express their personal views concerning, for example, school-based sex education, the role of teachers and other adults in providing information on SRH, and their opinions about students' sexual activity in general.

The findings of this study cannot be said to be representative due to the small, non-probability sample of adults who participated. Instead, our sampling strategy aimed to select 'information-rich cases' (Patton 1990, 167). Accordingly, teachers who carried out pastoral roles (e.g. the Matron and the Warden), who taught SRH issues (in Biology or in one-off sexual health classes), as well as senior members of the administration (the Headmaster and the Financial Director), were chosen to take part. Members of staff from the UK–Uganda NGO were also selected using purposive sampling; the Director of Education of this organisation was directly involved with the content and quality of students' education, while the Managing Director influenced the issues that the NGO prioritised in its schools.

This study was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University of Sussex, Social Sciences Cluster Research Ethics Process

Findings

The construction of sexuality and 'appropriate values' in Ugandan policy documents

PIASCY is Uganda's key policy on school-based sex education.³ The policy advocates an 'ABC' (abstain, be faithful, use condoms) approach,⁴ and abstinence is described as 'the focal strategy for protecting youth ... from the impact of HIV/AIDS' (MoES 2006a, 2). The ABC + Model for HIV/ AIDS Prevention outlined in the National Policy Guidelines on HIV and AIDS reveals that the strategy is extended across three educational levels. Primary abstinence from sex is to be 'promoted among learners and students in primary and secondary educational institutions', while 'knowledge, skills and values that promote faithfulness as a strategy for safe transition into marriage' and 'condom use education' are to be delayed until tertiary education (MoES 2006e, 11).

There are several examples of rights-informed language in PIASCY documents; for example, 'the right to adequate and valid SRH information' is included under the heading of the sexual and reproductive rights of young people (MoES 2006b, 30). However, the focus on abstinence and the overall promotion of conservative moral values in the policy means that 'adequate' and 'valid' SRH information is inevitably defined in much narrower terms. The portrayal of 'normal sexual behaviour' in PIASCY documents offers one example of this. While rights-informed approaches assume that diversity is 'a fundamental characteristic of sexuality' (UNESCO 2009, 2), normal sexual behaviour is specifically defined in PIASCY as a 'sexual relationship between an adult man and woman ... ideally this should be a marriage relationship

leading to procreation’ (MoES 2006b, 34; emphasis added).

The language used in PIASCY is also overtly religious, referring mainly to conservative Christian values but also occasionally invoking Islam to include the country’s other main religious group. It is asserted that that ‘in the African context, and with all religious convictions and practices in Uganda, sex outside marriage is not approved [of]’ (MoES 2006b, 34). Teachers are also strongly encouraged to condemn ‘sexual deviations’ including masturbation and homosexuality, which ‘in an African context ... are considered abnormal and deviant because they defy the normal sexual orientation’ (MoES 2006b, 36).

In addition to this construction of normal (and abnormal) sexual behaviour, PIASCY outlines ‘some of the key values held by Ugandans’, which include ‘Virginity’ and ‘Respect to God’ (MoES 2006b, 167–168; 2006c, 25–26). These are included in the Teacher Resource Book, which encourages teachers to promote these values amongst students, as well as in the Student Handbook for Upper Post Primary level, where students are given ‘tips for promoting and maintaining’ these positive values. In the Student Handbook, young people are told that virginity ‘helps us to avoid HIV/ AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections’, and also ‘helps to avoid the anxieties which often result from broken sexual relationships’. ‘Respect to God’ is also said to ‘help us to avoid risky behaviour like sex outside marriage and drug/alcohol abuse’ (MoES2006c, 25–26). In contrast to key values such as ‘respect for elders’, which enable young people to ‘live in harmony with our religious values’ and to be ‘appreciated by God’ (MoES2006c, 25), sexual activity outside marriage is characterised as amoral, dangerous and ungodly.

Teachers are directly implicated in the transmission of these values to their students, with the Resource Book stating that ‘teachers are [students’] most important resource in developing and practicing appropriate values which can prevent them from [SRH] risks’ (MoES 2006b, 165). They must help young people to ‘handle sexuality positively’, which includes promoting messages such as: ‘having sex with someone who is not your wife or husband ... may create a strong sense of guilt in the long run’, and ‘avoid sex outside marriage for the sake of respect for your body and moral values ... sex robs you of the power to negotiate’ (MoES 2006b, 26–27). This advice and other ‘selected SRH information’ can be provided through discussions and activities such as drama and dance at school, but, above all, teachers are told to ‘support young people to appreciate that sexual feelings can be controlled’ (MoES 2006b, 30 and 50).

As is discussed later, teachers at Bright Future High School strongly subscribed to this morally conservative approach to sex education.

‘Well-equipped, skilled and morally upright students’

The ‘vision’ of Bright Future High School is painted in large, black letters on the side of the Administration Block, and is immediately visible on entering the school compound: ‘TO PRODUCE WELL-EQUIPPED, SKILLED & MORALLY UPRIGHT STUDENTS’. Other signs

used in the school's 'talking compound' (such as 'Virginity is a Virtue: Prevent Early Sex', 'Always Put God First: Everything Will Be Possible' and 'Be Disciplined At All Times: Respect Your Teachers') seem to suggest that the values promoted at the school are consistent with the conservative moral position advocated by PIASCY.⁵ The school also takes a strongly gendered approach to teaching the students their 'responsibilities as boys [and] their responsibilities as girls':

... the boy needs to know, that as a man ... I'm in charge of my life ...
[boys should] always be self-independent, compared to women ...
For girls, the first responsibility ... is having respect, and value for,
their bodies ... they are the 'Mothers of Tomorrow'.

(George, Headmaster)

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes at the school has been discussed elsewhere (Iyer and Aggleton 2013), but maintaining virginity through abstinence is a 'virtue' that is promoted for both boys and girls at the school. Francis, the Financial Director, declared that he does not want Bright Future High School to be:

[one of those] schools which go ahead and give out condoms, give out pills ... because I think there would be giving them a leeway [to have sex] ... it would mean maybe that you have failed to counsel them and to guide them.

(Francis, Financial Director)

Several teachers emphasised that students should abstain from sexual relations while they are at school for the sake of their education.

Education is a necessity ... so I first tell them to have the points of abstinence, and then afterwards they can enjoy that [sex] life they are dreaming of.

(Julius, Warden)

While this same teacher also said that he understood students' interest in sex is inevitable as 'nature starts demanding', he believed that students 'have to control that!' Another teacher accepted that sex education was important for students, but stressed that teachers had to keep a watchful eye on boarding students in the evenings after sex education lessons took place, as the classes 'excite ... their hormonal flows, and controlling themselves becomes a problem' (Joanne, Biology teacher).

A 'sexual health' class at Bright Future High School In interviews, several teachers mentioned that a 'class day' had taken place at the school a few weeks prior to the research, during which teachers had put aside the usual school timetable and talked about life skills. According to a poster hanging in the staff room, issues covered included: Social Health and Relationships, Sexual Health, Deadly Diseases, School, Money and Careers, Diet and Body, Society and Social Issues, Drugs–Drinks, Environment, and Transparency & Accountability. These topics appeared consistent with the school's aim to ensure that the education they provided was 'not only academic', and made efforts to ensure students 'acquire life skills' (Joyce, Managing

Director, NGO).

During their interviews, Henry and Grace (both English literature teachers) provided vivid accounts of the Sexual Health session which they had delivered to Senior 2 and Senior 3 students on the class day. Both teachers discussed covering ‘rape and defilement’, ‘incest’, and ‘cross-generational sex’ in this class, consistent with the topic list on the school’s class day poster. Unsurprisingly, given the topics chosen to frame ‘sexual health’ issues, the teachers discussed sexual activity outside marriage in purely negative terms. After defining ‘defilement’ as ‘any sexual relationship [with someone under] the age of 18’, Grace reported being asked by a student how sex between two people under 18 would be described. As she struggled to answer this ‘funny question’, Henry recalled that he had stepped in to explain:

[since] to defile is to ... spoil something ... they’re both defiling themselves ... this girl is spoiling this young boy’s life, and ... the boy also spoiling the life of this other.

(Henry, English teacher)

The imagined ‘young girl’ and ‘young boy’ appear to be equally blamed for engaging in premarital sex in this example, but young women’s sexuality was generally portrayed as more problematic by these teachers. Grace described ‘put[ting] in a lot of experiences’ or ‘real-life’ examples to make the topic more immediate for students during the Sexual Health class. One vivid example took the form of her descriptions of ‘harlots’ outside bars, in which Grace characterised schoolboys as innocent bystanders and the sex workers as aggressively sexual:

Around bars, around the brothels ... those harlots are there. And, yeah, they’re hungry. They can just grab. And, these young boys, they have a heart of adventure ... for them, their interest is simply to watch ... [but] these harlots ... can easily grab [them].

(Grace, English teacher)

Grace also characterised female sexuality as problematic in another example chosen to discuss rape and incest with the class. She reported reading the students a newspaper article about a father who sexually abused his daughter ‘from [the] age of six, ‘til the age of 25’, which she concluded by asking ‘whom do you blame here? Do you blame the little girl, or the father?’ After a discussion with the students on this, she revealed her own judgement:

Maybe at the beginning it was rape. But from the time that girl grew from the age of 12, I think she used to consent, she just used to accept ...

(Grace, English teacher)

Both Grace and Henry reported telling students that the girl was particularly ‘to blame’ because she had ‘failed to speak out’ about this ‘dirty relation- ship’, and used this aspect of the story to urge students to ‘not keep quiet’ if anyone ‘disturbs’ them in a similar way.

‘Homosexuality’ and ‘lesbianism’ were also listed as topics on the class day poster (under the heading of ‘sexual deviations’, along with ‘masturbation’ and ‘incest’), but interestingly Grace did not mention discussing these topics in her account of the lesson. According to Henry, however, Grace ‘defined homosexuality’ as an ‘unwanted type of sex’ during the class, and told students that it was common in ‘these single-sex schools’. Although Henry did not discuss the topic in detail, he did suggest that any students who had ‘such experiences’ should still ‘speak out’ in order to ‘get advised ... against that practice’.⁶

The various examples of sexual ‘misconduct’ discussed during the class were used to reinforce a wider message of abstinence; echoing the sign outside her classroom, Grace reported telling the students that:

...when you know that you’re a virgin... you’re so proud of it, you feel there’s so much value to your life.

(Grace, English teacher)

However, students’ reported responses in the sexual health class suggest that they were ‘against the whole issue of abstaining’ (Henry, English teacher). After being told to wait ‘til the right time to have sex’, students reportedly expressed strong objections:

...time is really not waiting for us, at the end of it all you leave the best person to go.

(Reported by Grace, English teacher)

...no, it can’t [wait], we need to begin now.

(Reported by Grace, English teacher)

...it’s hard to wait... as long as the partner is there, there is no reason, waiting.

(Reported by Henry, English teacher)

‘These young men and women need to be guided and counselled’

As well as the termly class days, teachers reported that they provided students with information on SRH in various other ways. For example, topics such as ‘body hygiene’, sexually transmitted infections, preventing HIV, contraception and pregnancy were covered on the Biology curriculum (Jonathon, Biology teacher; George, Headmaster). Beyond the classroom, the ‘talking compound’ signs described earlier were said to display ‘some dos and don’ts’ for the students, and to ‘keep reminding them, abstain, abstain, abstain’ (Edith, Christian religious education [CRE] teacher). Extracurricular activities such as music, dance and drama were also used to remind students of issues surrounding SRH: in 2010, the music, dance and drama performance centred around ‘the fight against child abuse’; and in 2009, ‘HIV and pregnancy among the youth’ (George, Headmaster; Joanne, Biology teacher).

In addition to this, all of the teachers emphasised how ‘guidance and counselling’ was

an important part of their role in supporting students with various problems, including SRH issues. This happened formally, with group counselling sessions being held every fortnight (during which the whole school is gathered together and students can ‘air their views on HIV/AIDS, sex, relationships, pregnancies’; Francis, Financial Director), and informally, with students coming to teachers to ask advice, or teachers offering advice to the students both inside and outside the classroom.

One teacher spoke about the importance of ‘making students your friends’ so that they ‘open up’ during counselling (Edith, CRE teacher), while another described her counselling role enthusiastically:

I cannot even wait for Wednesday [when group counselling sessions occur] to come... So for me everywhere, I counsel them everywhere – even if they are in the toilet, I teach them toilet manners, eh!

(Susan, Economics teacher)

While two teachers gave examples of advice that seemed to decrease students’ vulnerability to SRH risks,⁷ other accounts of such counselling suggested that the process is often more didactic than therapeutic. One teacher described a class in which students debated whether it would be better to have HIV or to become pregnant; in the end she counselled them ‘by saying that none of the two is good’ (Edith, CRE teacher). Another explained that counselling can be included in any lesson, giving the example of a girl arriving late for class and students shouting out that ‘she’s married, that’s why she’s late’. This provided an opportunity for the teacher to say ‘you people you are still young, you shouldn’t get married’ (Joan, Matron). However, in spite of their apparent enthusiasm to providing counseling and advice, several teachers suggested that their actions had a limited impact on their students:

Maybe three quarters of the [counselling] group may not really take your piece of advice...

(Henry, English teacher)

Of course, out of the thirty, two will pick up [what I have said].

(Edith, CRE teacher)

Discussion

We indicated earlier our interest in analysing teachers’ practices and perspectives against the backdrop of current policy frameworks for sex education in Uganda, and the ideologies underpinning these. Our interest lay in identifying some of the tensions created by a somewhat narrow perspective on students’ (and by extension young people’s) lives, circumstances and needs. There is abundant recent research from Uganda to show that young people engage with sex and sexuality in diverse ways. While abstinence and a ‘morally correct’ way of life may be appropriate for some young people, it is not a route followed by all. A properly contextualised approach to sex education needs to recognise this, and respond accordingly.

Both PIASCY documents and teachers' accounts from Bright Future High School are consistent with what were described earlier as morally conservative approaches to sex education, as they view school-based sex education as an opportunity to 'control' young people's sexuality, and to promote 'normal' forms of sexual behaviour firmly located within the context of a procreative heterosexual marriage. PIASCY offers a hegemonic and somewhat monolithic version of Ugandan culture and 'values', and notably uses religious precedents to advance the authority of such an approach. However, it is not clear that a morally conservative approach to sex education is necessarily appropriate in light of young Ugandans' own experiences of and attitudes towards sexuality.

The sustained assertion in the PIASCY documents that 'sex before marriage is taboo in all parts of Uganda' (MoES 2006c, 19) is partially confirmed by studies that discuss the secrecy of young people's early sexual encounters. Bohmer and Kirumbira's (2000) study of out-of-school youth and Kinsman et al.'s (2001) study of adolescent girls both reveal that young people's first sexual experiences are often secretive acts of 'sex in the bush' at community events such as weddings and funerals. More recently, Bell and Aggleton (2013, 111) document how socio-cultural and religious norms that portray pre-marital sexual activity as forbidden are a key reason why young people seek 'secretive ... sexual experiences'.

However, these and other studies also note that young people in Uganda place a high value on pre-marital sex, with young women and men typically becoming sexually active between the ages of 12 and 16 years, in ways that range from 'sexual play to full sexual intercourse' (Bohmer and Kirumbira 2000, 276). The commonplace nature of pre-marital sexual activity among young people is also suggested by the assertion of married young men and women in this same study that 'it is very unlikely that a girl would reach 18 years without losing her virginity', and that 'it is hard to find a girl who is still a virgin' (Bohmer and Kirumbira 2000, 276). More recent work with young people in Uganda (for example, Birungi et al. 2009; Råssjö and Kiwanuka 2010; Nobelius et al. 2011; Katz et al. 2013) reveals that young people continue to be interested and involved in sexual relationships (and transactional relationships in particular) despite the existence of conservative social norms.

Muhanguzi's (2011) recent study with secondary school students in Uganda also reveals that girls can feel pressured into sexual relationships by their peers, but may attempt to reject sexual advances in order to focus on their studies and preserve their reputations. In spite of girls' positive attitudes towards sexual activity in Kinsman et al.'s (2001) study, their findings, along with those of Bohmer and Kirumbira (2000) and Muhanguzi (2011), suggest that young men's belief in their sexual prerogative often leads to young women being coerced into sex, which is corroborated by other recent studies concerning intimate partner violence and coercive sex in Uganda (for example, Koenig et al. 2004; Karamagi et al. 2006; Annan and Brier 2010).

The attitudes of students (as reported by teachers) at Bright Future High School similarly suggest that they do not share their teachers' stated views of virginity as a

virtue. As well as protesting against their teachers' advice to abstain from sexual activity, it was also reported that during a debate on the legalisation of abortion, some girls argued that sex is 'just having fun' (and so girls should be able to legally abort and continue their education).

This strongly suggests resistance to the official construction of sexual activity outside marriage as sinful and dangerous. Additionally, incidents of 'coupling' (sexual relationships) between students reported by teachers at the school (Iyer and Aggleton 2013) also suggest that students hold relatively positive attitudes towards pre-marital sexual activity, consistent with their peers in other African countries (see, for example, Groes-Green 2009, 659; McLaughlin et al. 2011, 59). As young people who were reportedly highly aware of (and interested in) sexual activity, more appropriate sex education for students at Bright Future High School should arguably include more comprehensive information and advice on sexual health.

Teachers' views and perspectives

Previous studies of sex education in Uganda have reported that teachers are often reluctant to discuss SRH, for fear of going against 'local traditions' that consider public discussion of sex as taboo (Kinsman et al. 2001, 94; Kibombo et al. 2008, 6). In addition, Ugandan teachers cite practical barriers to undertaking sex education, including lack of appropriate training, materials and time (Kinsman et al. 2001; Kibombo et al. 2008). These are not challenges unique to Uganda or in sub-Saharan Africa; students in the United Kingdom (Kehily 2002), Australia (Lupton and Tulloch 1996) and New Zealand (Allen 2005; 2009) also report that teachers are too embarrassed to talk about SRH issues, appear to lack specific knowledge, and feel that parents do not want these issues discussed in school.

However, teachers interviewed in this study did not appear too embarrassed to discuss SRH issues with students – indeed, they reported doing so enthusiastically, often influenced by born-again Christian values – nor did they seem aware of their own lack of accurate SRH knowledge. While repeatedly emphasising that the students were not well informed about SRH, teachers were often incorrect in the claims they made. Contraception, for example, was believed to cause 'permanent barrenness' by several teachers, while one teacher suggested that AIDS could be cured by going to 'other countries to change blood'.

There is clearly a major disjuncture between the sex education provided by teachers at Bright Future High School and the potential needs of students, based on previous studies' findings of young people's experiences as well as teachers' reports of student behaviour and attitudes at the school. For example, the story in which a girl was blamed for being sexually abused by her father once she had reached puberty is not only a disturbing message to convey to students, but particularly inappropriate in light of the fact that there were reportedly girls at the school who had been victims of sexual abuse themselves. The expression of such attitudes by teachers seems more likely to invoke

shame, confusion and fear in students experiencing abuse, rather than encouraging them to ‘speak out’ or to seek help.

In addition, the fact that many students were already (reportedly) sexually active at the school suggests that a comprehensive, rights-based approach would be more appropriate than a morally conservative style of sex education. Teachers acknowledged that their insistence that pupils should ‘abstain, abstain, abstain’ was not working, but, more importantly, their emphasis on abstinence to the exclusion of providing information on contraception, safe sex, and so on, also left sexually active students unable to make informed decisions on their sexual behaviour. A more comprehensive approach would encourage the acquisition of ‘values such as reciprocity, equality, responsibility and respect’, and would provide ‘scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgemental information’ to encourage ‘healthy and safer sexual and social relationships’ (UNESCO 2009, 2–5). It would also enable a more open, discussion-based approach to sexual health classes than the current didactic approach, which ignores students’ experiences and needs.

The ‘denial of knowledge, marginalisation, lack of straightforward means for critiquing the subject content and [failure] to inform’ that is evident in the morally conservative sex education provided at Bright Future High School may be viewed as a ‘violation of individual rights’ intimately associated with increased vulnerability to HIV and other SRH risks (Mirembe 2002, 292). While schools are commonly viewed as agents of change in terms of promoting young people’s SRH, the findings from this study support others that have portrayed the school as a potential ‘risk factor’ in the lives of young people by limiting their ability to access comprehensive SRH information and opportunities to critically reflect upon wider issues relating to gender and sexuality (Mirembe and Davies 2001; Muhangazi 2011).

Nevertheless, schools remain potentially attractive locations for educating young people on sexual matters in the Global South, with the opportunity to reach large numbers due to growing levels of school enrolment (UNESCO 2009). However, as this paper highlights, there is an urgent need to interrogate the way in which sex, sexuality and sexual health are engaged with in the classroom and in the wider school environment. Sociologically-informed analyses of the assumptions and ideologies at work in both official policy prescriptions and classroom practices have an important role to play in this respect. If schools are to have a positive impact on students’ SRH, approaches to sex education organised around a moral panic about young people’s sexuality must be replaced by approaches more relevant to the contextuality and diversity of their lived experiences, thus enabling young people to make more informed decisions about their sexual lives.

Notes

1. School-based sex education takes many forms, and is also known variously as ‘sexuality education’, ‘sex and relationships education’ or, more euphemistically, ‘family life education’ or ‘life skills education’ (UNESCO 2007, 8). The broad term sex education is used to refer to all of these different practices in this paper.
2. The name of the school and all participants’ names have been changed to maintain anonymity.
3. PIASCY was introduced by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in 2003 for primary schools, and in 2006 for secondary schools. The secondary school module consists of four policy documents: a ‘Training Manual’, a ‘Teacher Resource Book on HIV/AIDS’, and two ‘Student Handbooks on HIV/AIDS’ (lower post primary and upper post primary) (MoES 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d).
4. The use of the ABC approach to HIV prevention has proved controversial. The fall in HIV prevalence in Uganda during the 1990s was attributed to the success of the ABC approach, which formed the putative evidence-base for its promotion in developing countries by the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief from 2003 to 2010. However, Parkhurst (2011) and Kirby and Halperin (2008) have challenged the notion that abstinence-only messages were the cause of this success, arguing that it was in fact the combination of ‘breaking up the sexual networks by having fewer sexual partners’ and ‘decreasing the risk of HIV transmission through the use of condoms’ that led to Uganda’s HIV prevention efforts having a powerful impact in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kirby and Halperin 2008, 29).
5. The PIASCY curriculum was not formally being implemented at the school at the time of this study, although one of the Biology teachers (Joanne) had received PIASCY training, and the Headmaster stated that the school was planning to introduce the curriculum over the coming year.
6. This is a fairly moderate expression of the widely-reported homophobia in Uganda, which is often characterised by ‘rage, revulsion, disgust and malevolence’ (Tamale 2007, 17). The controversial Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009 originally stipulated the death penalty for some homosexual acts, although this has reportedly been dropped. Uganda’s President Museveni recently stated that ‘if there are some homosexuals, we shall not kill or persecute them but ... we cannot accept promotion of homosexuality as if it is a good thing’ (BBC News Online 2012).
7. After finding out that a female student was being sexually abused by her brother-in-law (who paid her school fees), one teacher strongly encouraged the student’s sister to place her in the boarding school under the pretext that it would improve her academic performance. Another teacher reported helping older female students to save money with her at the school in order to build up capital for their school fees and so avoid transactional ‘sugar daddy’ relationships with older men (Edith, CRE teacher; Susan, Economics teacher).

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