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## Exploring Parents' and Teachers' Perspectives about School-Based Sexuality Education in a Multicultural Context: A Case Study in Mauritius

WAJIIHAH BANU SHAH EMAMBOKUS and BRINDA OOGARAH-PRATAP

### Abstract

The importance of school-based Sexuality Education (SE) programs is widely recognized. Effective implementation of such programs require that due consideration be given to sociocultural factors that can constitute enablers and potential barriers. Numerous research studies on these aspects have been conducted in developed countries. However, there is a lack of such studies in developing countries, especially studies involving school-aged adolescents from a multicultural context and from socioeconomically deprived areas. Therefore, this small-scale study uses a qualitative approach to research conducted in Mauritius, a developing country with a significantly multicultural population, and where SE is addressed in a fragmented manner within the school curriculum, despite changes noted in the sexual behaviors of the country's adolescents. The aim of the study was to explore parents' and teachers' perspectives of sociocultural factors that can act as enabling factors or potential barriers. The study involved semi-structured interviews of two parents and two teachers selected through purposive sampling at a secondary school which has students from diverse cultural backgrounds and mostly from socioeconomically deprived areas. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the enabling factors were perceived as the importance of school-based SE by parents and teachers, contribution of external organizations, and a two-way communication process with adolescents. The potential barriers were perceived as a resistance from some teachers and students, the gender of the parent, and religion. Generation gap and ICT were found to be both enablers and barriers. The findings have implications for the design and implementation of school-based SE within a multicultural context and pave the way for similar studies on a larger scale.

**Keywords:** School-based sexuality education, adolescents, multicultural, enablers, barriers.



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## Introduction

Mauritius is a small island of 1,865 square kilometers, situated in the Indian Ocean to the southeast of the African continental mainland. It has a multicultural population of approximately 1.3 million. The inhabitants are mainly of African and Asian origin and follow one of four main religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism). The education system reflects the British system, given that Mauritius was a former British colony, having gained its independence in 1968. Primary education and secondary education are free and under the purview of the Ministry of Education, as are the human resources for the country's education, and for overseeing Tertiary Education and Scientific Research. Mauritius is still a developing nation, though it has experienced rapid socioeconomic growth over the past few decades (Tang, 2018). This shift has been accompanied with significant changes in societal values, and in so doing, changes in the sexual behaviors of Mauritian adolescents.

According to the latest Global School Health Survey conducted in Mauritius, 22% of Mauritian school-aged adolescents (12-17 year-olds) had already had sexual intercourse (World Health Organization, 2014). Among those students who had had sexual intercourse, 46.9% had initiated intercourse prior to the age of 14 years old, and that there was no significant difference seen between the genders. Additionally, only 44.0% had used a condom during the last time they had sexual intercourse. Pregnancy in teenage females is also becoming widespread. According to the Director of the Mauritius Family Planning Welfare Association (MFPWA), around five pregnant teenage girls call their office for help each week (Fakun, 2016).

The Mauritian current educational system does not seem to be adequately responding to these societal changes. Though the need to provide Sexuality Education (SE) to school-aged adolescents is recognized at local and international levels, SE is still addressed in a fragmented manner within the Mauritian school curriculum. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2009), the primary goal of SE is to make "children and young people become equipped with knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV" (p. 3). The high rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among teenagers in Eastern and Southern African countries is largely attributed to the unmet need for information, education and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services for young people (UNESCO, 2013). The purpose of SE is to guide students' behavior, stressing upon social problems targeting millions of youngsters rather than merely the delivery of simple science education (Godswill, 2012).

In developing countries, such as Mauritius, sex is still considered as a taboo subject and views of adolescents, parents and teachers about school-based SE differ considerably (Rambaree, 2011). A study conducted by Netsanet, Assefa, Alemseged, and Ambaw (2012), in Ethiopia, revealed that school-aged adolescents showed favorable attitudes towards school-based SE. However this positive perception was not reflected among their teachers or parents. Moreover, in Nepal, teachers delivered only biological information, whereas their parents wanted children to receive Moral Education, but the students' interests were geared towards SE based on life skills. In India, Tripathi and Sekher (2013) reported that SE-related topics are best addressed through Adolescent Family Life Education. The latter provides knowledge concerning the physical, social, moral, behavioral and psychological changes and

developments during puberty, while also placing emphasis on adolescents' roles and responsibilities at both the familial and societal levels. In Nigeria, adults believe that the provision of information about SE-related topics to adolescents can encourage the latter to become sexually active, and could thereby contribute to the moral deterioration of the country's youth (Dienye, 2013; Hallgarten, 2010).

Today, access to information about sexuality has increased through the wider availability of the Internet and other ICT facilities. In Mauritius, close to 90% of school-aged adolescents have access to the Internet and are members of at least one online social network (Khedo, Suntoo, Elaheebocus, & Mocktoolah, 2013). Rambaree (2011) pointed to the need for an appropriate formal sex education program for adolescents. The program "should take into account the 'Net Culture' context within which contemporary young people are growing sexually in Mauritius" (p. 171). In Bangladesh, adolescents surf the Internet in cyber cafés to watch pornographic clips, read erotic books, and watch X-rated films (Reeuwijk & Nahar, 2013). Similarly in Indonesia, adolescents are using the Internet to search for informal and unreliable sources of information about sex and sexual relationships (Hald & Mulya, 2013).

While there has been significant research on the implementation of SE and its benefits in developed countries, there is still a considerable lack of literature on the implementation of SE in developing countries, including studies involving school-aged adolescents from a multicultural context and from socioeconomically deprived areas. Filbert and Flynn (2010) stated that due consideration should be given to the sociocultural context in the design and implementation of SE programs. Similarly, Mukoma et al. (2009) pointed out that a program is more likely to have a positive effect where it is culturally suitable and adjusted to the framework of the local cultural situation. Moreover, social and cultural aspects have been found to act as barriers, and can restrict open discussion of SE-related topics (Oshi, Nakalema, & Oshi, 2005).

The current study addresses the research gap in this area by focusing on the sociocultural factors that can be enabling factors or potential barriers to the design and implementation of SE in the Mauritian school curriculum. Using a qualitative approach, the perspectives of parents with regards to SE in a multicultural context are explored. The perspectives of teachers working with adolescents from socioeconomically deprived areas are also considered.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the current study was to explore parents' and teachers' perspectives of sociocultural factors that can act as enabling factors or potential barriers to SE in secondary schools in Mauritius. A case study research design, supporting a qualitative research approach, was employed. As stated by McLeod (2008), "Case studies are in-depth investigations of a single person, group, event or community" (p. 1). For the current study, a purposive sample of two parents and two teachers were selected from one secondary school in Mauritius which has students mostly from socioeconomically deprived areas and from diverse cultures. The study participants were selected based on their profile (see Table 1). The sample selected was not meant for drawing generalizations, but rather it was targeted towards probing the existing perceptions and ideas which are both sensitive in nature and difficult to quantify (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

**Table 1.** Profile of study participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Reasons for Selection</i>
<i>Teacher 1</i>	Female Hindu in her 50s. English Language educator. Head of Department.	Open-mindedness. Personal encounters with target group students and parents. Involved in social work.
<i>Teacher 2</i>	Female Catholic in late 20s. Information & Technology and SE educator for 5 years.	Important to gain an IT educator's perspective as technological advances closely relate to the topic. Number of years of work experience better qualifies responding to questions.
<i>Parent 1</i>	Female Hindu in early 30s. Works as a maid. Widow and mother of 3 daughters.	Faces family problems. Daughter experienced early sexual activity and school truancy.
<i>Parent 2</i>	Male Muslim in mid-50s. Works as a clerk. Father of 3 daughters. Wife is a homemaker.	Sole earner of the family. Daughter has a good school record.

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer was allowed an element of openness and flexibility since the issue of sexuality is sensitive. The interview respondents felt free to deliver even their inner perspectives. Each interview lasted around 30 to 45 minutes and took place in private in order to ensure it was not overheard by colleagues or students. Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Freud's Psychosexual Theory of Development guided the design of the interview questions, which were asked by way of probing for relevant and rich information. So as to ensure that the participants' responses and perspectives were well-documented, each interview session was audio-recorded in order that a more accurate and permanent record could be recalled and used for transcription and subsequent analysis.

Prior to the interview sessions, the participants were briefed about the nature of the research, its aim and objectives. Emphasis was stressed that the participants were under no obligation to participate in the research, and that they were also free to decline at any point. Consent was also obtained from the school authority, teachers and parents. Confidentiality of the participants was assured during the data collection and analysis. In order to further protect their confidentiality, the identity of participants' location was also concealed.

Data from the interview transcripts were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Two themes were preset, namely enabling factors and potential barriers. These two themes were searched for within each transcript. As the researchers read through the transcripts, additional emerging themes were identified within each preset theme (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Emerging and preset themes

<i>Emerging Themes</i>	<i>Preset Themes</i>
Conceptualization of SE	Enabling factors
Role of ICT	Potential Barriers
Contribution of external organizations	
Communication process	
Generation gap	
Role of teachers	
Taboo subject	
Gender and religion of parents	

**Results**

Analysis of the teachers’ and parents’ responses revealed a number of factors as enabling factors and potential barriers to the implementation of SE in Mauritian schools. As shown in Table 3, some of these factors were identified by both groups of study participants. Moreover, a few of the factors could be considered as both enablers and barriers, depending on the context.

**Table 3.** Emerging Enabling Factors and Potential Barriers

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Enabling</i>	<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Parent</i>
Conceptualization of SE	√		√	√
Role of ICT	√	√	√	√
Contribution of external organizations	√		√	
Communication process	√		√	√
Generation gap and taboo subject	√	√	√	√
Resistance from teachers and students		√	√	
Gender and religion of parents		√		√

*Conceptualization of SE*

Both parents and teachers conceptualized SE positively and acknowledged its importance. For parents, SE at school would help male and female adolescents to understand the concept of love, to respect each other, and to empower young females to protect themselves.

*Providing SE, means that pupils must be aware of what is going on around them; for example, they must know exactly what is the meaning of real love. Their conception of love is being distorted. (Parent 2)*

*We have to bring about SE to help them understand exactly what the concept of love is,... how a girl and a boy must behave. In that respect, how each has to respect the other, and not as it is happening today. So in that respect, SE is going to be very helpful to these students... so that boys will not abuse girls. (Parent 1)*

For teachers, SE at school would provide adolescent students with the appropriate information about their own sexual development and reproductive health in order to help them make the right choices and the right decisions in the short- as well as in the long-term. Therefore, the benefits of SE are not limited just to the period of adolescence.

*I believe that this type of education would give young children many ideas about how to make informed decisions, not only about their body, but also about their future sexual life. (Teacher 2)*

*I believe during this time, children acquire a lot of information and they will develop attitudes, beliefs and values. They will get more ideas about their sexual development, their reproductive health, their personal and impersonal relationships as well as certain gender roles. (Teacher 1)*

#### *Role of ICT*

ICT was found to be both an enabling factor and a barrier by teachers, while for parents ICT constituted mainly a barrier. Teachers appreciated the role of ICT in improving access to information on SE related issues, especially from the Internet.

*As ICT has become today a must in every one's life, I believe that there is also a lot of information there from which children can benefit; provided that we, as parents as well as teachers, show them the right way, what is the right thing to view, and what to avoid. In this way, children by themselves can make use of ICT in order to be able to get more information. (Teacher 1)*

Despite the benefit of ICT acknowledged by teachers, parents as well teachers also recognized that the information that is available on the Internet, for example, may be misleading or even erroneous. Access to such information is a challenge for teachers as such information may conflict with the SE-related information that students are provided during SE classes. Adult guidance is therefore needed in order to help adolescents to distinguish between credible online sources of information and those which may be misleading or incorrect.

*Well I cannot really say whether we can, in the long run, monitor everything that a child watches; but definitely there will be some way that we can find out in order to avoid such happenings in the future for the children. (Teacher 1)*

*Today, in this world of technology, there are lots of things which are against morality. In that respect we are talking a lot about sex education. (Parent 2)*

#### *Contribution of External Organizations*

Teachers pointed out that though they have an important contribution to school-based SE programs, it is not solely their responsibility. External organizations can also bring added value to the programs.

*But it would also benefit students if they would have others from a certified organization coming and talking to them. (Teacher 1)*

*This education to the school community will be a fruitful option as the Ministry of Education, non-governmental organizations and social workers can prepare more relevant topics that can be included... for discussion matters at the school level – seminars can be held where students at all levels can share their opinions, and interact with their elders in order to receive better guidance. (Teacher 2)*

#### *Communication process*

Both teachers stressed the fact that communication approaches adopted by schools should follow an easy and smooth path. This would aim to create and sustain their students'

interest. Students tend to be more receptive to information delivered by their teachers than through broadcast media.

*As an educator, I believe that when we speak to kids, to children or young people they have the tendency to see it in another perspective, they listen to us more than if it was on the radio or TV. (Teacher 1)*

Parents also acknowledged the need for a two-way communication process, though they may find the issues sensitive at times, and thereby recognized that teachers may find it easier to communicate with adolescents.

*When you talk about sex, it should be in school as well as also in the house with the parents. This is going to help because parents nowadays who find it really very difficult to talk about this issue to their children... Teachers [outside of the family] will be much more free to talk about this issue. (Parent 1)*

*It is not something shameful because adolescents need to know about their own body right from a small age... Whilst not exactly shameful for my daughter, it is something which is seen as very negative. This sensitive issue that she is going to be informed about outside [of the family], you know, it may be something good, or it may be something bad. But in most cases it will be something bad which they receive... It is something which we cannot ignore, but it is true that sometimes we, as parents, we hesitate. We must gather our strength and dare to talk with them and to make friends with them so that they are able to share their feelings with us. (Parent 2)*

#### *Generation gap and taboo subject*

Teachers and parents recognized that today's youth generation has evolved very fast, and as such that SE is no longer perceived to be a taboo subject.

*We must take into consideration the fact that this generation is not the same as past generations. (Parent 1)*

Both of the teachers did not consider SE as a taboo subject, and felt that students are in need of proper SE and that they should talk freely with them, or at least try their best.

*Well, this new generation does not make anything easy. Still we do try our best in order to inculcate in them some form of moral education. (Teacher 1)*

*It was a taboo-like subject, but now everything is more open... This is not a taboo thing among students... not any more. In this era I don't think it is taboo, neither can I think it will be taboo for me to discuss it. (Teacher 2)*

One parent, on the other hand, still felt that SE was a taboo subject. Nonetheless, the parent highlighted the need to overcome this perception.

*Yes, it is considered as a taboo subject. In many fields, it is considered as a taboo subject and you must, as soon as possible, by providing SE, try to change this negative concept of taboo. (Parent 2)*

Parents mentioned that adolescents nowadays perceive sexuality with a more "open-mind." Therefore, school-based SE should not only focus on preventing adolescents from becoming sexually active, but also help them to learn more, to be aware of their acts and their consequences, to be able to make their own decisions and to shoulder their own responsibility, in order to emerge as fully informed individuals.



*We cannot prevent them from committing sexual acts, but we must make them aware about the precautions which should be taken so as to prevent them from falling pregnant. If they are pregnant, they should stop coming to school and thus their career is totally ruined before it even starts. It is then that they may be vulnerable to falling into prostitution and drug usage since they would be in need of money to lead their lives. (Parent 1)*

The teachers felt that too much “openness” have result in adolescents starting to disrespect the norms, rules and regulations set by society. Consequently, making them abide by those rules and regulations can be quite difficult.

*Well, this new generation does not make anything easy... As Teachers, even as parents, I believed, it becomes difficult for us to make children abide by the rules, but we can still try. (Teacher 1)*

#### *Resistance from teachers and students*

Though the teachers in the current study acknowledged the importance of SE and did not consider it as a taboo subject, they also pointed out that some teachers may not feel prepared to talk about issues of sexuality due to a lack of knowledge. Lack of training may therefore be seen as a cause for this reticence of some teachers. Thus, proper training of teachers should be administered.

*If teachers are provided with appropriate knowledge and training on SE, the task of the teachers can be made easier. Challenges that may crop up may include resistance from teachers' attitudes to deliver the correct teaching. (Teacher 2)*

In addition, resistance can also come from the students themselves. When faced with sensitive issues and having to discuss them with their teachers, it may be perceived by some students as rather embarrassing. Despite the fact that the current youth generation is considered to be more open-minded, some students may still feel too shy to talk about sexuality issues freely, especially in front of their teachers in a classroom setting.

*There is a resistance or shyness from some students for which the teachers must help them to overcome by maybe applying different types of teaching strategy or approach. (Teacher 2)*

#### *Gender and Religion of Parents*

Both of the parents acknowledged the need to be able to discuss sexuality issues with their children. Nonetheless, analysis of the interview transcripts indicated that the female parent (Parent 1) was more at ease talking to her child about issues of sexuality compared to the interviewed male parent (Parent 2).

*No I do not limit myself because it is true that we should be closer to our children. Topics such as menstruation... we should know when they are having their menses, or if they are ill or anemic. Or is it that only after 3 months that parents should know that their child has become pregnant. (Parent 1)*

*It is something which we cannot ignore, but it is true that sometimes we, as parents, we hesitate. We must gather our strength and dare to talk with them and to make friends with them so that they are able to share their feelings with us. (Parent 2)*

Religion was also found to be an important factor influencing two-way communication on issues of sexuality as discussed between parents and their children. Parents of the Hindu or Muslim faith tend to find it difficult to tackle such issues because of their own upbringing.

*Usually we, as Muslims or Hindus, have experienced an upbringing that is considered different, so it is quite difficult for us to talk freely about SE with our kids. (Parent 1)*

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

A number of sociocultural factors emerged as enablers or barriers to SE in secondary schools in a multicultural context such as Mauritius. The perceived importance of SE by both parents and teachers was seen as an enabling factor. Parents and teachers believed that SE is important to help adolescents better understand and cope with the developmental changes during the adolescence period, and also to help foster their decision-making skills. The perceived importance also related to the affective domain whereby SE can promote values such as respect and love. Resistance for the implementation of SE is less likely when both parents and teachers have positive perceptions about school-based SE. Resistance from teachers could still arise should they lack the relevant knowledge and training to teach topics on sexuality issues. To address this shortcoming, schools could seek the support of external resources with the relevant expertise.

A two-way communication process between adolescents and their parents or teachers also constituted an enabling factor. It was felt that teachers were better positioned to address sexuality issues with adolescents at school because of their communication approach, and that students tend to be generally more receptive to the information they provide. Religion, gender and the generation gap were perceived as potential sociocultural barriers to the effective communication process regarding SE. In the current study, reluctance to talk about sexuality issues was not only confined to the parents and teachers. It was also reported by the teachers and parents that certain students might not feel at ease talking about these issues with other adults either because they are either too shy or because of their upbringing, especially those from a Hindu or Muslim faith background.

Generally, both parents and teachers felt that SE was a less taboo subject nowadays because today's generation perceive sexuality more openly. While this could constitute an enabling factor to the implementation of school-based SE, it might have implications given that today's adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual activities from a younger age. Thus, SE in schools should not only focus up the abstinence-only approach, as per the more commonly accepted norms of Mauritian society, but should empower adolescents with the relevant knowledge and life-skills to adopt informed and safe behaviors. The latter includes the discerning use of ICTs as a means to accessing credible online resources of information on sexuality.

This small-scale study provided useful insights on some of the enabling factors and potential barriers to school-based SE from teachers' and parents' perspectives, conducted within a multicultural context such as Mauritius. The findings constitute a notable starting point for future studies involving greater numbers of teachers and parents. Moreover, research is also needed on students' perspectives, as they are a primary stakeholder for school-based SE.

## Notes

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