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Approaches to delivering contextual and culturally relevant sexuality education: insights from educators in rural schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality education in rural South African schools encounters significant challenges, including limited resources, socio-cultural barriers, and lack of contextual relevance. This study explored culturally relevant, contextualised approaches to delivering sexuality education in rural schools using a qualitative design. Data were collected using participatory action research during a three-day workshop with 19 educators from the Soutpansberg North Circuit in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The workshop, guided by the UN Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education and the training cycle competency framework, sought to facilitate open dialogue and interactive engagement. Group discussions were documented using flip charts, photographs, and audiovisual recordings. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Three main themes were developed: educators' learning needs; barriers to effective sexuality education; and strategies for delivering contextually and culturally relevant instruction. Findings highlight the importance of empowering educators with context-sensitive approaches to sexuality education to bridge the gap between formal curricula and the everyday experiences and realities of rural learners.

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Introduction

Among young people in the Vhembe district of Limpopo, South Africa, unprotected sexual activity remains common. Such behaviour contributes to high rates of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and in some cases unsafe abortion (Khosa, Mudau, and Makhado 2024). Studies highlight the complex interplay between knowledge and the socio-economic factors influencing these practices (Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2021; Koch and Wehmeyer 2021). A key issue is the inadequacy of sexuality education provision, particularly in rural schools (Munyai 2023).

Persistent poverty and unemployment within the local community further exacerbate the problem, driving children at an early age into sex work and transactional relationships

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(Ramoshaba, Rapholo, and Mamadi 2022). Traditional beliefs and stigma surrounding HIV hinder open discussion about prevention and perpetuate misinformation, leading to ongoing transmission (Govender et al. 2017). Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and systematic approach to sexuality education, which is critical for equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to transition safely into adulthood (Department of Basic Education 2019).

Despite its inclusion in the curriculum, the implementation of sexuality education has faced significant criticism for its inadequacy (Koch and Beyers 2023). Barriers to the provision of effective sexuality education include a disconnect between the current Life Orientation (LO) curriculum (as part of which sexuality education is delivered) and learners' lived experiences, particularly in contexts marked by high rates of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies and HIV transmission (Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2021). Many learners find the current LO content disengaging and irrelevant to their experience. Furthermore, teachers' personal values are often opposed to the provision of sexuality education, making them hesitant to engage in meaningful conversation on relevant topics (Koch and Wehmeyer 2021).

In the light of these challenges, a project was initiated in the Soutpansberg North Circuit of Limpopo, focusing on education and community engagement as strategies for strengthening HIV prevention among learners in Limpopo. The study sought to identify effective approaches for delivering sexuality education, emphasising the importance of adequately training educators to addressing learners' needs and creating a supportive, relevant learning environment.

Theoretical framework

We drew on the United Nations (UN) (2018) Revised Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO 2018) and the training cycle competency framework (World Meteorological Organization 2018) to guide the implementation and evaluation of the project.

Comprehensive sexuality education framework

The UN Revised Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education emphasises the importance of providing culturally relevant and context-appropriate education which acknowledges the social and cultural aspects and dynamics of a specific setting. In rural schools, this means fostering respect and responsibility in relationships, while guiding learners to critically examine and challenge the cultural norms and behaviours that shape their choices. By adopting such an approach, educators can deliver comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that is both scientifically accurate and attuned to the realities faced by rural learners.

The Guidance highlights the transformative potential of CSE. It seeks to empower individuals and communities by promoting critical thinking, strengthening citizenship, and encouraging learners to develop positive values towards sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Thus, in the context of rural schools, CSE can become a powerful means of building learners' self-esteem and developing learners as advocates for human rights and champions for gender equality.

The training cycle framework

The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) (2018) guide to competency-based training was designed to help individuals acquire or refine specific skills through a systematic, iterative process. It emphasises culturally relevant and contextual training, within educational programmes that are tailored to meet the diverse needs of different regions and communities. By weaving local context and cultural nuance into the structure of the training, the WMO guidance seeks to ensure that learning is both scientifically rigorous and deeply reflective of the cultural realities in which it is delivered.

The competency-based training cycle, outlined by the WMO, consists of several key stages, as illustrated in Figure 1. At its core, is an analysis of organisational context to ensure the training provided aligns with broader goals and needs, and empowers learners to make informed decisions about a subject or topic.

The cycle begins with the identification of learning needs, with a focus on the gaps between current competencies and those required for success. From this analysis, appropriate learning solutions are designed, utilising a range of methods, such as formal training or on-the-job learning, tailored to specific learner needs. The subsequent development of resources and activities should reflect the identified learning outcomes, ensuring that they are both practical and aligned with the broader objectives of the training. The delivery of this training, facilitated by skilled educators, becomes a moment of interaction, when participants engage with the material provided, while being encouraged to question their assumptions and expand their understanding. Assessing learning outcomes is comes next. By evaluating the success of the training, educators can determine if the intended competencies have been achieved. Feedback and reflection feed into the final stage, allowing ongoing analysis and improvement of the training cycle.



Figure 1. A typical training cycle (World Meteorological Organization 2018, 34).

Integrating the CSE framework into the training cycle

In this study, the UN CSE framework's learning objectives, such as developing autonomy, critical thinking, and respectful relationships, were translated into specific competencies and embedded in the training content. For instance, the training needs analysis phase drew on technical guidance domains such as relationships, rights, values, and sexual behaviour to identify gaps in teachers' knowledge and capacity.

Learning materials and strategies were tailored accordingly, ensuring they addressed both curricular relevance and contextual realities. During the delivery phase, facilitators used participatory and contextually relevant methods to reflect the UN technical guidance's commitment to inclusivity, rights-based education, and cultural relevance. The assessment stage evaluated learners' mastery of CSE-related competencies such as an understanding of SRH rights and the ability to challenge harmful gender norms, aligning with both the technical guidance's learning outcomes and the WMO's emphasis on outcome-based evaluation.

Integrating the UN technical guidance into the training enabled the project to align with international standards for sexuality education while promoting a responsive and contextually relevant form of education tailored to the needs of educators and learners in rural Limpopo.

Methods

Research design

The study was part of a larger project by the second author that adopted a qualitative cyclical longitudinal ethnography design (Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2023). The overarching goal of this larger project was to explore and improve the implementation of sexuality education in rural South African farm schools as part of broader HIV prevention efforts in the Soutpansberg North Circuit, Limpopo Province. The cyclical longitudinal ethnographic approach allowed for repeated visits to the research site over several years to develop an in-depth contextual understanding of the sociocultural, educational, and institutional factors influencing how sexuality education was delivered and received, design relevant interventions, and monitor their impact over time (Neale 2021). Unlike traditional ethnography, which requires long-term on-site presence, the cyclical method promotes repeated, iterative engagement alongside ongoing reflection and adaptation, making it well suited for enquiry into complex, evolving contexts such as sexuality education in rural schools.

Context

The study focused on Musina town, a rural community in the Vhembe region of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Musina is situated along the N1 highway corridor, and primarily serves as a transit point for trade between South Africa and countries to the north, including Zimbabwe, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, yet with minimal direct economic benefits accruing to the local population (Frouws and Horwood 2017).

Schools in Musina fall under the administration of the Soutpansberg North Circuit in the Vhembe district, which was selected due to specific contextual vulnerabilities pertinent to CSE research. These vulnerabilities include pervasive socio-economic hardship, high unemployment rates, limited access to healthcare services, and constrained educational resources, all factors known to elevate young people's susceptibility to unprotected sexual activities (Netshidongololwe 2016).

Musina's proximity to international borders and significant trade routes intensifies cross-border mobility, resulting in substantial migration, transactional sex, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking, thereby significantly increasing HIV transmission risks within this community (De Sas Kropiwnicki 2010; Frouws and Horwood 2017). Consequently, this area provided a distinctive context for examining the effectiveness of a culturally relevant and contextually responsive forms of sexuality education. Figure 2 provides a map of Musina and its surrounding areas.

Participants

Nineteen LO educators from rural schools in the Soutpansberg North Circuit, Limpopo, participated in a workshop we ran in August 2024. The participants came from eight different schools, with 16 participants identifying as female and 3 as male. All the teachers were fluent in English. Seventeen of the educators lived in the Soutpansberg North Circuit, where the schools are located, while the remaining two stayed in this area during the weekdays and travelled home at weekends.

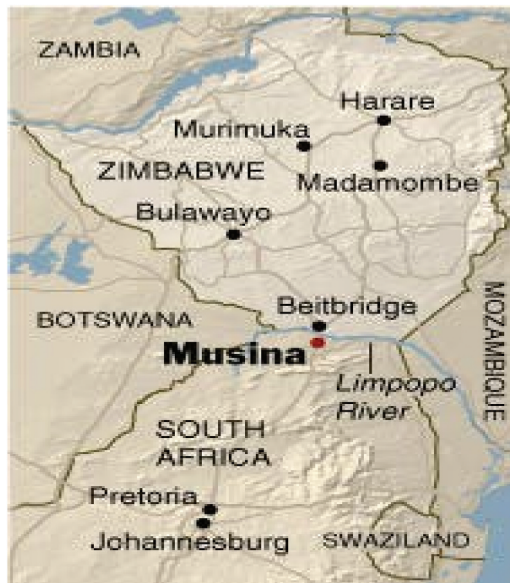


Figure 2. Musina town and its surroundings (Bearak 2009).

Data collection

Data were collected through participatory, interactive group discussions facilitated by the research team. The team comprised six members: a project leader (AHM), who is an activist and advocate for HIV prevention and management, as well as the LGBTIQ community; a health sciences educator (VEM); a primary health nurse specialist (LT); and three public health specialists (APA, IKI and HM), with expertise in gender and sexuality issues.

During group discussions, the research team also conducted non-participant observation to capture how educators engaged with one another, expressed their perspectives, and responded to facilitator prompts. Particular attention was paid to verbal and non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and emerging issues and themes. The training took place at a central venue booked for workshop purposes and activities ranged from 15 minutes to one hour in length. Interactions and observations were documented using flip charts, photographs (with consent), Microsoft Teams to support digital recording, and hand-written field notes, which were later digitised for analysis.

The primary research question guiding this study was: how is sexuality education offered by the life orientation educators at farm schools? The following subsidiary questions were used as probes:

- What are the learning needs of Life Orientation teachers in order to effectively deliver contextual and culturally relevant sexuality education in rural schools?
- What obstacles hinder the successful delivery of contextual and culturally relevant sexuality education in rural schools?
- What teaching approaches can Life Orientation educators employ to deliver contextual and culturally relevant sexuality education in rural schools?

Observation, alongside active engagement and questions about activities, behaviours and the broader context, helped the researchers gain an in-depth understanding of key factors related to sexuality education at rural schools. This process, ultimately, informed the identification of the most relevant and contextual approaches to delivering sexuality education in these settings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was received from the University of South Africa (Reference: 90187598_SEPTEMBER_CREC_CHS_2023). Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Department of Basic Education: Vhembe District. The Circuit Manager of the Soutpansberg North Circuit acted as gatekeeper for the project and was approached formally through an official letter, followed by a briefing meeting to explain the objectives of the study. With the Circuit Manager's support, permission was granted to engage school principals, who subsequently facilitated the identification and invitation of LO educators to participate in the workshop.

The research team worked to ensure the workshop was structured in an inclusive, non-threatening, and supportive manner. Prior to data collection, the purpose, benefits and ethical commitments of the study were communicated to participants in both written and verbal form. Informed consent was obtained from participants for their participation, and

for the use of photographs, video, and audio recordings. All participants also signed a confidentiality agreement, which outlined their understanding of and commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of fellow participants and study sites.

Given the sensitive nature of sexuality education, the workshop was facilitated with an emphasis on empathy, non-judgemental listening, and confidentiality. Emotional responses were managed with care; participants were offered time to pause or withdraw if needed, and the research team included members with counselling experience and public health backgrounds who were available to provide support. Throughout its duration, the study sought to adhere to the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, ensuring voluntary participation, transparency, emotional safety.

To protect personal identity and privacy, pseudonyms were used for all participants and schools during data analysis and reporting. No identifying information appears in transcripts, recordings, or published materials. All data were securely stored on password-protected systems, and access was limited to the research team.

Data analysis

Saldaña (2020) coding framework was used to guide the analysis of qualitative data generated from open-dialogue workshops and diverse documentation sources. This framework is particularly well-suited for participatory research settings due to its flexibility and iterative approach to uncovering meaning from complex, multi-modal data (Rogers 2018; Vanover, Mihas, and Saldaña 2021).

Saldaña (2020) outlines a systematic, two-cycle coding process that supports deep engagement with qualitative data. In the first cycle, initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments of data to capture significant actions, ideas, and participant expressions. This included the use of descriptive coding to summarise content, in vivo coding to retain participants' own language, and process coding to reflect the dynamic nature of practices and experiences shared during the workshops.

In a second cycle, these codes were refined and reorganised into broader categories. A key component of this stage was pattern coding, which clustered similar codes into overarching themes and sub-themes. This facilitated a more abstract and conceptual understanding of the data, allowing the research team to identify connections across various sources and generate deeper insights into the educators' experiences. Throughout the process, reflective memos were written to capture analytical decisions, researcher reflections, and emerging interpretations. Thematic analysis was then used to synthesise the findings into coherent narratives, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in both the data and the context in which it was generated. This analytical process led to the identification of three main themes: educators' learning needs; obstacles hindering the effective teaching of sexuality education; and approaches to delivering contextual and relevant sexuality education in rural schools.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigour, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were taken into account. Credibility was achieved through ongoing member-checking, where participants reviewed audio recordings

and transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their experiences. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced through the taking of detailed field notes, independent the transcription of audio data, and analysis by an expert coder, with themes compared to the researcher's findings and supported by an audit trail of research activities. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the research context, the sample, and study setting, along with reflections on the data collection process.

Findings

Three main themes were identified: educators' learning needs; obstacles hindering the effective teaching about sexuality education; and teaching approaches. Each theme reflected critical aspects of delivering contextual and culturally relevant sexuality education in rural schools.

Educators' learning needs

The workshop commenced with an activity facilitated by the project lead researcher employing a question-and-answer format, with responses recorded on a flip chart. Participants articulated their learning needs, which encompassed both their community roles and teaching responsibilities as respected community members. These needs, as expressed verbatim by the participating educators, included: 'I would like to know more about the food to take for HIV/AIDS'; '...To know more about comprehensive sexuality education and learn more about HIV/AIDS'; 'How does eating healthy food affect HIV?'; and 'I would like to know more about new developments and issues concerning HIV'. Further inquiries were raised about the impact of HIV on impoverished families and how to support vulnerable children, who came from such a background.

Issues related to gender orientation, were also highlighted such as: 'How do I support a gender non-binary child?' and 'How do I support a child with diverse sexuality?' Additionally, intervention-oriented learning needs were mentioned, such as 'How do I counsel kids living with HIV/AIDS?' and 'How can I be capacitated to conduct lessons on HIV/AIDS?' Several educators expressed the desire to better understand contemporary treatments or the medications used to prevent HIV infection:

As an educator, I would like to know as much as possible about HIV, so that I am well equipped when I teach learners. Currently, my interest is in understanding more about injections to prevent HIV. Also, I would also like to learn more about PrEP, and access to PrEP for victims of rape (Educator 3, female)

Obstacles hindering effective teaching about sexuality education

While we managed to address many of the learning needs identified by the participants, several obstacles hindering the teaching of sexuality education and the provision of counselling came to light. A significant challenge was the perceived lack of support from the school-

based support team (SBST) – a school-level structure intended to coordinate support for learners with diverse learning needs, with one educator highlighting the following: ‘Although our community supports their children, . . . these issues require teamwork between teachers and the community’. (Educator 5, female). In addition, some educators felt they lacked adequate knowledge and skills to carry out the required work:

As a Life Orientation teacher, you sometimes feel inadequate in both teaching and providing counselling. You notice a child has a problem that is affecting her learning, but she doesn’t want to open up. Unfortunately, you can’t force her to talk (Educator 11, female)

Cultural and religious sensitivities influenced the discomfort some educators feel when discussing sexuality, as reflected in the following statement: ‘When we were brought up, it was taboo to talk about sexuality with kids’. (Educator 9, female). This sentiment was reflected in community attitudes towards the LO curriculum, where educators are sometimes described stereotypically as, for example, *thitshere wa u funza zwavhudzimu* [the teacher who teaches forbidden topics]. (Educator 8, female).

Educators also had to face the challenge of very large classes, with one educator stating, ‘We teach overcrowded classes, sometimes at a ratio of 1:60, which is why lessons are not effective’. In addition, some educators struggled with a heavy workload, a lack of teaching aids, and the reluctance of learners to discuss personal issues. Language barriers affected interactions with migrant children, complicating communication:

Some words are more effective and understood better if taught in the learner’s own language. We have to bite our tongues using English to say certain words or phrases, which would be more understandable in Venda, but we have to accommodate Shona-speaking learners. (Educator 6, female)

Teaching approaches

Educators were divided into three groups to discuss what they thought would be effective methods to deliver culturally relevant sexuality education in rural schools. Small group discussions, drama and role-play, the use of videos, demonstrations, overhead projector presentations, demonstrations, storytelling and case studies, games and songs, peer education and experiential learning were among the favoured approaches (Figure 3). These techniques were perceived as creative, simple and inclusive and would be particularly valuable for young learners in resource-limited environments.

The research team facilitated a further session wherein participants were asked to elaborate on and demonstrate some of the preferred teaching approaches. This was done so that the educators could emulate these approaches in the classroom, whilst simultaneously addressing their learning needs. Scenarios were used to present educators with specific, realistic situations they might encounter in their teaching. This approach provided a practical way to understand how to handle various classroom situations (Levin et al. 2023). Participants also engaged in role-play exercises, where they adopted a particular character or persona, relevant to a specific scenario. This allowed them to explore different perspectives and solutions, in a controlled setting. After each role-play, constructive feedback was given and discussion reinforced learning, with the aim to enhance future practice.

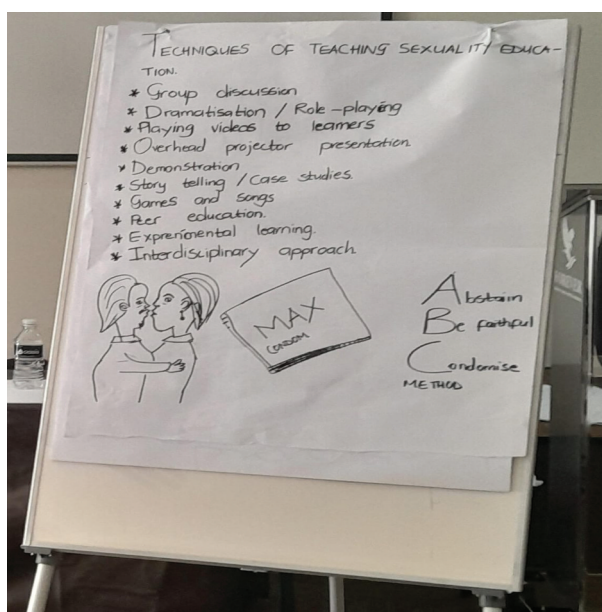


Figure 3. Group discussion responses on approaches to teaching sexuality education in rural schools.

Group discussion

Participants were divided into small groups to explore specific topics. These included the origins of HIV, factors influencing the HIV transmission in the Musina area, prevention strategies in rural contexts, and why women are more affected by HIV compared to men. The facilitator moved between the groups, to ensure comprehension and focused discussions, while time alerts kept the discussions on track. At the end of the session, each group presented their findings, followed by a collective discussion, to clarify and expand on the presented ideas, as well as how this approach could be applied in class. The following were the participants' reflections:

I found the group discussion approach to be highly relevant and thought-provoking. The facilitator's role in visiting each group, to ensure comprehension and focus, was crucial. It helped to keep us on track and clarified any misunderstandings on sexuality matters. (Educator 2, female)

We talked, and disagreed, but allowed each one to bring their different perspectives and solutions. I believe this approach can be effectively applied in the classroom. Learners can learn a lot from each other on sexuality topics. I think they can feel free to open up to each other. (Educator 7, male)

Role-play and drama

These activities were used to simulate real-life scenarios, allowing participants to act out situations relevant to their teaching. The role-plays were designed to be inclusive and culturally relevant, often involving participants switching roles to gain a broader perspective. For example, in a session focusing on HIV education, the participants role-played a scenario where one acted as a child, who was displaying HIV symptoms and needed confirmation of their status, another participant acted as a social worker, who provides counselling, and a third adopted the role as the child's mother.

Playing videos

Videos with HIV-related content, such as signs and symptoms, available treatments and interventions, as well as the effectiveness of the treatment, were shown to the participants, as a way of consolidating previous topics that had been discussed and to enhance awareness about the subject. After the videos, educators were asked to reflect on how they thought they might implement this approach in a resource-constrained environment, such as a rural school. Two of them responded as follows:

I found the video show approach to be highly effective in conveying complex sexuality education and information, in an engaging and understandable way. In our rural school settings, we have limited resources and most of the time we only use textbooks. (Educator 6, male)

Sometimes, as an educator, you find that there are concepts that might be difficult to explain through words alone. I plan to incorporate videos into my lessons, to provide students with a clearer understanding of topics like HIV/AIDS. (Educator 18, female)

Demonstrations

Demonstrations were used to teach skills such correct condom use, through volunteer educators. They demonstrated how to properly use male and female condoms, covering key steps such as checking expiry dates, proper application, and disposal. For male condoms, emphasis was placed on correct placement and removal, while female condom use included guidance on insertion and lubricant use. Feedback revealed participants' difficulties with female condom insertion, prompting a follow-up demonstration by the lead research team member to correct misconceptions. One participant responded,

There is so much to learn about the female condom. When we talk about the condom, the community always has the male condom in mind. But, the way you [the facilitator], demonstrate it, it appears so simple. Learning about how to use it can be empowering to the female learner. (Educator 14, female)

Another participant added:

Thank you to the team for correcting us on how to use this. We did not know the correct way of using the female condom, especially the sponge. Many people think it should be removed. I know in the community, the sponge is used for applying makeup. We must correct this even with learners. (Educator 5, female)

Storytelling and case studies

Storytelling and case studies enriched the training by providing real-world examples and personal narratives, helping participants relate to and understand complex issues in a more meaningful way. In the different sessions, facilitators used storytelling to share narratives, in a relatable and safe environment so as to help educators and learners feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics.

I have now observed that these children are very attentive when they listen to stories on sexuality. I think they can relate with what they see in their community and households. They seem to perform better on Life Orientation content that was facilitated through a story. (Educator 17, male)

Peer education

The research team delivered content, managed the learning environment and ensured participant engagement, while emphasising the value of peer teaching among educators. During this teacher-to-teacher peer education, educators took turns to lead sessions, facilitate discussions, recap previous topics and introduce new subjects, based on learning needs. The research team supported this process by clarifying concepts, demystifying content and providing additional information. Educators were advised to adapt peer education for use with learners in delivering inclusive and culturally-relevant sexuality education content.

Games, songs, ice-breakers and energisers

Ice-breakers and energisers using games and songs played a key role in setting a positive tone for the workshops. Ice-breakers helped the participants to feel comfortable and fostered an open learning environment. Energisers were strategically introduced during training, to re-energise and motivate participants, particularly when they appeared fatigued. Energisers were carefully chosen to suit the local context and ensure inclusivity, with an emphasis on safety and avoiding activities that might be seen as too competitive or exclusionary. Games and songs such as clapping activities, traditional indigenous games like 'River/Bank' and 'Tomato Sauce', and songs like 'We're Growing Up', 'Ek Soek', and 'Otswa Kae Mozala', were integrated into the training to create a lively atmosphere, foster engagement, and reinforce key concepts in an enjoyable and interactive way.

Participants shared the following insights from this experience:

What I have learnt is that I can incorporate relevant indigenous games and songs in my Life Orientation classes. For example, the Tomato Sauce song allows interactions among those singing it and can be used when students introduce themselves to others, when listing causes or prevention measures of HIV and even when summarising lessons. (Educator 7, female)

I am going to adapt the River Bank game when discussing topics like consent or healthy relationships. I can change the commands from 'river' and 'bank', to something like 'consent' means jump left, 'respect' means jump right, or 'communication' means stay in place. I am even thinking that I can add role-playing to this game, wherein students can act out scenarios related to boundaries or peer pressure. (Educator 11, female)

Using an multidisciplinary approach

A multidisciplinary approach in school was seen as helpful in delivering contextual and culturally-sensitive sexuality education. Other teachers could be encouraged to incorporate sexuality education into their work.

Even a mathematics teacher can also bring in issues of sexuality education in their classes, incorporating relevant examples and discussions, so that learners can understand these important topics better and see their real-world applications. (Educator 8, female)

The suggestion was made of inviting local celebrities to the schools, as guest presenters with more credibility than teachers themselves:

The contemporary learner no longer views the teacher as a role model to emulate. Sometimes, they ignore our teaching and warning on dangers of unprotected sexual

activities. Sometimes, these children do not listen to us. After all, I am just a teacher, not an influencer. (Educator 6, male)

During deliberations between the facilitators and educators, an additional approach was identified, namely the use of brainstorming. One participant gave the following example:

I could ask learners to brainstorm how the presence of a truck station in Musina, frequented by drivers from various African countries, and the plight of refugees might relate to the spread of HIV. These discussions would be both informative and sensitive, ensuring that xenophobia is avoided and fostering empathy and understanding in students. (Educator 2, female)

Discussion

Sexuality education in Southern African countries encounters significant implementation challenges, despite its inclusion in school curricula (Chawhanda 2022). To enhance the efficacy of programmes in resource-poor settings, barriers to effective delivery of such programmes need to be addressed at various levels, including those related to learners, teachers, schools and the broader context (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2015). For comprehensive sexuality education to reduce concerning statistics related to sexual health, educators must receive good quality training, while learners should be more actively involved in the development of programmes and in the learning process (Koch and Wehmeyer 2021).

The findings highlight the critical role of culturally relevant curricula and the systemic barriers undermining educator preparedness. Both were seen as pivotal for the development and provision of effective and inclusive sexuality education that addresses learners' needs and fosters supportive learning environments.

Contextual relevance in curriculum delivery

Delivering sexuality education in rural farm schools requires curricula fitted to the local cultural, social, and environmental context, particularly for diverse learners, including migrants. Educators in this study emphasised integrating traditional knowledge, such as indigenous games, and real-world data such as HIV, teenage pregnancy statistics or contraceptive use in mathematics lessons can foster critical thinking while raising awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues (DePalma and Francis 2014; Kirby and Laris 2009). This aligns with the work of Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2022), who advocate for context-specific curricula, and support for cross-curricular approaches to destigmatise sensitive topics. Such strategies can promote critical thinking and connect theory to learners' experiences. However, current curricula often overemphasise biological topics, neglecting gender, rights, and contraception, which limits their relevance (Kirby and Laris 2009). To create inclusive learning environments, curricula must engage with and reflect rural communities' socio-cultural dynamics, ensuring learner-centred education.

Systemic barriers to educator preparedness

Educators' concerns about inadequate training and structural constraints echo the broader systemic challenges identified by Adekola et al. (2025), which hinder educators' ability to deliver contextual sexuality education. Educators often feel unprepared to

address sensitive issues like sexual orientation or HIV, resonating with the findings in Cummings, Fisher, and Reilly-Chammat (2021). Limited curriculum time, overcrowded classrooms, and scarce resources exacerbate these issues, particularly for learners with specific needs (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2015). Societal resistance in the form of parental concerns and cultural taboos, further complicates delivery (Leos, Chen, and Jagannathan 2023). As educators balance roles as teachers and community advisors, good quality training in culturally sensitive, interactive methods is essential, supporting Koch and Wehmeyer's (2021) call for robust educator preparation and support.

Using theoretical frameworks to advance good quality work

This study used international guidance on CSE and a training cycle framework to identify and address the challenges educators face in teaching sexuality education in rural schools. The UN technical guidance on CSE stresses the importance of culturally relevant, context-appropriate education that fosters respect and responsibility in relationships, and encourages learners to critically examine damaging cultural norms. To advance this kind of work, educators need to understand contemporary issues such as sex, sexuality and HIV, and be able to support for vulnerable learners, including orphans and gender-diverse children. The UN guidance's focus on critical thinking and human rights encourages educators to build learners' self-esteem and advocate for gender equality.

The competency-based training cycle used in this study enabled us to engage with these issues in a contextually relevant way. In particular, it highlighted the need for systematic skills acquisition to enable educators to address the needs of both local and migrant populations. The study revealed major local challenges, such as inadequate support from the school-based support team, overcrowded classrooms and cultural sensitivities that needed to be addressed. The framework's approach of tailoring programmes to local contexts allowed educators to address specific gaps in knowledge, like the impact of HIV on families and relevant counselling techniques. This facilitated the development of a collaborative learning environment to enhance educators' confidence in teaching sexuality education, despite significant obstacles.

Limitations

The study was geographically limited to rural schools in the Vhembe district of Limpopo. Thus, the findings are deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and educational relations of this specific region and are not transferable to communities in different cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic contexts elsewhere in South Africa or beyond. Nevertheless, the teaching and learning process adopted in this study has relevance for work in other southern African contexts where culture and context need to be taken into account in preparing teachers for their work on sex, sexuality and sexual health in contemporary times.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for culturally relevant and context-specific approaches to CSE in rural schools. It revealed how tailored, creative methods such as indigenous games, storytelling, and role-playing can enhance learner engagement while respecting cultural

sensitivities and resource limitations, thereby making the CSE more accessible and impactful. Key recommendations include the provision of ongoing training for LO educators to more confidently address sensitive topics using culturally appropriate methods and encouraging cross-disciplinary integration of sexuality education. Future research should explore the long-term impact of culturally relevant CSE on learner practices and knowledge retention, the integration of CSE across subject areas within the curriculum, and the development and use of teacher and learner perspectives to inform more holistic, responsive educational strategies.

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