

# **SEX EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF WINDOW OF HOPE TUTORS IN GHANAIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

The social structure of the Ghanaian society has changed over the century due to the influence of western education and religion. Puberty rites, once avenues for sex education has found no locus in these new religions and western style education. Instead school based sex education programs are now avenues for educating the youth about sexuality in the face of the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, teenage and unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse and the violent abhorrence of homosexuality in Ghana.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of Ghanaian college sex education tutors regarding the subject, their experiences growing up and of teaching sex education and what inform their pedagogies, challenges and what they deem must be done to maximise the benefits of sex education.

This is a qualitative study involving interviews with five purposively sampled tutors and employing Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

**Key Words:** sex education, Teachers experiences, sex education pedagogies, perceptions of sex education

## **Introduction**

In Ghana, as in many other parts of the world, there is a culture of silence on issues of sexuality though it is difficult to separate sexuality from the everyday life of any society. As Ankomah (1992) puts it, “sexual matters are among the popular topics for conversation and gossip, but there is less evidence of serious societal debate about sexual issues”. Thus, during their transition from youth to adulthood, most youth do not receive any explanation as to the biological changes happening to their bodies until they attain puberty. Initiation or puberty rites, avenues for sex education exist in many traditional African cultures for young Africans reaching puberty.

The combined effects of HIV and the other sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancies, unsafe abortions, intolerance of homosexuality and discussing sex, and domestic violence in Ghana makes the case for a more comprehensive sex education. First detected in 1986, HIV infection rates went from 2.1% in 1987 to 2.7% by 1996, peaking at 3.6% in 2003. Although recent statistics published by Ghana AIDS Commission (2014), indicate a decline in the prevalence rate of HIV (1.3% in 2013), the demographic group (0-14) most affected means this decline cannot be celebrated. In the last few years abortion rates have consistently gone up (from 5,525 abortions among adolescents in 2009, rising to 6,679 in 2010 and 7,800 in 2011 - Daily Graphic, 2012). It must be said these are reported abortions. Crude, unreported abortions do take place in quack clinics and these cannot be accounted for (Gutmacher Institute, 2010).

Today the focus of sex education is not just to prevent promiscuity and pre-marital sex among adolescents but to stem the tide of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, decline in age at first sex and increase rates of abortion and also to teach children about sexual identities, relationships within the social context of the society, responsible sexual attitudes and behaviour as defined by the society. The ultimate aim is a productive populace for sustained socio-economic development.

Sex education, especially that taking place in schools has been found to be effective in dealing with the challenges enumerated above by many researchers (UNAIDS, 1997; Grunseit et al., 1997; Kirby, 2000). Daria & Campbell (2004) enumerate the following as benefits of sex education; firstly, it enables the youth to get accurate information and explore their values about sexuality in an environment that is supportive and non- threatening. Secondly, learners will learn to practice relationship refusal skills that enable them to avoid being coerced into sexual activity. Thirdly, beneficiaries learn to practice safer sex in order to prevent HIV and STIs as well as the role that safe sex and abstinence can play in the prevention of these diseases. Sex education has also been found to contribute to sexual behaviour change (Kirby, Laris and Roller, 2005). Finally, sexuality education should encourage young people to become wise, sexually-healthy adults.

In spite of the noted aversion to discussing sex in Ghanaian culture, sex education has always been part of Ghana's education albeit in different forms. Before Ghana's independence in 1957, the major provider of western style education were missionaries and thus religious and moral education were key components and sex education was embedded in these. Sexuality education at post - independence has always been dealt with in Ghana's education as;

1. integration in other subject areas especially the physiological aspects (Reproduction in Humans, Sexually Transmitted Infections – biology or Natural science; Sex Abuse, Teenage Pregnancy – Social Studies)
2. Religious and moral education taking care of the moral, emotional, social and behavioural aspects of sexuality.
3. Stand-alone sex education – tertiary level only.

The National HIV/AIDS/STI Policy and the National Strategic Framework on HIV/AIDS were two policies formulated by the government of Ghana in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These two policies mandated public sector ministries to design and implement sector specific programmes aimed at combating HIV. Thus, in 2000 the Ministry of Education (MOE) began implementation of HIV/AIDS intervention programs under guidelines contained in the National strategic plan. Prior to this initiative, MOE had integrated Population / Family Life Education topics which included some form of sex education into existing curricula in four career subjects at each level of the school programme: Basic school, High school, and Post-secondary Institutions. Supported by World Education, Ghana, a national HIV and AIDS curriculum, "Window of Hope"(WoH) was developed. This curriculum was designed to provide teachers with the necessary information to effectively teach HIV & AIDS issues in the classroom.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The Window of Hope curriculum was piloted in 2005, evaluated and the findings used to repackage it into a core and examinable course in 2007.

Crucial to the implementation and success of any educational program is the skills, beliefs and practices of those responsible for its implementation ([Peterson and Bickman, 1988](#)). As recognized by Tijuana, et al. (2004), teacher's attitudes, beliefs and values towards sexuality affect their teaching; and their ability to provide counselling on sexuality matters is dependent on the capability to differentiate what forms of sexual behaviour and belief are accepted to them personally and what could be acceptable to their clients, or other people (Long, Burnett, & Thomas, 2003). This is even more relevant when the sex educator is a teacher educator. The novice pre-service teachers learn their practice by listening to and observing the practices of their teacher.

Sex education (WoH) tutors in colleges of education in Ghana certainly have experiences about sex education arising from their own lived experiences and practice which invariably may or may not inform their approach as well as pedagogies. Identifying and recognising these experiences and how they influence the practice of sex education is paramount to policy formulators and curriculum developers as they are duty bound to ensure that there is harmony in the ideologies and interest by all stakeholders but especially by the implementers.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions held by college sex education tutors regarding the subject, their experiences growing up and of teaching sex education and what inform their pedagogies, their challenges and what they deem must be done to maximise the benefits of sex education to their students and by extension the general society.

## **Research questions**

This study will be guided by the following questions;

1. What are the lived experiences of tutors of the window of Hope module in Ghanaian Colleges of Education regarding sex education?
2. How do window of Hope module tutors in colleges of education in Ghana perceive sex education?
3. To what extent does the lived sex education experience of window of Hope module tutors in Ghanaian colleges of education influence their approach and pedagogical choices?

## **Significance of the study**

In spite of the seeming success of HIV/AIDS education in Ghana where awareness is almost universal, there is little published research concerning sexuality education in Ghana. The few available are basically research involving students or beneficiaries of sex education. Therefore this study will critically contribute to available literature on sex education and perhaps a pioneering literature on the experiences of sex education teachers in Ghana. Policy makers, curriculum developers and other

stakeholders in Ghana's education sector will benefit from the findings of this study in the sense that they will have a first-hand understanding of the experiences and approach of the implementers of their products and therefore tailor their products to the strengths of the implementers.

### **What do we know about Teachers experiences, perceptions and pedagogies?**

To get a clear understanding of the issues being researched an extensive literature review will be necessary. For the purposes of this paper however, I will briefly review the key issues of teachers' own experiences with sex education, perceptions and pedagogies.

There is a lot of research (Motalingoane-Khau, 2010; Bowden et al 2003; Alldred, David and Smith, 2003) establishing the fact that teachers are the primary agents for successful sex education, and that they achieve success not just by sharing knowledge but by their attitudes with regards to the knowledge they share. Attitudes are formed out of the experiences one goes through and the values placed on the experiences. Studies (Milton, 2003; Motalingoane-Khau, 2010; Alldred, David and Smith, 2003) have reported teachers finding themselves in several conflict situations when the demands of the curriculum conflict with their personal values and judgement and when questions are asked about their own sexuality in the class or when other staff members ridicule them because of what they teach. For instance, in Milton (2010) when asked about how contraception was taught a respondent had the following to say;

*"No, we don't do contraception and we don't do HIV and AIDS because for them to be important to you, you have to be sexually active ... I guess it might be a value judgment that the kids aren't sexually active .... As to whether or not we should, that question comes up each year.... (M2)"*

Teachers have been noted to have a positive perception to the relevance of sex education and its effectiveness in addressing sex related issues such as teen pregnancies and STIs (Bharatwaj and Jain, 2013; Onwuezobe and Ekanem, 2009; Alldred, David and Smith, 2003). Age, gender, religion and level of education have been found to affect teachers perceptions and readiness to teach sexuality (Onwuezobe and Ekanem, 2009; Mchumu, 2007).

On sex education pedagogies, Sanjakder et al (2015) writes that it has been driven by first, the safer option of disease prevention instead of looking at the more socially-oriented, health-enhancing behaviours underpinned by critical thinking and secondly, young people have been considered as a unified group in spite of the growing cultural and ethnic diversification within the school context.

Pedagogies that have focused on risk knowledge (McWilliams, 1996) and normative ideals of sex, sexuality, and gender have been described as conservative pedagogies and are said to be pervasive in the practice of sex education (Allen 2007; Rasmussen 2006) and are aimed basically at equipping beneficiaries with a system of values, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, and morality that supports and reproduces the established social order and the class interests that dominate it. Critical pedagogy, an approach that seeks to transform oppressive structures in society

using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003) has been noted by Sanjakder et al (2015) as an approach that encourages participatory, democratic, critical, and reflective practice within the classroom. Such a transformation approach is essential to sex education because, as Cohen et al (2000 p.31) put it, pedagogy should not “merely be to give an account of society and behaviour” or to “understand situations and phenomena, but to change them”. Change should be the focus if we are to overcome the sexuality challenges facing today’s young people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study designed to explore the lived experiences, perceptions and pedagogical choices of sex education tutors in Ghanaian colleges of education using the Interpretative phenomenological analysis design (IPA).

The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it seeks to explore the experiences of participants regarding sex education and their practice as sex educators. Experiences are unique to every individual and so is their interpretation of the events in their experiences. As shown by Geertz (1988, p. 10), qualitative approaches and engagements with small groups allow a researcher to do “thick and deep” work to gain understanding into how a few individuals perceive and experience a phenomenon. I deem the thick and deep work as necessary because there is virtually no reported study involving college sex educators in Ghana and so as a result, very scanty literature is available. The approach will also provide the opportunity for study participants to reflect on their experiences and work practices which will help them gain insight into their perspectives as they share with me (Schatz and Walker 1995). The gaining of different perspectives of an issue is an important step in arriving at what is good for all involved and will eventually lead to the desired social change.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) according to Smith (as cited in Brooks, 2015, p. 644) “aims to provide an in-depth and nuanced analysis of participants’ accounts of their lived experience”. IPA is a variant of Phenomenology. According to Brooks (2015, p.642), “phenomenology is about isolating ‘essences’-invariant features and structures of phenomena and to describe these as precisely as possible”. The description of the essences of a phenomena helps to identify the qualities that makes a particular experience unique or distinctive. Phenomenology is credited to Husserl Edmund (1859 – 1938), a German philosopher who in the words of Brooks (2015, p.642) believed that “to be able to identify the distinctive qualities of an experience, it was necessary to adopt a specific attitude, to suspend – or bracket – presuppositions and judgments so that a clear and unblinkered view of the life world could emerge”. However, Husserl’s student, Heidegger, felt bracketing or suspending presuppositions or judgment was not entirely possible because to understand the reality of an experience both the detailed experience and the bigger picture (language, temporality, history and culture) were necessary. For Heidegger, an individual’s relation to the world was both interpretative and relational – that is always situated in a context. The point made by Heidegger is the basis for IPA. As Smith and Osborn (2003, p.51) puts it succinctly, “both the researcher and the participant are intrinsically sense-making creatures, thus the researcher is free to try to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world”. Thus this study

will explore the experiences of sex education tutors in Ghanaian colleges of education within the context of their family, social and educational environments and what it meant to them and to the society then and how it has or not influenced their practice. They will also relay their experiences with teaching sex education within the context of today's social environment and what those experiences mean to them and their practice. Whilst they do these I will be trying also to make meaning of their experiences within the context of my inquiry.

The study participants will be five purposively sampled Window of Hope tutors in colleges of education in Ghana recruited by an email. Participants must have taught the module for at least five years and must be based in the Central or Western regions of Ghana and must be available and willing to participate in the study.

The data collection instrument will be an interview guide designed to collect data on the experiences of tutors regarding sex education, their perceptions of sex education, and how their experiences inform their practice as sex educators.

I estimate three interview sessions with each participant, each lasting on the average one hour. Interview sessions will be recorded with the permission of participants and later transcribed by me and validated by participants before the next session. Data explication will be done using the five steps outlined by Hycner's (1999);

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.
4. Summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it.
5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

## **Ethics**

The study has approval of the ethics committee of the University of Birmingham. Each participant will be given an information pack which spells out the details of the study and what is required of them as well as their rights. Participants will sign a consent form.

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## **Biography**

Gordon Mabengban Yakpir is a PhD student in University of Birmingham. He holds an M.phil and a Bachelor of Science Education from the University of Cape Coast. He is a professional teacher trainer and has taught Biology and Sex Education at all three levels of Ghana's education.