



Adolescents' sexual health: Elucidating the paradoxical influence of Christianity on School Sexuality Education Programmes in King Cetshwayo District, South Africa

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Abstract

Despite the implementation of a school-based sexuality education programme meant to promote learners' sexual and reproductive health (SRH), the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and teenage pregnancy is increasing rapidly in South Africa. This phenomenon can be observed in rural schools such as those in King Cetshwayo district in the Kwazulu Natal Province. We argue that it is critical to investigate the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of sexuality education in these schools, which ultimately impacts the learners' sexual health outcomes. The paper applies an information-motivation-behavioural skills model as its theoretical paradigm for this qualitative, phenomenological study. In 2020, nine focus group interviews were conducted to gather in-depth experiences and perspectives from a purposively sampled group of learners in the study setting. The analysis of the collected data was guided by the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework. The results indicated that the religious antecedents of learners and teachers and the activities of faith-based organisations in the study setting influence the acceptance or rejection of sexuality education messages. Based on the study findings, we argue that Christianity as a colonial religion has functioned as both a barrier and an enabler of effective school-based sexuality education. Therefore, we recommend that the paradoxical effects of religion on school-based sexuality education be addressed by optimising the enhancing effects and mitigating the inhibiting effects on sexuality education programmes in the research setting. We also propose that leaders of faith-based organisations be considered critical stakeholders in the implementation of a school-based sexuality education programme, hence the need for continuous engagement.

Keywords: sexual and reproductive health, religion, sexuality education, learner, Christianity.



Introduction: Contextualising religion and the technology of power

Religion is “the continual participation in traditions and beliefs passed on from one generation to the next” (Beyers 2010:2). Religion as a technology of power based on the Foucauldian notion of “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1982:780) functions as a form of surveillance through multiple devices in regulating bodies. Faith leaders, as the custodians of these beliefs and traditions expressed within faith-based organisations, perform what Foucault refers to as “pastoral power” (Foucault, 1982). The definition of faith-based organizations by UNAIDS becomes critical in contextualizing the technologies of power that are performed by religious leaders within these organisations. UNAIDS (2010), defines faith-based organisations as faith-influenced non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with operational structures at local, national, and international levels. These organisations are known as strategic gatekeepers and are led by prominent religious figures in the community (Chitando & Moyo-Bango, 2016). In the same vein, Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021) argue that religion as a social structure utilises various structures such as churches, temples, mosques, norms, statutes, and doctrines to create a socialising space for its members drawn from the community to internalise its values. Olowu (2015) notes that faith-based groups are crucial in influencing the community's beliefs, sociocultural norms, and attitudes toward school-based sexuality education programmes.

It is in the context of the subjectification of bodies that the intersectionality of religious norms, bodies, gender, and sexuality are to be located and analysed. Bonjour and Van der Vlugt (2018) defines sexuality education as a learning process that equips and empowers adolescents with the information, attitude, and skills to communicate and make their own decisions in the areas of relationships, sexuality, sexual health, and wellbeing. In South Africa, school-based sexuality education programmes aim to improve adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health outcomes and are a key component of the national strategy to combat teenage pregnancy and HIV transmission (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021).

The roles that religion plays in sexuality education and adolescents’ access to SRH services in various settings globally are considered contentious and sensitive. Depending on their doctrines and creeds, different religious groups react differently to the curriculum contents of sexuality education. Mendolia, Paloyo and Walker (2018) argue that religion provides a protective barrier against adolescents’ risky health behaviours. This argument is supported by Francis et al. (2019) and Osafo et al. (2014), whose findings reveal that certain faith-based organisations promote positive health and behavioural outcomes among adolescents. In the same vein, in various resource-constrained settings around the world, religious institutions have offered SRH services to young people in their facilities (UNAIDS, 2010). Faith-based organisations play important roles in South African communities, ranging from providing support for people living with HIV (PLHIV) to combating HIV-related stigma and discrimination (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2019). Likewise, young people obtain SRH services through hospitals and clinics run by faith-based groups, which are the only medical facilities available in some disadvantaged communities around the world (UNAIDS, 2010). Succinctly put, religion as a technology of power can function as a disciplinary power, or what Foucault refers to as “biopower” (Foucault, 2008).

Conversely, some religious leaders, through their messages, trigger moral panic against key messages of the sexuality education curriculum, like contraception, gender diversity and equality, which are deemed offensive to their doctrines and beliefs. Armstrong-Mensah et al. (2019) and Beyer (2011) reckon that certain religious preaching and praxis could compromise the effectiveness of sexuality education among adolescents, for example by sending messages that promote stigma and discrimination against PLHIV and portraying them as being punished by God for their ungodly behaviour. This is corroborated by Olowu (2015), who notes that some faith-based organisations in Lesotho claim that HIV is a punishment for those living with HIV. The same



author claims that certain religious groups incite hostility toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) individuals, while others chastise PLHIV for taking their anti-retroviral medication rather than depending on prayers for their recovery. In the USA, certain religious leaders propagate heteronormativity and portray any sexual activities that are not within the confines of marriage as against God's will (Ponzetti, 2016). In addition, Ninsiima et al. (2019) detail how religious leaders in Uganda successfully resist the implementation of sexuality education in schools by having portions of the curriculum that they deem offensive to their religious tenets removed, thus preventing young people from accessing scientifically accurate SRH information. Wekesah et al. (2019) concur that, contradictory messages emanating from religious leaders on sexuality education topics such as contraception, sexual identities, gender equality and diversity undermine the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education programmes. This form of power can be summarised as a form sovereign power and/or pastoral power based on the normativity of religious precepts and hermeneutical paradigm of a literal biblical readings.

With the high prevalence of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among learners in the schools located in rural areas of the King Cetshwayo district, South Africa (Office of the Premier, 2020), the school-based sexuality education programme might not be effective regarding learners' SRH outcomes. Therefore, we were prompted to investigate the contextual factors, including religion, that influenced the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education in the research area. It is argued in this paper that the religious antecedents of learners, parents, and teachers and the activities of faith-based organisations in the study setting influence the acceptance or rejection of sexuality education messages.

Theoretical framework

Guided by the interpretivism paradigm, we explored the lived experiences of the participants regarding school-based sexuality education programmes in the research setting. The choice of this paradigm allowed us to understand and make sense of qualitative data collected from participants through focus group interviews. Furthermore, it helped us gain insight into the contextual variables that influence the efficacy of school-based sexuality education in the research setting. For this study, we utilised three interpretivism paradigm assumptions, namely epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions, as outlined by Aliyu et al. (2015). Our epistemological assumptions for this study were that focus group interviews with the learners in the research setting would reveal the learners' experiences during sexuality education lessons. Our exploration of these experiences would provide in-depth insight into the contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of sexuality education programmes in the research setting. Findings from group interviews would provide an adequate basis for our recommendations on how to address the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education in the research setting. Our ontological assumptions were that sexuality education in the study setting has multiple realities that were socially constructed by the study participants and the researcher through social interactions. We used an interpretive methodology to explore the participants' experiences of sexuality education implementation in flexible ways in their context, and the results were interpreted using a well-tested theory, namely the modified information-motivation-behavioural (IMB) skills model (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2022).

The IMB skills model was utilised as the theoretical framework for interpreting the findings of this study. Fisher and Fisher developed the theory in 1992, and it has three constructs: information, motivation and behavioural skills (Fisher, Fisher & Shuper, 2014). According to Bartholmae (2016), these constructs are based on social and health psychological theories and are frequently used to understand sexual-related risk behaviours. As stated by the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) (2019), the theory's strength lies in its effective

applicability in different population groups and great suitability for various sexual health-related studies. The generic IMB model asserts that a person must be well informed about health-promoting habits, be motivated and possess the behavioural skills to engage in health-promoting behaviours (Cai et al., 2013). In the context of this study, the IMB skills model posits that a community actor in the research setting must be well informed about sexuality education, be motivated to accept or act on its information and possess the necessary skills to act on the information. These community actors could be learners, teachers, parents, religious or community leaders, and so on. Additionally, the IMB skills model was modified to include a fourth construct called environmental factors, as illustrated in figure 1, due to the possibility that the three constructs could be interfered with by the contextual elements that were prevalent in the study setting (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2022).

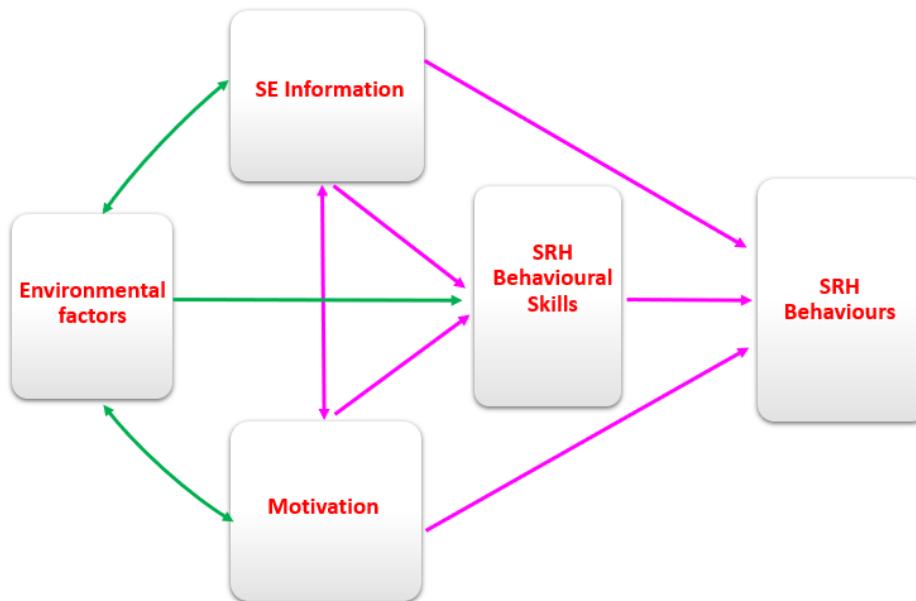


Figure 1: Modified information-motivation-behavioural skills model adapted from Adekola and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2022)

Methodology

Design

The aim of this interpretative phenomenological study was to understand how religion affects school-based sexuality education through the views and lived experiences of the students in the research setting. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) explain that this design is suitable for an interpretivist researcher since it helps the researcher to acquire a deep understanding of the self-described experiences of participants as well as the context in which those experiences occurred.

Setting

This study took place in nine selected rural high schools that offer a sexuality education programme as a Life Orientation subject in the King Cetshwayo district of South Africa. According to the KwaZulu-Natal provincial Office of the Premier (2020), the rural areas of the district have one of the highest burdens of teenage pregnancy in the province.

Sampling

We used a convenient and purposive sampling strategy to select learners who met the inclusion criteria outlined as follows: participants had to be at least 14 years old and no older than 19 years



old, residents of the study area, fluent in either or both English and IsiZulu, enrolled in Grades 10 or 11, agree to have their voices recorded, and sign and return an informed consent form along with parental approval. A total of 84 learners participated in the study. The sample size was informed by data saturation, which occurred when new participants provided redundant information that could not yield new codes relevant to the objectives of the study (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021).

Data collection

We conducted nine focus group interviews, starting in March and ending in July 2020, with the learners who met the inclusion criteria. All sessions of the interview were audio recorded. Each group interview lasted between one and a half and two hours and was mediated using the interview guide developed by the authors. A pilot group interview was conducted to refine the interview guide before it was used for the study. We followed Qu and Dumay's guidelines (2011) for a focus group interview by asking the participants a central question such as, "From your experiences, describe the influence of your religion on the sexuality education curriculum being taught in your school". Additionally, the use of probes and prompts to elicit in-depth responses from the participants produced rich and detailed shared experiences. The authors' reflections on the interview process and non-verbal cues of the study participants were captured using field notes. The analysis of the qualitative data collected from each group interview was done on an iterative basis.

Data analysis

Audio data from each group interview was transcribed verbatim within two days of data collection. All the transcribed data was analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework as described by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). Based on the IPA framework, we listened to the audio-recorded data, read the interview transcripts several times to have a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and then interpreted the participants' self-described experiences. Furthermore, we captured how the study participants narrated their experiences in a reflexive note, grouped the emergent themes and dropped themes that were not relevant to the study objectives. In addition, a separate qualitative coder was employed, who independently analysed every transcript. His codes were compared to ours. The resultant comparison and engagement with the independent coder led to a final table of themes comprising two main themes, sub-themes and relevant quotes from the study participants.

Trustworthiness

We made sure that this study was trustworthy by adhering to the criteria of credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability and authenticity listed in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for ensuring trustworthiness. Member checking and validity checking were carried out by the authors on an ongoing basis to ensure credibility. By providing them with the relevant group interview transcripts, the study participants were given the opportunity to confirm that their self-described experiences were accurately recorded. We recorded the non-verbal communication of the participants during the focus group interview to ensure dependability and confirmability, and details such as the date, location and time of the interview were recorded using field notes. In order to enhance confirmability, an independent coder was hired to transcribe and analyse the collected data. By incorporating participants' excerpts to support the emerging themes, we ensured the authenticity of the research method. To assure transferability, we kept a detailed audit trail of the research activities in addition to providing a thick description of the research process, the study design, the biographical information of the learners who participated and the contexts in which they operated.



Ethical considerations

Both the research ethics committees of the University of South Africa and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education granted their approval and clearance to conduct the study. The study's objectives, nature and potential for improving the SRH outcomes of learners in the study setting were succinctly and plainly explained to the study participants. The participants were also made aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could end it at any time without incurring any penalties. They were also not incentivised in any manner to participate. The parents' consent was sought and obtained in addition to the participants' individual consent. Apart from conducting the focus group interviews in venues that were convenient and comfortable for participants, the identities of the participants were protected by using pseudonyms in the transcripts and in reporting the findings of the study. Furthermore, we password-protected the audio files of the interviews, the transcripts and the field notes in order to prevent illegal access to participant information. Because focus group interviews are public by nature, the participants were made aware of how challenging it was to remain anonymous. Participants were told they could opt out of the study if they were concerned about their anonymity. The participants were then asked to affirm that they were aware of their responsibility to maintain anonymity.

Results

The results section is divided into participants' biographical details and the negative and positive influences of religion on sexuality education in the study setting.

Biographical details of the participants

A total of 84 learners, about 42% of whom were boys and 58% girls, participated in nine focus group interviews. All the participants identified as Christians but belonged to different denominations. 60% of the study participants had previously engaged in sexual intercourse, with 5% mentioning being pregnant before, and two-thirds of the sexually active participants claimed to have multiple sexual partners. Less than a fifth of the sexually active participants reported that they rarely used condoms.

Negative influence

The study findings reveal religious leaders' apathy toward sexuality education, the spread of contradictory messages, a judgemental attitude, unethical practices, a culture of silence and conflicted educators.

Apathy towards sexuality education

The findings reveal that certain religious leaders were disinterested in school-based sexuality education. Participants mentioned that their pastors were neither involved in sexuality education nor committed to its cause.

Nobody talks about sexuality in our church and people don't generally talk about such thing in church. Pastors don't play any role that I know. Church is a place to learn about God and our pastor teach us to grow in the knowledge of God and nothing about sexuality. (Sibonile, female, 17 years old)

They [religious leaders] are not doing enough, and I believe that they can actually help a lot because they are leaders, and many people look up to them, respect them, and some people take every word that their religious leaders say seriously. So, I believe that if they become more involved and educate us about it, they can do a lot and help a lot because people respect and listen to them. (Sisanda, female, 17 years old)



Contradictory messages

Besides the general apathy of religious organisations towards sexuality education programmes in the research setting, the results indicate that some religious organisations propagate messages that directly contradict or discourage the acceptance of sexuality education messages.

Our pastors think some of what our teachers are teaching us are not right will only lead us to commit sin. They preach that using condoms and other contraception does not agree with their beliefs. (Mhlengi male, 17 years old).

My pastor encourages me to abstain till I'm married, condoms are off the table but at school, we learnt about how to protect yourself during sex. That is the difference. I must say, it is difficult to abstain when everyone is doing it. (Mzomuhle male, 17 years old)

My church does not support the use of condoms or to have sex before marriage. I have gay friends in school, but they cannot follow me to our church because pastor preaches against being gay. (Fezeka female, 16 years old)

Judgemental attitude

It further emerged from the data analysis that the judgemental attitude of the leadership and members of religious organisations could have a negative influence on school-based sexuality education.

From my experience, the church does not support sexuality education. For example, when I tried to discuss sex in the church, they were going at my back, saying I was advertising my body and that I was a loose girl. What can I say? When I go to our church to ask for sponsors, they say no, we won't help you because you're advertising your body. Do you see what I mean? Yeah, they are judgmental. (Silungile female, 17 years old)

When I made a mistake and became pregnant, my parents felt bad, but they offered me their support, but my church people stared at me to make me feel indecent. They were judgemental and play negative role. Some people in the church believe we fall pregnant because we are exposed to information that is not good for us at school. (Zamile female, 17 years old)

Unethical practices

Apart from the judgemental attitude of some religious leaders, the findings show that certain unethical practices among some religious groups in the communities could negate the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education.

Well, pastors are not doing enough to make sexuality education effective. Some of them just wants to sleep with the children that are in the church. I don't understand why but they even make such promises that they will make you the second wife just to take advantage of you. They target mostly girls that are helpless like me I am talking from my experience. When a helpless girl goes to church to ask a pastor for help, the pastor will say if I sleep with you then I can help you with anything that you want. For me, pastors are part of the problem, and they are not doing enough to make sexuality education effective. (Wandi female, 17 years old)



Culture of silence

Participants said their religion discourages sexuality-related conversation because it is seen as sinful to do so, thereby encouraging a culture of silence.

Discussing sexuality education with children in the church is still taboo. My church thinks we are too young to discuss anything pertaining to sexuality or sexual orientation. Actually, the only time that such a discussion arises is when they teach us to abstain from sex until we are old enough to start dating. (Hlengiwe female, 16 years old)

My church does not play any role. They dictate to us instead of talking us through sexuality education. I can't even confront them and ask for their help. (Nomcebo female, 17 years old)

Conflicted educators

The results show that some religious organisations in the community, through their preaching, may exert pressure on teachers, which may conflict with the messages of the sexuality education curriculum. This is in addition to the teachers' own religious antecedents and impacts how these topics are taught in the classroom.

Some religious leaders warn teachers about teaching us sex at a young age, and teachers don't want to disobey pastors or do anything against their beliefs. This makes them to struggle with some topics during lessons. (Njabulo male 18 years old)

Our teachers are religious too. For instance, some of our teachers are uncomfortable discussing contraception with us in the classroom. (Lethu male, 17 years old)

Positive influence

Besides negative influences, the results indicate that religious organisations in the research setting also have a positive influence on sexuality education by volunteering, promoting delayed sexual debut, enhancing the moral values of learners and teaching safer sex messages to young people.

Volunteering

Some participants mentioned that their churches work with young people in the community to make sexuality education effective.

Some of our pastors in the community work with young people to make sexuality education effective. They teach us to do the right things and make the right choice. Not all of them are bad. (Kwanda male, 18 years old)

I think the religious leaders are doing everything for us, but the problem is with us we want to experiment and make bad choices. (Thando male, 18 years old)

Encourage delayed sexual debut

The study's findings reveal that the preaching of some religious leaders helped them abstain from sexual activities, leading to a delayed sexual debut.



My pastor helps me a lot by teaching me to respect girls and their bodies and minds. There is no excuse to harm girls because of sexual intercourse. This helps me to abstain from sexual intercourse. Yes, my religion expects me to wait for marriage to perform sexual intercourse. (Myeni male, 17 years old)

I came from a Christian family called Jehovah's Witnesses. I strongly believe that sex is only for a man and woman who are married. That's why I strongly abstaining from sex until I get married one day. (Ngidi male, 17 years old)

Moral expectations

Some participants felt that moral expectations from their churches helped them make positive choices regarding sexual health outcomes.

As a Christian, the role of church is positive, they told me to wait because boys are not going anywhere and no sex before marriage. So, I am not going to disappoint them. (Fundile female, 17 years)

"My beliefs and religion help me with my sexuality. They believe I should wait till I am grown up and marry before having sex. They don't teach me about sexuality education at church like we do at school, but they encourage me to live pure life, and I have been trying to do just that. (Nyoka male, 18 years old)

Teach safer sex

The findings also reveal that certain religious organisations actively instruct young people in safer sexual behaviour.

They tell us about the consequences, inform us what we should do, and to wait for a certain time. They teach us about the use of condoms if that time does come and you not ready to be pregnant. (Zonke female, 17 years old)

Discussion

Religions play an essential role in shaping communities' attitudes towards school-based sexuality education (Olowu 2015). As Foucault rightly argues that "The fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home." (Foucault, 1989: xxii)

As argued previously, some religions can encourage positive health behaviours in adolescents by providing SRH-related information and services through their health facilities (Francis et al. 2019), while others can incite moral panic by using their influence to contradict the critical messages of sexuality education curriculum in the communities (Armstrong-Mensah et al. 2019). In agreement with the reviewed literature, the study's findings reveal that some participants believed that, in the research environment, religious practices had a detrimental impact on the efficacy of school-based sexuality education. This observation demonstrates that Christianity can be a tool and a vehicle of empowerment in sexuality education and awareness amongst adolescents. At the same time, it can also perform as a form of surveillance or what Mothoagae refers to as "patriarchal gaze" (Mothoagae, 2019) a barrier to sexuality education and self-awareness.

These findings are consistent with Ponzetti (2016) who explains how religious leaders undermine the efficacy of the curriculum content of sexuality education in the USA by promoting gender



binarism. Likewise, the findings align with those of Wekesah et al. (2019), who indicates that the propagation of contradictory statements by influential religious leaders exerts pressure on sexuality education teachers, leading them to avoid discussing sensitive topics with learners. These findings are further supported by Ninsiima et al. (2019), who highlight how religious groups pressurise governments and policymakers to omit certain content from the sexuality education curriculum.

However, as the study's findings reveal, religion can also have a positive impact on school-based sexuality education. In accordance with the findings of this study, Armstrong-Mensah et al. (2019) report that religious organisations play a significant role in encouraging positive SRH outcomes through supporting school-going adolescents. In addition, Osafo et al. (2014) concur that religion plays a protective role by inhibiting young people from engaging in risky sexual practices and, consequently, delaying their sexual debut. In a similar vein, Mendolia et al. (2018) agree that religion acts as a barrier to adolescents' harmful health behaviours.

Limitations of the study

A purposeful and non-probability sampling technique was used to choose the learners who took part in this study. This suggests that learners who might have had different perspectives and experiences were possibly excluded from the study. Because this study was based solely on the opinions and experiences of learners, voices from educators, community members and parents were not included. On this basis, it is important to consider these limitations when interpreting the study's results.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that in contextualising the impact of sexuality education among adolescents, it is critical to locate the intersectionality of religious norms, body, gender, and sexuality within the broader context of the role of religion. We have maintained that it is essential to analyse these intersectionalities within the Foucauldian notion of power with reference to pastoral power as a lens of analysis.

The results of the study suggest that religion has paradoxical influences on the sexuality education provided in schools in the research setting. The religious impact on the outcomes of the sexuality education programme in the research context can be either favourable or negative. To resolve the paradox, we advocate the key constructs of the IMB skills model should underpin the interventional efforts to maximise religion's beneficial effects on sexuality education and lessen its detrimental effects on school-based sexuality education. We therefore predict that the effectiveness of school-based sexuality education on students' SRH outcomes will be significantly increased if religious leaders in the research setting are given information on sexuality education that is both scientifically accurate and contextually relevant, and they are engaged as key stakeholders to increase their motivation and are trained to be constructive partners in a sexuality education programme.

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Authors' contributions

The first author conceptualised and designed the study, collected the data, analysed, and interpreted the data, and wrote the paper.

The second author technically edited the manuscript, analysed, and interpreted the data.



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