

## ATTITUDES AND VIEWS OF TEACHERS TOWARDS STUDENTS' SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN TANZANIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study assessed attitudes and views of thirty secondary school teachers and three heads of schools towards students' sexual relationships in three secondary schools. Teachers filled in a questionnaire, which tapped their views and reaction towards students' sexual relationships; knowledge of sex education; and how they assisted students on sexual related matters. The heads of schools and twelve teachers were interviewed. The results of this assessment revealed a range of teachers' attitudes and views towards students' sexual relationships. Many teachers favoured the provision of sex education; yet, most of them were either not conversant with sex education or did not want to educate or assist students in sexual related matters. Some teachers punished students involved in sexual relationships; this indicated negative attitudes towards students' sexual relationships. Some teachers helped students on sexual matters, which indicated positive attitude towards students' sexual relationships. This paper recommends for alternative ways to improve students' wellbeing through provision of effective sex education to students, strengthening help and support systems in schools, and establishment of sex education programmes for teachers and students.*

**Keywords:** sex education, sexual relationships, students.

### INTRODUCTION

Sexual relationships among students are on increase and common in schools (Mgalla, Schapink & Boerma, 1998). The existence of students' sexual activity in schools has elicited public concerns. The outcome of sexual relationships such as schoolgirls' pregnancy and eviction of pregnant girls from schools are particularly prioritized matters of concern, while others include: poor academic performance, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV infections, and conflicts between teachers and students (Petro, 2009). In 2010, for example, statistics from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) shows that the total number of students dropped out of school due to pregnancy related reasons were 6345 (MoEVT, 2010). Previously, as it was reported in the Daily News (Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2010), statistics indicated that a total of 28,600 girls could not complete their education due to pregnancy within a period of five years, 2004 – 2008. This is a critical issue, which needs to be addressed as a matter of exigency.

Studies in Tanzania REPRO/GTZ (2000), Hellar (2001) & Mori (2004) show that a large percentage of adolescents are sexually active but lack basic knowledge of the biological functioning of their bodies and the risks involved in becoming sexually active at early ages. Often, this ignorance has made adolescents vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies, hazardous abortions, as well as STDs, including HIV/AIDS (REPRO/GTZ, 2000). Surprisingly, with this ignorance, teachers' reactions to students' sexual activity in schools, for decades, have remained that of either expelling or suspending them from studies. This means, a student

discovered involving in any sexual activity or relationships, is punished instead of being helped or advised otherwise; hence, students miss school and education (Petro, 2009).

Teachers could play an imperative role in both shaping academic development, and influencing social lives of students. However Petro (2009) argued that teachers tend to concentrate on academics, ignoring important social aspects of life like sexuality. Although teachers are the preferred agents for provision of sexual and reproductive health education to students in schools (Hellar, 2001), they are reluctant in doing so. Studies which examined attitudes towards provision of sex education in schools in developing countries, indicated that it brings more benefits to students and the community in general (Mkumbo, 2010). However, studies on teachers' attitudes towards students' sexual relationships in Tanzania are lacking and therefore this paper intended to bridge the gap.

Therefore, this study investigated teachers' attitudes towards students' sexual relationships in secondary schools by examining their knowledge of sex education, their views, and reactions towards students' sexual relationships.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Thirty secondary school teachers, and three heads of schools from three secondary schools in Bagamoyo District, Coast Region, were sampled to participate in the study. Teachers and schools in this sample were purposively sampled, basing on availability and locations respectively (Cohen, Monion, & Marrison, 2011). The teachers were both male and female aged between 25 and 55; the majority (72%), were young teachers aged between 25 and 39 years, and (28%) were aged 40 years and above. Heads of schools were all males aged above 40 years. Most of the participants were degree holders and a few had diplomas in education employed on either permanent or temporary employment basis, teaching different subjects. Most of respondents, 70%, were Christians and 30% Muslims. The teaching experience of participants was between 1 and 15 years, with the majority, especially most of the young teachers, having less than 5 years' experience in the teaching profession. None of the teachers, however, had taught at the current school for more than five years concurrently. Most (70%) of teachers were married and 30% singles.

### **Instruments and Procedures**

The large body of data was obtained using questionnaires and was triangulated by interviews and social conversations between the researcher and teachers. Ten teachers from each school volunteered to complete the questionnaire that was designed to investigate their views and reaction towards students' sexual relationships; their knowledge of sex education; and how they helped or supported students on sexual matters. Twelve of the teachers (four from each school) and the three heads of schools were interviewed.

The questionnaire comprised four sections; the first section looked at the demographics of respondents which included ages, sex, marital status, and religion of respondents as well as the time each teacher had been at the studied schools. In the second section, respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a list of questions regarding students' sexual relationships - this section of the questionnaire was designed to get teachers' views on students' sexual relationships. In the third section, respondents were asked to answer questions concerning their knowledge of sex education and how they help their students make sexual relationship decisions, and in the last section, respondents were asked to state their reactions towards students who were involved in sexual relationships.

Interviews with heads of schools were done using semi-structured format. A guideline, which highlighted key issues to be discussed, was prepared. As emphasized by Langridge (2004) the questions in the guideline was open ended to encourage the respondents elaborate their views about the topic. Issues investigated included teachers' sex education, handlings of students' sexual matters, and students' sexual relationships in schools. On the other hand, 12 teachers were interviewed in unstructured interviews with intention of getting their face-to-face responses to incorporate in their knowledge and beliefs in which their attitudes could be tapped. Lastly, the data from questionnaires and interviews were triangulated by social conversations done between the researcher and some teachers in the study field.

The questionnaire and interview guidelines were prepared in English and there was no translation. However, during interview sessions, both English and Kiswahili languages were used. Code-mixing and code-switching were common during interviews, and then, at the end transcriptions of Kiswahili texts were made to facilitate the analysis. Data obtained from the interviews were subjected to content analysis technique, whereby, written and spoken responses from participants were summarized and reported thematically. Some data from questionnaire were tabulated; frequencies and percentages computed to analyze participants' responses regarding their views and reactions towards students' sexual relationships, and their knowledge of sex education. These responses gave insights of teachers' attitudes towards students' sexual relationships.

## RESULTS

### Teachers' Views on Students' Sexual Relationships

Teachers were provided with four statements, which required them to agree or disagree with the suggestions on how students who were in sexual relationships should be treated. As illustrated in table 1, the first statement read, '*students in sexual relationships should be expelled from school*'. Twenty seven of the respondents disagreed with the statement, and only three agreed with the statement. The second statement stated, '*students in sexual relationships should be educated about sex and sexual relationships*'. All thirty teachers agreed with the statement; however, the reverse was to the third statement, which stated, '*students should be allowed to practice sexual activity for their healthier sexual development*'. All thirty teachers disagreed with the statement. The last statement read, '*students in sexual relationships should be given help and support and be allowed to remain in schools*'. Twenty seven teachers agreed with the statement; and three teachers disagreed.

**Table 1. Teachers' Responses on Students' Sexual Relationships**

Statement about how students who are in sexual relationships should be treated	Agree		Disagree	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Should be expelled from school	3	10	27	90
Should be educated about sex and sexual relationships	30	100	-	-
Should be allowed to practice sexual activity for their healthier sexual development	-	-	30	100
Should be given advised and be allowed to remain in schools	27	90	3	10

N = 30

This information implies that most teachers prefer the provision of sex education, help, and support to students, and allowing them to continue with studies even if they are found involving themselves in sexual relationships instead of expelling them from schools. This collocates with Mkumbo's (2010) finding that an overwhelmingly majority of teachers supported the provision of sex education in schools, as well as the idea that the school and parents should share the responsibility to provide sex education to children. Conversely, teachers are against students' sexual activity in schools.

Data from interviews show that schools are guided by rules and regulations that have to comply with the country's laws and directives. According to rules and regulations, any kind of students' sexual relationships is strictly prohibited. This was emphasised by one headmaster during interview, who said:

*"...We have school rules and regulations. We also operate under laws of the country. In short, here at school, we take sexual relationships as violation of school rules and regulations. We punish students when we find them involving in sexual relationships. When, for example, a girl becomes pregnant we terminate her studies..."*

This implies that, although teacher would tolerate students' sexual relationships, rules and regulations may force them to instigate punishment in forms of corporal or expulsion of students from schools. In Tanzania, pregnancy while in school, is punished by automatic expulsion of the girl from school and if the male responsible is also at school, he is also expelled (Fundikira, 1985). This is legally sustained by the National Education Act of 1978, which gives power to schools to evict pregnant schoolgirls out of schools (URT, 1978). In reality, girls suffer more than boys (Petro, 2009).

### **Teachers' Knowledge of Sex Education**

In this study, having a formal training in sex education was taken a criterion for teachers being knowledgeable of sex education. To get this information, teachers were required to indicate if they had ever attended any sex education training; and if 'yes' then, they were asked to indicate the topics learned during the training. Seven teachers indicated they had attended some seminars or workshops on sex education, while, twenty three had never attended any formal sex education training.

The following topics, which relate to sex education, were mentioned by seven respondents:

- a. Sexual and reproductive health education
- b. Sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS
- c. Sexual relationships
- d. Sexual behaviours

Further, the interviews with teachers revealed that, most teachers have basic knowledge of sex and sexuality, which is acquired through personal studies (i.e., readings), experience, and mass media. Teachers said that there were no sex education programmes in which they can be trained about sex education. This was noted during interview session with teachers; one teacher highlighted that:

*"...I have never attended any training on sex education... I do read books, newspapers, love stories and I sometimes like watching love-story movies in which I learn a lot about intimate relationships..."*

This was also emphasised by two heads of schools when they insisted that:

*"...As a school we don't have sex education programmes..."*

“...Sex education does not really exist at our school...”

These statements can be interpreted that there were no sex education programmes for either teachers or students in the studied schools. Since sex education was not the area teachers could bother to concentrate, neither the schools nor teachers themselves were taking initiatives to develop sex education programmes for teachers, students or the schools in general. Mkumbo (2009) indicated that in Tanzania, sexuality education in schools is not provided as a standalone subject; rather it is mainstreamed in other subjects. Therefore, it is next to impossible for teachers to concentrate on sex education.

### Teaching Sex Education to Students

Then, teachers were asked to indicate whether they teach sex education to their students. The respondents were required to indicate yes or no to the question asking, “*Have you ever discussed sex and sexuality topics with your students?*” beneath to this, those who indicated ‘yes’ were asked to mention the topics they discussed with their students. Sixteen teachers showed that, they have had discussed sex education with students in their different subjects, while fourteen teachers indicated to have never discussed any sex education with their students. The topics that were mentioned include:

- I. Reproduction (in Biology)
- II. Sexual intercourse at early ages (in Biology)
- III. Sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS (in Biology)
- IV. Body and behaviour changes of adolescents (in Biology)
- V. Life skills and family matters (in Civics)

As it can be seen on the above list of topics, which teachers discussed with students; it is clear that many teachers, who taught sex education, did as part of academic subjects. Four topics were part of Biology subject and one was part of Civics subject.

**Table 2. Teachers’ Responses on Reasons for Provision of Sex Education to Students**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sex education informs students about the impact of early sexual activity	7	23.3
Sex education gives students knowledge about sex, sexuality and sexual relationships and it puts them at a good position of making right decision	6	20.0
Sex education makes students informed about what good things they may practice in sexual relationships	5	16.7
Sex education makes students understand themselves better before they engage in sexual relationships	5	16.7
Sex education provides students with knowledge to cope with the contemporary world socially and academically	4	13.3
Sex education helps student to make use of the preventive measures when engaging in sexual relationships at their age.	3	10.0

N = 30

There were no separate programmes for teaching sex education to students in the studied schools as one head of school narrated that:

“...There are no teachers teaching sex education at our school. Only Biology teachers teach some topics related to sexuality like reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. As a school we don’t have sex education

*programmes... however, our school gets <sup>1</sup>FEMA magazines, and through these we believe that our students can learn a lot about sex and sexuality...*

Although many teachers, seemingly, are not teaching sex education to students, it is surprising that all respondents in the studied schools were positive with, and supported, the idea that sex education should be taught to students. Sex education was viewed very important to students. Many reasons were given to support the provision of sex education to students as summarised in Table 2.

### Helping Students to Make Right Sexual Relationship Decisions

An open question concerned with how teachers help students to make right sexual relationship decisions was given to teachers in the questionnaire. Teachers indicated how they were helping their students towards making right sexual relationship decisions. Each way was treated independently. As summarised in Table 3 the teachers' responses indicate that, *to educate students about adolescence and sexual relationships and their outcomes to life of a student*, was the response, which twenty one teachers mentioned. This means many teachers preferred provision of sex education to students. The response that got second rank in frequency was *to advise students to concentrate on studies rather than involving in sexual relationships* sixteen teachers mentioned it and other responses were related to these two as they appear in the table.

**Table 3. Teachers' Ways of Helping Students to Make Right Sexual Relationship Decisions**

<i>Ways used to help students</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
To educate students about adolescence and sexual relationships and their outcomes to life of a student	21	70
To guide and advise them to concentrate on studies rather than involving in sexual relationships	16	53.3
To give them support in time they face sexual related problems	10	33.3
To teach them the right and appropriate time for healthy reproduction	3	10
To explain to them the advantages and disadvantages of sexual relationships at their teen ages	3	10
To teach them to respect both sexes	2	6.7
To discuss with them life experiences	2	6.7

N = 30

On the other hand, interview data emphasised on discussing with students and advising them how they can handle sexual relationships. These suggested methods were used when teachers notice students' sexual relationships or behaviour changes. This was enunciated during interview by one teacher, who asserted that:

*"...we discuss with them and advise on how to handle sexual relationships at school. Many students fall in sexual relationships unknowingly or with the pressure to comply with their fellows, then they face lots of problems like performing lowly academically..."*

<sup>1</sup> FEMA magazine is a product of Femina Health Information Project commonly known Femina HIP, which promotes adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights in the African setting.

Another way used to help students who fall in sexual relationships at school was cooperating with students' parents. Parents were contacted to discuss ways to help students. It was unfortunate that, consultation with students' parents was done only when the problem was worse and teachers could not handle it alone. This was mentioned by one teacher, who added that:

*"...sometimes we call the student's parents when the problem is worse and we cannot solve it without the parents' presence..."*

However, it was noted that, not every teacher used these ways like discussing with students, advising them, or involving the students' parents; some teachers used punishment as the only alternative. One teacher featured this during interview by saying:

*"...I know teachers differ. ...some teachers take students' sexual activity as indiscipline and if they discover that students are in sexual relationships, they punish them instantly..."*

### **Teachers' Reactions towards Students' Sexual Relationships**

Data for this theme was obtained using two questions, which meant to reflect on teachers' reactions towards students' sexual relationships. The first asked *what teachers do when their student is in sexual relationships*. Responses showed that, ten teachers discuss or educate students on the matter; nine teachers advise students to make right choices; seven teachers punish students to discipline them, because sexual relationships are not allowed in schools; and four teachers report the cases to school administration.

The second question asked *if teachers had ever punished their student for being in sexual relationships*. The responses for this question reflected the first, that only seven teachers indicated to have punished students for sexual reasons, and the rest said they had never punished students for being in sexual relationships. These data informed that, teachers applied different ways to handle students' sexual relationships with different reasons.

Additionally, interview data provided other insights on how teachers reacted towards students' sexual relationships. The respondents told the researcher that teachers were punishing students who were in sexual relationships. During interview, one teacher commented that:

*"...Teachers sometimes react on spot by punishing students when they find them in sexual relationships. However, sometimes they may forward these cases to the discipline master/mistress or school administration..."*

It was also learned that, students who involved in sexual relationships, were punished when discovered. Discussion between parents and school administrations could be made to help the student, but punishment was the first alternative applied by most teachers. This was attested by heads of schools explaining how sexual matters were handled in schools. Heads of schools indicated to be very strict on students' behaviour or discipline as one head of school highlighted:

*"...We call the parents and discuss the issue, and the parents usually punish the student on spot before other students. When the student repeats the same mistake three times, the student is terminated from studies. We don't entertain sexual relationships at school and students know that it is against the school regulations..."*

Another head of school emphasised that, the last resort for students involved in sexual relationships with anybody were punished by total expulsion from schools, suspension for some days or corporal punishments:

“...When a student is brought with evidence on this, we don't have discussion, because it is the law, which guides us, and students as well as teachers know about it. We operate under the National Education Act. This guides what we do regarding to students' affairs...”

## DISCUSSION

The variable that was to be inferred from the views, reactions, and knowledge of sex education of respondents or dealt with through introspection was teachers' attitudes towards students' sexual relationships. The responses from both teachers and heads of schools indicate mixed attitudes towards students' sexual relationships. In the first place, observation shows that all (100%) teachers suggested for provision of sex education to students. This shows that teachers have positive attitude towards students' wellbeing by especially emphasising on educating students. Mkumbo & Tugaraza (2007) assert that according to studies, sex education may bring more benefits to students and the community in general. Sex education in schools is very important as all respondents acknowledged this. Regardless of the meagre training of teachers on sex education and negative attitudes of some teachers towards students' sexual relationships there are some efforts, which Tanzanian secondary school teachers are taking to help students by either teaching or advising them on sex and sexuality matters.

Provision of sex education to students was viewed as very essential to make them understand the benefit and detriment of sexual activity. However Mkumbo & Tugaraza (2007) assert that Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is not part of the school curriculum in Tanzania, implying that its potential in addressing young people's sexual health problems has not been tapped. On a second note, teachers' knowledge of sex education is an issue to be dealt with accordingly. Teachers want their students to be given sex education, but they, themselves, are not well equipped with the necessary tools to do so. Thus, there are no programmes for sex education to students and this may support what Mkumbo (2010) asserts, though teachers may be committed to providing sex education in schools, they are currently incapacitated to do so by the low status given to sex education in the school curriculum

Further, the results show negative attitude of teachers towards students' sexual relationships as exemplified by teachers' reactions. It was learned that when students were discovered involving in sexual relationships, they were punished on the spot. This gives the picture of how sexual matters are treated in secondary schools. This information also exposes teachers' and school administration's reactions towards students' sexual relationships as negative. It can be said that students' sexual relationships are viewed and treated as violation of school rules and regulations or as students' indiscipline behaviours, which deserve punishments. This is consistent with the findings by Izahaki (2006) that when students are found engaging in sexual relationships they get expelled from school instantly.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, sex is generally regarded as taboo and perceived too private to be discussed within the society and especially within the family (Shemdoe, 2005). Most teachers who took their time to deal with sex and sexuality matters in schools concentrated on what Kelly (2001) calls the risks that are associated with students' sexual activity like unplanned pregnancies, STD's including HIV infections, which leads to AIDS,



and poor academic performance. Teachers failed to go deeper to finding out why students are planning to engage in and practising sexual activity. Given that, most students miss parental and teachers' guidance, they may face difficulties and problems in making sexual decisions due to ignorance, and this may result to conflicts between adolescents and adults on sexual matters. Therefore, the MoEVT has to devise some purposive initiatives to train a competent cadre of teachers to provide sex education as a standalone subject and not incorporating it in academic subjects. Life skills education, counselling skills, and sexual reproductive health education should be given due importance in schools so as to help students. Special sex education programmes are needed in schools so as to familiarise sex and sexuality matters and neutralise the misconceptions and sensitivity held over sex education for both teachers and students.

In addition, there should be well established help and support system or counselling and guidance units in schools. For the sake of the wellbeing of students, these are essential to be established in schools so that students can be helped to achieve their educational goals and reach their full potential instead of being expelled from schools when discovered involving in sexual relationships. The MoEVT needs to provide school counsellors, who are recognised and competent in counselling and guidance to help students achieve their educational goals.

Lastly but by no means least, with all the cultural restrictions on public discussions of sexual matters, there is a need for people to change their attitudes towards students' sexual relationships. These can be achieved only through the provision of effective sex education that caters for all community members in the society. School curriculum for all levels of education (primary and secondary schools as well as teachers' colleges or universities) in Tanzania should include sex education. Community outreach seminars and projects on sex and health education need to be designed and implemented to help achieve this. This can help teachers, students, and the community at large acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to do away with the challenges of sex and sexuality matters.

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