

ROBERT MORRELL

Sex education has changed over time. Think of the explicit scenes in the Netflix series, *Sex Education* which made its debut in 2019, and then cast your mind back to the stilted or non-existent discussion at family meals or in the school classroom.

Sex Education was a hit with 40 million viewers streaming the first series. It was popular probably because audiences are interested in sex. But more than this, it surfaced the lifelong question of how older people speak to younger people about sex and intimacy and how people develop intimacy and trust.

It is often rightfully argued that girls in particular need sex education to protect themselves from sexually-transmitted diseases and to help them negotiate sexual intimacy.

Yet, boys are just as much in need. Sex is a relational thing!

It is helpful to recognise that the challenge today has continuities with the past. A century ago, while there was recognition of the dangers of engaging sexually at an early age, sex was mostly a taboo subject in school other than in biology lessons where reproduction in earthworms and stereotypical diagrams of the human body was as spicy as things got.

But there was public interest in contraception. In 1918, Marie Stopes published her *Married Love*, which raised the issue in the UK, but had to be published privately because it was deemed too controversial.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CLASH

Historically in Africa, approaches to sex and sex education have been strongly marked by, on the one hand, the moralising hand of the church among European settlers, and, on the other, norms and practices among local African communities.

In the 19th century, the influence of the church spread beyond the gospel, prescribing forms of sexual behaviour, spreading homophobia and valuing virginity. This basket of values meant that women were expected to be demure and chaste; sex was policed, and sexual matters were seldom publicly discussed.

Among Africans, however, matters were more open, although virginity was prized amongst women primarily as a means of controlling reproduction. Sexual experimentation among adolescents was also encouraged.

The historian, Natasha Ertank, has done much to show how two rival value systems clashed in the lives of converts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

She notes that rural communities preferred to proceed with sexual instruction through the medium of initiation schools. These initiation schools included for boys initiation circumcision training, and for girls, this often meant virginity testing.

On the other hand, "urban communities moved towards placing the responsibility for sex education in the hands of both mothers within the home and educators, who were to be assisted by a growing body of literature on physical and social (or moral) hygiene".

Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of sex in human interactions, sex education remained neglected and marginal in schooling curricula. South Africans largely remained coy about sex talk other than in private, although ideas about the male entitlement to sex were prevalent and unquestioned.

In schools themselves under apartheid, discussions of sex were confined to biology lessons where the details of amoral reproduction were about as exciting as things got.

Young boys (rather than girls) scurried to find pictures of bikini-clad models in *Scope* magazine as a way of addressing their sexual curiosity. For the older generation with deeper pockets and available transport, one could head for strip shows and *Playboy* magazine in Swaziland or later in South Africa's homelands, Transkei and Bophuthatswana.

SHADOW OF HIV/AIDS

But in the mid-1990s, sex became a public talking point with the emergence of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Unlike in the US, where it had primarily been associated with homosexual intercourse, researchers found that the disease was largely spread by heterosexual sex.

Work by Quarraisha Abdoal Karim and her colleagues indicated that the highest infection rates were among young African girls in northern KwaZulu-Natal. At the time, they reported the highest transmission rates in the world. By the year 2000, HIV/AIDS was estimated by Debbie Bradshaw and Rob Dorrington to be responsible for nearly 30% of annual deaths (65 859).

From the mid-1990s onward, researchers began to explore modes of transmission, focusing on heterosexual intercourse and the power of older men to insist on sex.

Prior to this, the focus in the global North particularly, had been on gay sex which meant that there was already a homophobic undercurrent to HIV and AIDS by the time research began in South Africa.

Despite public disinclination to discuss sex, the pandemic forced the subject into the open and this led to education becoming increasingly com-

Let's talk about sex education

It's an old story, with plenty of new challenges



The cast of *Sex Education* on Netflix. PHOTO: PINTEREST

mon and public space beginning to feature coverage of condom use and sexual consent.

Numerous NGOs began to engage in sexual and reproductive health education, while the national Department of Health devoted more resources to the pandemic. A current that ran counter to the healthy development of discussing sex was the devaluation of Thabo Mbeki's presidency which did much to hinder steps to combat the disease and by denying anti-retroviral drugs to infected persons, led to thousands of deaths.

SCHOOLING AND TEACHING

Parallel to these developments the shake-up of the school curriculum in the early 2000s saw the introduction of the subject life orientation (LO).

This was a subject that was compulsory from Grade R all the way through to Grade 12. LO included "health education, life skills, career guidance, physical education, human rights education, and religious education" and was motivated, according to André van Zyl and colleagues, by the belief that it could contribute to "solving social issues such as poverty, abuse, violence, sexually transmitted infections, social breakdown, and unsafe environments".

By this time the pandemic was affecting schools (learners, teachers and parents) and it was realised that not talking about sex was a poor, if not disastrous, way of dealing with the questions of young people. But this realisation didn't take the controversy out of sex education. What about its content? The call for abstinence as a way of dealing with "the problem of sex" was and remains strong.

It is regarded as a means of delaying sexual debut, pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. And it often has a strong moral and religious underpinning. Many teachers and parents are likely to believe in this approach.

Sex education has a place within LO but it is often swamped by other elements within the syllabus. Although we don't have a universal sense of how LO is taught anecdotally, it seems as though a number of elements limit its efficacy.

In some schools, particularly under-resourced schools, LO has no dedicated teacher, so the lesson is left open for revision of other (more important) subjects or "taught" by a teacher who has no training or little interest.

Although chalk-and-talk as a teaching method is no longer favoured, the content-based approach to teaching is still common and this does little to answer questions about emotion and

sexual intimacy. Teachers are themselves carriers of values, and these are not always friendly values.

There is a debate about how sex education should be taught, featuring prominently the conservative position that teenagers should abstain from sex.

This approach attempts to delay teenage sexual interest and activity in the belief that this will safeguard health (and morals). This is a deeply-held belief across South Africa and is witnessed in belief in the practice of virginity testing despite its prohibition in the 2006 Children's Act.

The need for gendered sex education has meant that government and particularly NGOs have taken on the work. But possibly the most obvious place to undertake sex education is in school. Most schools are public institutions. They have direct access to the young generation and their duty is to prepare the young for adult life and responsible citizenship.

'GENDER IDEOLOGY TRAINING PROGRAMME'

The Department of Basic Education has responded to this with a proposal for a "gender ideology training programme in primary and pre-primary schools" with an accompanying "early childhood education toolkit".

The idea is to train primary and pre-primary teachers, and by extension, primary and pre-primary school children.

This is a contentious attempt to introduce current debates about sexual identity into schools, but will it help pupils to become more skilled and knowledgeable about themselves and about relationships?

Questions of intimacy can't be reduced to "ideology"; relationships can't be addressed with formulaic training, vulnerability can't be explored with course notes.

The department's proposal takes sex education seriously, but ignores the complexity of the subject and can be read as a blunt attempt to move with the times.

There continues to be a debate about whether sex education classes should in some instances be sex-segregated. Research has shown that mixed classes with young teenagers may not be best suited to discuss issues such as sexual intercourse, pregnancy and menstruation, which is why some teachers seek the cover of a sanitised ideological approach to these issues.

And are teachers trained and ready to teach sex education? Some are, some aren't. In a recent study by Emmanuel Mayeza and Louise Vincent conducted in five former "black" schools in the Eastern and Western Cape of South Africa, they found that lessons were moralistic and homophobic and did not create the space for the difficult discussions needed to tackle issues of sexuality.

Yet there may be hope. In a study based in schools in the Free State, Dennis Francis and Renée DePalma

found that even teachers who believed in abstinence were prepared to acknowledge the value of broader comprehensive sexuality which included discussing relationships and safe sex.

The call to involve parents more actively in sex education is a global and South African phenomenon.

Ayobami Adekola has recently again raised the topic urging parents to talk to their teens.

This is nothing new, but the fact that periodically such reminders are issued suggests that there remains a generational communication gap.

—Dolly Mauerick

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What youth think about sexual consent

They understand the concept, but don't always ask in the moment

ANDREA WALING
ALEXANDRA JAMES
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Sexual consent has been a major focus for the past few years.

One challenge with sexual consent education is how it translates to real-life situations. As part of broader research seeking to answer this question, we wanted to understand how young heterosexual men and women understand and practice consent.

Our new study found that while participants mostly understood the concept of affirmative consent, they didn't always put it into practice in the heat of the moment.

UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL CONSENT

Our research included a mixed group of 44 men and women aged 18 to 35, who were in relationships, dating or single. We spoke to them in focus groups and presented a variety of heterosexual sexual consent vignettes (scenarios) to discuss.

We wanted to understand how participants thought the characters should handle these situations, and how they would deal with these scenarios themselves. Scenarios were designed to be somewhat ambiguous, with no clear right answer.

An example of a vignette we used was Julia and Mark. They meet for drinks on their first date, and the chemistry is strong.

They end up at Julia's place, where she tells him she wants to take things slow and won't be having sex that night. They start making out, and both begin to shed layers of clothing. Mark hesitates, unsure whether to continue, and Julia is uncertain how to signal her interest in other types of intimacy after setting a boundary.

Alongside the vignettes, we asked participants to share their understandings of consent, and their reflections on gender expectations around dating and sex, among other issues.

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of consent practices in line with the affirmative consent framework. "It's like equal responsibility in my eyes,"

Participants also noted that straightforward, open communication, alongside consistent verbal check-ins was important.

This included understanding that consent was the responsibility of all parties involved. Danny, a 25-year-old man, said:

"It's like equal responsibility in my eyes."

Social media for sex education:

South African teens explain how it would help them

AYOBAMI PRECIOUS ADEKOLA

Most teenagers dread talking about sex with their parents. But, in some societies it's considered taboo to even broach the subject.

And, even where sexuality education is taught at schools, research has shown that effective communication between young people and teachers is hindered because of age differences and, in some places, because of the societal taboos.

HOW MIGHT TECHNOLOGY IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

Adolescents spend a lot of time on their electronic devices. A study in the U.S. found that teens were using their phones, tablets or laptops for social media, gaming and texting for about eight-and-a-half hours daily; tweens (ages eight to 12) rack up about five-and-a-half hours daily.

Much has been written about the downsides of screen time for teens. But, as a public health scholar who studies adolescent sexual and reproductive health, I believe that social media platforms could be a powerful resource for sexuality education and support. These platforms can also be a gateway for young people who need to access essential resources and support services.

This is already happening in some parts of the world. For instance, Planned Parenthood in the U.S. has accounts on several social media platforms (X, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube) where it shares public health messaging, contact details and information about sexual and reproductive health and rights. It also invites people to get in touch and ask questions. The potential value of social media

to sexuality education in South Africa was underscored during a recent study I conducted in KwaZulu-Natal. Pupils were asked how their schools' sexuality education programme could be improved.

Many suggested that social media had an important role to play. Integrating social media into school-based sexuality education programmes in South Africa has the potential to reinforce curriculum messages and, ultimately, lead to improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes among learners — particularly those in rural areas where access to information and services is limited.

THE STUDY I conducted my study in KwaZulu-Natal's King Cetshwayo area.

The municipality's main city is Richards Bay and the area I worked in is largely rural and under-served. The participants came from nine schools. They were all aged between 14 and 19, were fluent in either English or isiZulu, and were enrolled in grades 10 to 11. Participation was voluntary; ultimately, I worked with 35 boys and 49 girls.

The study revealed that about 60% of the participants were sexually active, with many having had multiple partners in the past three years. While most sexually active participants (41) reported condom use, eight used them inconsistently. Four girls had been pregnant before.

During our discussions, it became clear that many learners found it difficult to talk about sex even during Life Orientation lessons (this subject includes modules on sexuality and reproductive health). A 17-year-old male said: "Most of us are not comfortable talking about sex

As Abigail, a 26-year-old woman, said: "Both parties must be actively engaging and checking boundaries as you go."

IN THEORY VERSUS REALITY

Despite appearing to understand the principles of affirmative consent, participants reacted differently when presented with varying scenarios.

Instead of noting equal responsibility, most participants believed men in the scenarios were responsible for getting consent, and women providing it.

Discussing the scenarios participants highlighted the need to avoid assumptions and to encourage open communication. But this perspective shifted when discussing personal experiences and sexual consent.

Here, participants expected partners to understand typical boundaries to understand typical boundaries, suggesting a shared sense of what's "normal".

In fact, participants felt following good sexual communication practices could demand the enjoyment of sexual encounters.

Some admitted that even though they knew the ideal approach, they didn't always stick to it. As Alice, a 25-year-old woman, said:

"Everything's going well and we're hitting it off, and then it moves into the bedroom and things just seem to flow, and I feel comfortable not having to necessarily overtly have that conversation then and there."

Lenore, a 28-year-old woman, said: "Sometimes, like, a conversation can't be had. It's like, 'I want to just check in with you for a second, I would be like, 'Dude, come on, like, let's just do the thing.'"

Jeremy, a 34-year-old man, said: "I've regularly asked someone if they're having a good time, you know, 'is this okay,' 'is this okay,' and he told, 'No, you've ruined the moment,' which I found quite perplexing as someone who believes strongly in making sure there's always consent."

Participants also indicated affirmative consent was more important in some sexual situations over others. In discussing one of the vignettes, Lenore said:

"It would really depend on what the [scenario character] tried, to be honest, like if he's flipped me around and chuckled me one day, I would not

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PHOTO: PINTEREST

like, yeah, go for it. If he's slapped me across the face in the middle of sex without clearing that first, no. It would completely depend on what it was and the way that he goes about doing it."

IMPLICATIONS

Our study is relatively small and cannot be generalised to the broader population.

We also focused only on consent in heterosexual relationships.

Nonetheless, our research provides some insight into how young men and women may be navigating consent during sex. The results don't imply education on sexual consent is ineffective. Rather, they highlight a significant gap between knowing and applying that knowledge.

Our findings also point to a broader and more complex issue: the need for a whole-of-society approach to rethink sexual communication and consent. One in five women have experienced sexual violence, suggesting deeper problems of masculine entitlement and societal attitudes toward women. Focusing on consent between sexual partners is one way of shifting attitudes.

Sexual encounters often involve intricate layers of emotion and experience, influenced by culture, religion, and other factors, with elements like shame, pleasure, joy, uncertainty, fear and anxiety.

Understanding the complex variables that inform decision-making in these contexts is crucial for creating educational resources that help people navigate sexual consent in different situations.

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