

An Evaluation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education as a University Course: A Case of Mulungushi University

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Abstract

Background: Any authentic type of curriculum is subject to review after a certain period of time if its viability is to be maintained. In the recent years, there has been need for inclusion of the much needed Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in different curricula including those for universities. So far CSE has been offered at Mulungushi University to third year students since the year 2016. This study is anchored on the theory of Critical Pedagogy which promotes the belief that teaching is meant to challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo which they need as their sexuality awareness develops.

Methods: This study aimed at evaluating CSE as offered at Mulungushi University. This descriptive and qualitative survey explored the learners' experiences, opinions concerning its usefulness during and after graduating. A questionnaire was distributed to 120 current and former students. Additionally, oral interviews were conducted with some of the participating students.

Results: Generally, the learners appreciated the content of the course and hoped it could one day be offered to all students regardless of their school as it covered cross-cutting issues concerning human development. Others however felt that the content could be updated by including current trends concerning health, hygiene and the politics of bigamy and homosexuality.

Conclusion: The study concluded that CSE is useful as it compels logic, inclusive values, sexual health and gender equity in the learners. As such it promotes holistic education for human development.

Key words: Comprehensive, Sex, Sexuality, Education, University

Introduction

Every society strives to improve its well-being and better its existence through education. Nowadays the role social media plays in disseminating important messages concerning social awareness (including Comprehensive Sexuality Education) to a wider community, cannot be over emphasized.

Social media has been an emerging phenomenon used in many studies to enhance situational awareness (SA)...as opposed to traditional media such as newspaper, TV and radio (Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015; Sutton, Palen and Shklovski, 2008; beigi, et al. 2016, Mandel et al. 2012).

Education is part of the basis for every country's development efforts. Enhancement of education is key to human capital development which is a major ingredient to any society's efforts towards economic development. Lately, teachers have engaged in attitudinal change towards teaching sensitive topics that affect learners because they have realised that if the area of human sexuality, especially among youths is ignored, health and human development will not be achieved (Flint, Schaapveld & Page, 2018).

This achievement requires constant improvement of the education system to ensure it remains relevant to the development of necessary human capital, thus Freire's Critical Pedagogy Theory which promotes the belief that teaching is meant to challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo which they need as their sexuality awareness develops. Freire reiterated the importance of structure transformation through critical education. This in turn would transform oppressive structures through the values of love, care and solidarity. (Paulo Freire, 1997).

Therefore, the curriculum of every education system requires reviewing from time to time to ensure it remains relevant and maintains its viability. However, any curriculum changes are as good as they are accepted by target audience. This article therefore highlights the perceptions of the learners of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) at Mulungushi University as a contribution to assessing the acceptability of the course.

In Zambia, the development, monitoring and review of most curricula such as for early childhood, primary, secondary schools and government teachers' colleges is the responsibility of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). Nevertheless, Universities do develop their own curricula under the supervision of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZQA), while for Technical and Vocational Colleges the mandate is with Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training Authority (TEVETA). These bodies responsible for curricula development and improvement in the country have always worked to enhance human capital development through comprehensive education in Zambia. Recent years (2013-2014) have seen the inclusion of a relatively new field in education; Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) which has found its way into different curricula at different education levels. With the help of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Ministry of Education in Zambia decided to introduce CSE in the education system by training teachers and lecturers to teach the subject. The aim of this introduction was to address the growing need of making young learners understand their sexuality amidst conflicting and often confusing messages about sexuality and gender daily (UNESCO, 2013). In the past, because of its controversial, political and sensitive nature, sexuality education was left to

traditional educators and the church who only availed it to learners at puberty or just before marriage. Religious leaders in marginalized places, including rural areas reached out to the most vulnerable populations to give them the most needed sexuality education. (UNESCO, 2018). However, these institutions did not reach as many youths as formal education institutions could. Mulungushi University was one of the first public universities to introduce CSE in its teachers' training curriculum in 2016.

Having been offering CSE for four years, time was right to carry out an evaluation of the course's acceptability and opinion of its value by the stake holders. Such an assessment was made even more important given that the course's subject matter is not often openly talked about in Zambian societies due to traditional beliefs. Such an assessment helps identify some factors that play a role in the acceptance or resistance to the course by students. This study therefore aimed at evaluating how CSE as offered at Mulungushi University was viewed by learners. The survey sought to explore the experiences of learners that took the course, assess their opinion on its usefulness and find out if they had put its principles to use in their lives. Such an evaluation was vital for understanding the course from the perspective of learners and ultimately inform revision to better achieve the objectives of the course.

Methodology

The survey was conducted in order to explore opinions and perceptions of learners about the Comprehensive Sexuality Education in its current state. Being a perception study, the survey took a descriptive and qualitative approach. A questionnaire with both open-ended and closed questions was administered to a sample of 100 students with a further 20 students interviewed orally. This sample was representative of the population of about 1,035 students that had taken CSE

as a course over a period of 4 years. The data thus collected was then subjected to cross tabulation analysis using excel with further thematic analysis applied to it.

A variety of data were collected showing students' background, prior knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education, initial perception of the subject, final perception, opinion of usefulness, proposed areas of possible change, opinion on whether the subject should be taught to all other students in the university beyond the school of education. This data were analysed to establish if there is any indication of correlation between students' back ground and their initial perception of subject, as well as check if there was any change in personal opinions before and after taking the course.

Results

Age of respondents

Table 1 below shows that 71 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 30 years and above while 28 percent were between 25 and 29 years. A mere 1 percent of the respondents was in the age group 20 to 24 years. The biggest number of respondents' that filled in and returned the questionnaires came from the Open and Distance Learners (ODL). Out of all the respondents, 60 percent were teachers prior to enrolling at Mulungushi. Gender disaggregation shows that for younger age groups, below 30 years, there were more female respondents while for 30 and above there were more males. Of all female respondents, 68 percent were teachers, while 32 percent of the males was an equal split between teachers and none teachers.

Table 1: Percentage Summary of respondents disaggregated by age group, occupation and gender

	Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
Age group			
20-24	2	0	1
25-29	30	25	28
≥30	68	75	71
Occupation			
None	32	50	40
Teacher	68	50	60

Figure 1 below shows that over three quarters of all respondents were married. Disaggregating by gender, 70 percent of all female respondents were married while 85 percent of male respondents were married.

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents that are married disaggregated by gender.

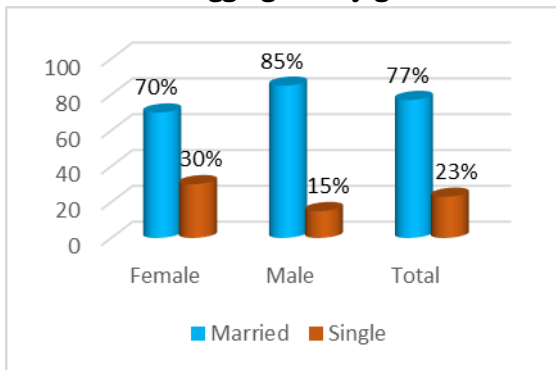
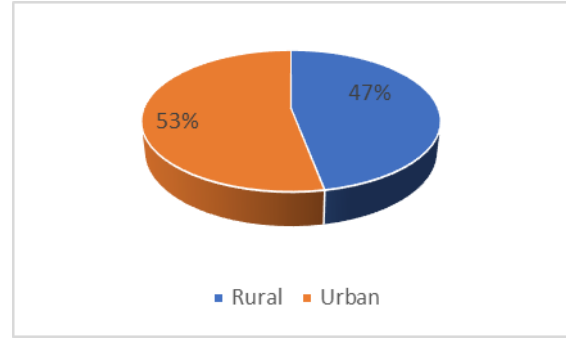


Figure 2 below shows how respondents were distributed in terms of those coming from rural versus those coming from urban areas. Data shows an even representation with urban being slightly more at 53 percent.

Figure 2: Respondents proportion by residence



The data collected was analysed along three main areas of focus namely prior knowledge, first impression and last impression or view of course after taking it.

Prior Knowledge of Comprehensive Sexuality

Table 2 below presents a summary of the findings of the study on prior knowledge.

Table 2: Percentage comparison of prior Knowledge by Gender, Age, Residence and Marital Status of respondents

	Prior Knowledge	
	No	Yes
Gender and Age		
Female	79	21
20-24	2	0
25-29	20	66
≥30	77	33
Male	90	10
20-24	0	0
25-29	26	20
≥30	74	80
Residence and Gender		
Rural	82	18
Female	45	56
Male	55	44
Urban	85	15
Female	55	88
Male	45	12
Marital Status		
Married	89	11
Single	67	33

Another area of interest was the first impression learners got upon introduction to the course and table 3 below summarises the finding

Table 3: Percentage representation of respondents' first impression of the course

	First Impression			
	Educative	Interesting	Neutral	Uncomfortable
Gender & Age				
Female	45	32	4	20
20-24	4			
25-29	32	39		2
≥30	64	61	100	9
Male	42	29	10	19
20-24	0	0	0	0
25-29	30	21	20	22
≥30	70	79	80	78
Marital Status				
Married	43	32	5	20
Single	46	24	13	17

Equally of interest was the final or last impression that students walked away with after the semester course. Table 4 below summarises the findings on this aspect as cross tabulated against some baseline characteristics including the first impression of the correspondents

Table 4: Percentage representation of respondents' final impression of the course

	Final Impression	
	Neutral	Positive
Gender and Age		
Female	16	84
20-24	0	2
25-29	22	32
≥30	78	66
Male	0	100
20-24	0	0
25-29	0	25
≥30	0	75
Marital Status		
Married	10	90
Single	4	96
First Impression		
Educative	9	91
Interesting	9	91
Neutral	0	100
Uncomfortable	10	90

Discussion

The findings of the study established that the area of Comprehensive Sexuality Education was appreciated by both male and female learners. Further the findings showed that there was a slight difference between female and male learners in terms of prior knowledge of

comprehensive sexuality with 90 percent of male respondents indicating they had no knowledge prior to taking the course compared to 79 percent of the female respondents. This could be explained by the fact that females traditionally in Zambia receive a more focused and detailed life-long education during initiation ceremonies and before marriage as opposed to men. In line with the theory of Critical Pedagogy, this study should encourage male learners to examine and challenge the power structures and patterns of inequality in the area of Comprehensive sexuality so that they are as enlightened as their female counterparts. Limmer (2010) however, explains that increasingly, the benefits of addressing gender for boys and young men are also being stressed.

Nevertheless, one striking fact concerns the low numbers of respondents from both sexes having prior knowledge of CSE; a mere 10 percent for males and 21 for females. This goes to show how much gap there exists in terms of people engaging in sexuality topics, let alone education. The picture is basically the same whether one lives in urban or rural areas. An interesting result was how comparing among married and single, there seemed to be more prior knowledge among singles than married respondents. This could be due to the fact that younger people are more engaged on social media (the most common way of sharing information nowadays) where a lot of CSE content is discussed than the older people.

Once introduced to the course, the first impression for respondents varied greatly

among different age groups, gender and marital status. 77 percent of female respondents indicating a first impression of the course being educative and interesting, leaving only 24 percent stating neutral and uncomfortable. For males, the percentage for educative and interesting falls slightly to 71. Among the married, 75 percent indicated finding the course educative and interesting while among singles this percentage falls slightly to 70 percent. Across the gender, the course made a better first impression among the older respondents, as shown by results in table 3 where for both male and female the percentage of positive first impression is considerably higher among those 30 years and above.

The picture of respondents' standings after the course make for an interesting reading, especially among male respondents where all of them indicated a positive final feeling while for females the percentage stands at 84. Like wise, regardless of marital status, majority of the respondents indicated positive final impression, 90 and 96 percent for married and single respectively. A cross tabulation analysis of the first impression against final impression shows a picture of most moving to positive impression even if at first they indicated neutral or uncomfortable. However, existence of 10 percent of those uncomfortable at the beginning in the neutral section maybe an indication that there are aspects of the course that need revising to ensure it becomes more positively accepted. Nevertheless, the final impression figures show positive reception among learners.

To ensure a better understanding of the perception and opinion of the course by learners, respondents were asked which topic of the course was most striking to them. This question drew a wide range of responses which in all summarizes the course. This indicates that the different aspects of the whole course appeal to different learners. The most commonly mentioned aspects were:

Self-Actualisation

The openness of the lecturer in talking about the subject matter in CSE left a deep impression on the learners.

Lecturers and teachers should take it upon themselves to promote positive attitudes towards lifelong education through change of personal attitudes. This view is shared with *Flink, et al (2018)* who states that teachers have reported changes in their own beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge regarding the teaching of sensitive topics such as contraception, abortion, and sexual diversity, which they had previously skipped. In the end, they spread the deep self-awareness education content which taught them things they never knew such as polyandry and self-actualization.

Teaching Methodology

The usefulness of the course in teaching about human development and traditional beliefs in relation to sexuality came out strongly.

The study sort to check how useful respondents thought the course was. One former student expressed her gratitude to Mulungushi University for having taught her CSE as it assisted her to secure a job in a Non-Governmental Organisation as a Project Assistant handling Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programmes. In her own words, she said,

"...I packed my two majors; English and Geography and I am using CSE out here to facilitate CSE under the Girls' Club in rural areas where some people still hold on to traditional reproductive myths..."

The human anatomy video lesson, and the tactics for teaching the subject matter to different age groups.

Teachers also reported the increased use of and confidence in participatory teaching methods (Flink, Schaapveld, & Page, 2018).

The learners appreciated the teaching methods that were used in class to assist them grasp the intended content. Despite there being some respondents who indicated neutral last impressions, there was near unanimity on the importance of the course to actual life. There were several reasons expressed by respondents why the subject matter was important beyond the class room. A good number of them indicated that they saw it as a lesson on life for better and holistic understanding of oneself which ought to

be taught to all, especially young people at university. Some indicated they saw the course as a good bridge between tradition on sexuality and reality which is crucial to enhancing human development.

Ultimately there was an indication of a general agreement that the course is important, and it should be taught to all students in all schools at Mulungushi University and all learning institutions across all professions. Many students from the School of Education as well as other schools in the University wondered why the course was not offered to them in their first year because it would have assisted them to avoid some of the mistakes they made in their first and second year at the institution.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education supports education that will advance individual well-being and prevent physical and emotional problems. This type of sexuality education is age-appropriate, medically accurate, and it encourages adolescents to be abstinent until they are physically, mentally, and emotionally ready for mature sexual relationships. It also teaches how to explore personal values and to let these values guide relationships. This is evidenced in the large percentages (between 75 female and 90 male respectively) of those respondents that responded positively or in favour of the course. In addition, it teaches learners how to set limits and deal with social, media and peer pressure.

The introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in school has been designed to counter the threat of HIV and other STIs, and to help protect young people against unintended pregnancy, provide the necessary skills to develop effective decision making and communication skills, explore values and attitudes. Lack of open communication and information regarding sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases, fosters misperceptions and may encourage high risk behaviours among young people in various sectors of society. The beginning of 2021 came with a lot of debates in Zambia around the topic of comprehensive sexuality education being offered in schools. Though the debates seemed to suggest that the content of the subject contributed to the moral

degradation of the learners in primary and secondary schools, the opposite seemed to be the case at university, concluding from the presented data. Most of the students at Mulungushi University seemed to appreciate the course. The 2021 cohort made a proposal to start a CSE club as a follow-up to the acquired knowledge during lectures. One student during an oral interview explained,

“I am now a better husband because CSE has taught me to listen to my wife and allow my children to participate in the affairs of our home.”

However, it is common knowledge that in whatever is good, there may be someone who would identify something negative.

Despite all the evidence of positive CSE effects on adolescent sexual health, its compelling logic, the intrinsic values of human rights and gender equity, and the many satisfied users, opposition to CSE remains astoundingly strong. In many countries, overall public opinion may be notably positive, but small yet extremely vocal conservative and religious groups strongly keep resisting CSE in many places (Chau et al., 2016; Keogh et al., 2018). Unfortunately, these groups often manage to negatively influence national educational politics as well as political agreements by international bodies such as the UN. Twenty-five years after the landmark ICPD 1994, UNFPA emphasizes *that* “the struggle for rights and choices is an ongoing one” (2019, p. 7).

Conclusion

The study concluded that CSE is useful as it compels logic, inclusive values, sexual health and gender equity in the learners. As such it promotes holistic education for human development.

Availability of data and materials

All the data used for writing this research article was gotten from books and journal articles related to the study.

Abbreviations

CDC: Centre for Disease Control

CSE: Comprehensive Sexuality Education

HEA: Higher Education Authority
ODL: Open and Distance Learning
SA: Situational Awareness
TEVETA: Technical Educational
Vocational and Training Authority
UNESCO: United Nations Education
Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ZQA: Zambia Qualifications Authority

Appendices

None

Authors Contributions:

IM conceived, coordinated and interpreted the results. APM drafted the manuscript and interpreted the results

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Authors Contributions

MP and BM interpreted and drafted the manuscript. JNM drafted the manuscript. We further wish to state that we all reviewed the manuscript to ensure that the content contained therein was correct before finally submitting it to the journal

Ethical declarations

Although this data included human beings, this data analysis was secondary and permission was granted to us by Mulungushi University Ethical Clearance committee.

Consent for publications

No images, individual details or videos for clients' data are part of this paper.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of interests

Not applicable

Submission declaration and verification

We declare that this paper has not been submitted to any journal besides this one

Use of inclusive language

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