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"ASIBIZI": TEACHING HUMAN REPRODUCTION IN RURAL EASTERN CAPE SCHOOLS

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The primary focus of this paper is to explore the possible influence of cultural taboos when teaching human reproduction content knowledge by isiXhosa speaking teachers in rural secondary schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Previous studies on Xhosa culture and the teaching of science have focused on the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, citing the need for cultural restoration and heritage. However, little research has focused on the experiences of rural teachers when teaching sexually related content to teenage learners of the same ethnic culture where traditional ways of behaviour are compelling within an ethnic grouping. In this paper, we used semi-structured qualitative questionnaires to explore the views of twenty-nine rural secondary school Life Sciences (Biology) teachers and one Life Sciences Education Specialist on the possibility of cultural taboos in terms of restricting language use when teaching human reproduction. Cultural taboo themes and examples of 'language conflict' were generated via thematic analysis of the data. The term 'language conflict' is taken from the isiXhosa word 'asibizi', which means, 'we do not talk about this'. The claim that is made is that cultural taboos embedded in cultural beliefs of Xhosa-speaking communities may be regarded as a fifth language issue that restricts the teaching of Life Sciences concepts of a sexual nature in terms of language and lexicon use; namely what teachers are allowed to say and the words that they are allowed to use.

Keywords: Teaching human reproduction, Xhosa cultural taboos, Fifth language, Rural secondary schools, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that talking about sexually related content can be culturally offensive to certain groups worldwide (Buni, 2013; Kral & Schwab, 2012). This view is prevalent in Sub-Saharan African countries (Doidge & Lelliott, 2016; Mhakure & Otulaja, 2017). The question posed in this paper is whether the belief in cultural offensiveness is pervasive among indigenous Xhosa people living in traditional, rural villages of the Eastern Cape. Specifically, we explore Xhosa teachers' beliefs about how the cultural belief of *'asibizi' - 'we do not talk about this'* – may impede the use of standard, academic language required for teaching human reproduction as prescribed in the Life Sciences curriculum (Dube & Lubben, 2011; Odora Hoppers, 2009).

Webb (2013) explored whether a culturally homogenous group such as the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape share a common understanding of their indigenous knowledge (IK) and whether they see any value in

including their cultural values in the science curriculum. The answers to both these questions were, in general, that they do have a common understanding (within limits) and that they do value the inclusion of indigenous understandings and worldviews when teaching science. However, there is a paucity of data on the existence and influence of traditional indigenous Xhosa cultural taboos in terms of teaching culturally sensitive topics such as human reproduction, particularly in rural Xhosa contexts, and the limitations they might impose in terms of the type of language and lexicon adopted by the teachers. As such, we explore the issue of how Xhosa culture may influence the teaching of human reproduction by Xhosa teachers. More so, we explore how homogeneity, that is, sharing common ethnicity with learners, influences the teachers' selection and delivery of human reproduction content such as menstruation, ejaculation, the structure of the testes and fertilisation.

Our concern with taboos is due to a general understanding that there are ingrained cultural beliefs that prevent talking about content viewed as culturally sensitive (Chilisa, 2012; Gee, 2008). Therefore, this paper explores cultural taboos and their possible influence on Xhosa teachers' use of language and lexicon (both in English and isiXhosa) when teaching human reproduction in rural schools situated in communities that hold firmly to their cultural practices and beliefs.

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND LANGUAGE

Central to the discussion is a previous study among Xhosa communities residing in rural Eastern Cape villages (Webb, 2013) which affirms the awareness of teachers, parents and pupils of the importance of integrating traditional knowledge in the school science curriculum. However, there is a paucity of data on the existence and influence of traditional Xhosa cultural taboos in terms of what teachers may say and what words they may use when teaching culturally sensitive topics such as human reproduction.

Culture is a 'social legacy the individual acquires from his group, a way of thinking, feeling, and believing' (Odora Hoppers, 2009, p. 604). Odora Hoppers (2002) advances a view that culture is the collective property of a group and manifests itself in learned behaviours, forming a pattern that shapes values from generation to generation. Foregrounding the issue of culture, Chilisa (2012) raises two types of values that are relevant for the study, namely: built-in, unconscious societal values which lead to preferences over certain things. Secondly, collectivism as a societal value that requires an individual to be part of a tightly knit social framework where people are loyal to the group. Further support for collectivism is proposed by Triandis (2018), who posits that culture is a 'collective phenomenon' (p. 4).

Pertinent to this paper, is the need to explore firstly whether the Xhosa teachers in rural areas are bound by collective, cultural taboos in the teaching of human reproduction. The second point is to determine whether conscious and unconscious societal values have influenced the participants to prefer using certain metaphorical words instead of standard biological terminology (Levinson, 2006; Nieto, 2006). Studies suggest that standard, biological terminology should be used for sexual terminology instead of euphemisms and colloquialisms (Chamany, Allen & Tanner., 2008; Doidge & Lelliot, 2016; Nieto, 2006).

Yore and Treagust (2006) note that there is a 'three-language' problem when teaching and learning science, namely the casual language used at home, the academic language of schooling, and then the peculiarities of the language of the discipline. An additional or 'fourth language' problem in South Africa is that the Language of Teaching and Learning in the majority of schools is English while the majority of learners are not English first language speakers (Webb, 2009). This issue is compounded in the Eastern Cape, where isiXhosa first-language speakers are most often taught in English by isiXhosa first-language teachers (Webb, 2009; 2013). In the rural contexts of the Eastern Cape, English can be considered to be a foreign language for most rural children (Webb, 2017), consequently bringing into even clearer focus the fourth language problem faced by learners and teachers. In the context of this paper, a fifth language problem could be taboo restrictions on language and lexicon, namely '*the things we do not talk about'*. As such, this study explores the issue of cultural taboos and the possible restrictions they may impose when teaching topics that are considered culturally sensitive.

METHODOLOGY

This small-scale exploratory research study, consisting of twenty-nine (29) secondary school Life Sciences (LS) teachers and one (1) LS Subject Education Specialist (SES), took place in the Ngcobo district of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. In the Department of Basic Education, an SES is responsible for managing all subject-specific teachers in an education district. The study comprised 12 male and 18 female respondents, with ages ranging from 25 to 60 years. In the new South African National Curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2011), human reproduction content knowledge falls under Life Sciences (LS), a subject that used to be called Biology in the old curriculum. Therefore, the term LS has been used throughout the paper in keeping with current trends. Mindful of the aim of the study, data were generated on the participants' current perceptions on teaching culturally sensitive sexual content (Taylor, 2011) framed in an ethos of mutual respect of their cultural heritage, human dignity and restoration of cultural identity (Webb, 2013).

As noted above, fieldwork with all respondents (n=30) was carried out in the Ngcobo District of the Eastern Cape. The setting is one of poorly maintained rural secondary schools (the schools in which the teachers who participated in this study teach) and poorly maintained, rugged and dusty gravel roads serving picturesque traditional villages of scattered rondavels and zinc-roofed rectangular houses from which learners in school uniform walk to school. Traditional herdsmen are often seen on horseback, while women dressed in Xhosa traditional attire are ubiquitous, carrying water buckets on their heads (no piped water is provided to residents in the area).

Qualitative exploratory, semi-structured questionnaires were issued to participants as the first step of a cyclic, flexible, design-based Participatory Action and Learning Action Recursive (PALAR) model (Zuber-Skerrit, 2009). Participants were issued with numbered questionnaires to be able to locate a specific questionnaire in case of errors. The aesthetic appearance of the questionnaire was colourful and simple, based on a study of Eastern Cape township teachers and learners of Xhosa ethnicity by Simayi and Lombard (2019) where it was found that doing so increased participants' attention span. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of simple, closed questions with instructions where participants had to make a mark on the chosen demographical

option. Closed questions were designed to ascertain demographic factors in order to accumulate empirical evidence about cultural issues and taboos and to provide contextual similarity, namely that of being a rural school with comparable ethnicity (Denzin, 2012). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of semi-structured questions, giving participants an opportunity to write how they felt when teaching human reproduction topics such as fertilisation, ejaculation, menstruation and sexual organs.

Inductive thematic data analysis was used to organise the data into patterns and themes, and a coding scheme was developed (Denzin, 2012). The first step of data analysis was used to describe statistics on the demographical area of the questionnaire (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The aim was to describe the target population, for example, Xhosa ethnicity, rural positioning of the school, LS as a subject taught and gender inclusivity to ensure that we had sampled appropriately. To give meaning and change raw data into meaningful patterns, we started with manual coding using sorting, writing and labelling (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Coding was used to group similar evidence and labelling to give a wider perspective. In the process, a story emerged as the text was used to generate themes and categories for understanding. The second step of thematic data analysis described the characteristics derived from the data coding in order to make connections between data and the original or emerging research question. The final step was the interpretation where participant responses were organised in the colour-coded categories to indicate emerging themes.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the data generated by the questionnaire revealed that cultural taboos do restrict the teaching of human reproduction by the Xhosa ethnic group teachers who were part of this study. Specifically, findings indicate that there is a fifth language issue that is indicated by Xhosa cultural taboo restrictions on the language used to teach human reproduction. Examples of responses which speak to this claim are presented below. I represents a question while T represents a particular teacher's response.

1 I: Do you think that teaching human reproduction content such as fertilisation, menstruation and ejaculation is part of the normal cultural conversation among young and old members of your culture? Explain your response.
2 T1: No, we don't talk about sex issues in our homes. When I teach these topics '*I double up and make serious faces'* because these learners are naughty.
3 T2: *Asibizi*, meaning 'we do not talk about those things' and '*siyahlonipha'* meaning 'we respect; we are disciplined'. We stay with these community members and are raised to respect our elderly people and cultural laws as forbearers and holders of authority in our culture.
4 T3: No, it's called '*amanyala*' meaning 'vulgar and culturally offensive'. Traditionally we don't talk about such things - '*asibizi'*.

The responses of T1, T2 and T3 illustrate the collective view that talking about sexual matters is taboo in the Xhosa culture. For example, T1's view of 'we don't talk about sex in our homes' reveals a fifth language issue (restriction) where Xhosa cultural taboos are inherent in an individual's personal life and home environment. These taboos result in avoidance of talking about and pronouncing human reproduction terminology. Similar views, based on collective, prohibitive Xhosa beliefs on talking about sex-related issues, were shared

by all the participants. For example, T2 uses the vernacular *asibizi* to illustrate the avoidance of naming human reproduction processes. A*sibizi* is also cited by T3, coupled with an explanation pointing out that tradition prohibits talking about human reproduction terms. Similarly, T3 believes that Xhosa cultural taboos regard talking about sexually related content as vulgar and culturally offensive (*amanyala* in isiXhosa); hence such talk is prohibited.

Compounding the teachers' situation is the matter of cultural identity in the form of *'asibizi'*, and *'siyahlonipha'* (we respect) as community members regard teachers as reservoirs of traditional and moral values where practices that have sustained Xhosa people for many generations have to be preserved. Teachers shared the view that they knew *inwardly* that they should 'avoid language of a sexual nature as it is offensive', confirming the role of culture as an ingrained, cultural belief that has unwritten rules. For example, T2 raises the issue of respect accorded to elderly community members as another cultural restrictive influence on teaching human reproduction. T2 points out that they have been raised to respect cultural laws and elders as holders of cultural authority.

Our findings show that Xhosa teachers share a common worldview where taboos induce feelings of shame, as indicated by T1. The issue of fear was glaring, where the respondent (T1) had to change facial expression. '*I double up*' is a colloquial expression used mainly by young people to explain '*changing the facial expression to a serious appearance'* as a defence mechanism when teaching the section on human reproduction. Furthermore, our findings indicate that Xhosa teachers share feelings of anxiety when teaching sexually related content to learners of similar Xhosa culture.

Anxiety was indicated by T4 where the respondent indicated that talking about sexual matters puts him in a *scary situation* because the problem is that the learners are waiting for the teacher to say those Xhosa terms that they know are prohibited in Xhosa culture. The challenge may be that learners will tell their parents in their traditional, rural environments and teachers may be viewed as disrespectful and far-removed from Xhosa practices.

Our findings reveal the need for cultural identification among Xhosa teachers. For example, T6 raises a compelling and collective authority that avoids talk about human reproduction, expressed as '*we must continue to be torchbearers of our culture and avoid using sex talk'*. Other respondents (T4, T5, T6) confirmed that Xhosa cultural taboos prevent them from talking about sexually related issues as something which is *not* done (T4) in our Xhosa homes when children grow up.

Also, our findings indicate that Xhosa cultural taboos are 'built-in' values and language that conflicts with what they are supposed to teach at school are, therefore, a fifth language issue. For instance, T5 believes that the school puts teachers in a difficult situation where they have to talk about these *things*. Difficulty and uneasiness in talking about human reproduction concepts can be seen from the teacher's avoidance of using standard biological concepts and terms, referring to them as *things.*

5 T4: Conversation about puberty and sexual parts is *not* something done in our Xhosa homes when children grow up. The problem is - learners know there are Xhosa words that are not talked about

in our culture. This puts me in a scary situation as I can't explain these things in my home language.

6 T5: It's our belief and we've been brought up to avoid talking about sexual issues - now at school, we are in a difficult situation as we have to talk about these things.

7 T6: We must continue to be torchbearers of our culture and avoid using sex talk while we have to teach the subject; that is a big language and moral problem to me at my age.

Our findings suggest a situation where Xhosa teachers are strongly influenced by collective, cultural taboos in the teaching of human reproduction in their rural spaces. We base this view on the excerpt, among others, from T2 '*we stay with these community members and are raised to respect our elderly people and cultural laws as forebearers and holders of authority in our culture'*. Further, T6 believes that '*we must continue to be torchbearers of our culture*', indicating an affinity to collectivism.

Living with elderly community members in a rural place and teaching their children, raises an internal conflict where the teacher believes he or she has to gain and maintain the respect of the elders by avoiding culturally offensive human reproduction language. Culturally offensive language is seen in T3's response '*No, it's called amanyala - vulgar'*, raising a point that the teacher does not want to be seen as disrespectful, ill-disciplined or bad by village members. Therefore, it can be claimed that there is a fifth language cultural conflict with the demands of the curriculum that restricts the teaching of human reproduction in rural Eastern Cape schools where the teachers and pupils are homogeneously ethnically Xhosa.

As indicated earlier, this study is preliminary and explores the presence and influence of Xhosa cultural taboos when teaching human reproduction. Our findings raise a question pertaining to the delivery of quality teaching and learning, namely, how do Xhosa teachers teach a subject where they cannot say the standard, human reproductive terms? In line with this question, this research remains an ongoing process which aims at generating further findings and possible solutions during the next data collection phase of the study.

CONCLUSION

In this paper our principal claim, based on the empirical questionnaire data, is that cultural taboos embedded in cultural beliefs of Xhosa-speaking communities restrict the teaching of Life Sciences concepts of a sexual nature in terms of language and lexicon use; namely, what teachers are allowed to say and the words that they are allowed to use. Cultural taboos add an extra dimension to the challenges of the home, school and disciplinary language problems of science teaching as described by Yore and Treagust (2006). Such taboos go beyond the language challenges of learning in a second language as they do not depend on whether the teachers use English or the home language of their pupils. In other words, although the effects of taboos are reflected in language and lexicon, they appear to be independent of any particular language used as they are primarily embedded in the culture. Nevertheless, they still remain a language issue and can be seen as a 'fifth language issue' which needs to be considered when teaching science in schools situated in communities where such taboos exist.

While these findings are preliminary, the authenticity and homogeneity of the responses produced by the

small sample of teachers in this study suggest that further research in this field should provide meaningful insights into issues hindering the teaching and learning of taboo topics. These insights could possibly be used to stimulate the development of teaching and learning strategies that, while respecting cultural beliefs, allow the required content and understandings expected by the curriculum to be delivered.

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