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At a Crossroads: Sex and Death Taboos in Child Development and Implications for Sesotho Education

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ABSTRACT

Taboos are prohibitions that are made to guard individuals and communities against danger and risk. Taboos are structured into two parts: the prohibited action and a consequence associated with non-observance. The prohibition serves as a command, while a consequence is presented with an element of a fib to avoid confronting the deep meaning that is considered taboo. The concept of taboo is universal, but its object is culture-specific. Basotho children learn rules, expectations, norms and taboos from their parents. Death and sex-related matters are taboo to children due to their developing intellect and social status. However, given the increasing instances of rape and deaths affecting children today, children should be protected against danger and risk. This paper is descriptive and follows the constructivist theory's prospects, to explore the challenges Sesotho teachers encounter in teaching topics related to sex and death, as well as how they can overcome these challenges. The findings indicate that children have access to sex and death-related matters through the media, many children are profoundly affected by death and sex-related matters and teachers lack knowledge of pedagogical practices to educate and support learners in these areas. Techniques such as using learners' prior knowledge, using folktales and understanding learners' cultural backgrounds can assist teachers in obliterating the challenges observed in this study. The research contributes to the existing literature about the teaching and promotion of the indigenous African languages.

Keywords - Child Development, Constructivist Theory, Death and Sex Taboos, Pedagogical Practices

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INTRODUCTION

In Sesotho, as in many African communities, child development comprises many aspects such as training, grooming, protection and the spiritual being of a child. Child development denotes the upbringing of a child. Bringing up a child is a collective responsibility because the phases of its growth involve various institutions and individuals. Children are considered vulnerable, and their upbringing requires caution in that they should be protected from danger and risk. Basotho children learn rules, norms and expectations from adults. They are nurtured to be responsible and cognizant members of society. One way of attaining the listed is using taboos, which are codes for acceptable conduct in a society.[1] Basotho children's

[1] Sally Paul, "Is Death Taboo for Children? Developing Death Ambivalence as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Children's Relationship with Death, Dying and Bereavement," *Children & Society* 33, no. 6 (November 17, 2019): 556–71, https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12352.

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upbringing continues in formal schools where Sesotho culture forms part of the curriculum. However, there is scant literature on how cultural norms should be instilled in learners in the classroom, hence the significance of this study, which investigates the challenges the teachers face in teaching taboo topics.

Taboos are defined as pointers to cultural norms children learn from.[2] It is further observed that a taboo designates an action that is considered inappropriate to practice or even talk about within a cultural group.[3] Taboos, like other aspects of culture, fade away and new ones surface to respond to changing societal norms and expectations. Children are prohibited from eating certain foods that are considered inappropriate to eat and actions and subjects that are hazardous to their developing intellect and status such as death and sex.[4] Several studies were conducted to explore the child's social world in different societies. Some authors support the idea that parents should discuss death and sex-related topics with children.[5] Others argue that parents' attempt to protect children by eliminating conversations about death brings confusion, ignorance and lack of trust.[6] Although death and sex-related issues are avoided to protect children, denying children access to information and rituals relating to death impact negatively on their bereavement experiences.[7]

It is argued that death is not hidden from children in their daily encounters but in their communities and education.[8] Africans observe that not only death is taboo in their cultures, but sex is also taboo. People are aware of the challenges brought by information gaps and are working towards eradicating the challenges.[9] However, people still consider death and sex topics as taboo. Addressing the taboo issue from a health view, people are strongly encouraged to share stories about sex and death to break down the taboo and generate support for institutional change.[10] However, for taboos to maintain their significance in child development, they should change and comply with modernity while retaining their indigenous knowledge system value.[11] Based on the literature, emphasis is rested on the significance of being open and honest in a way that responds to the child's social world.[12]

Contrary to the idea of sharing information on death-related subjects with children, some researchers argue that such information affects children's developing intellect and status.[13] It is observed that some schools avoid the topic of death because some teachers view death as a taboo subject, while other schools prevent teachers from initiating conversations with children about death.[14] The two instances act as barriers to the provision of death and sex education in schools. Parents and teachers are advised to assist children in understanding the meanings of those experiences.[15] However, parents find communication about those topics, especially sex, problematic.[16]

It is against this background that the current study seeks to identify the challenges that Sesotho teachers face in teaching learners about death and sex-related topics. The study further explores pedagogical practices that can help teachers maintain a balance between protecting and educating learners and navigating cultural restrictions without causing offense.

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[2] Johan Colding and Carl Folke, "Social Taboos:'Invisible' Systems of Local Resource Management and Biological Conservation," *Ecological Applications* 11, no. 2 (2001): 584–600.

[3] Sejabaledi A Rankoana, "Preventive Health Care Potential of Cultural Taboos: A Case of Dikgale Community in Limpopo Province, South Africa," *African Journal for Physical Activity and Health Sciences (AJPHES)* 25, no. 2 (2019): 252–60.

[4] Katherine McNamara and Elizabeth Wood, "Food Taboos Health Beliefs and Gender: Understanding Household Food Choice and Nutrition in Rural Tajikistan," *Journal of Health Population and Nutrition* 38, no. 17 (2019).

[5] Kelly Moult, "Teaching and Learning about Sexuality, Gender and Violence in Western Cape Schools,"*Agenda* 27, no. 3 (2013): 67–76.

[6] Sally B Hunter and Delores E Smith, "Predictors of Children's Understandings of Death: Age, Cognitive Ability, Death Experience and Maternal Communicative Competence," *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 2 (2008): 143–62.

[7] Paul, "Is Death Taboo for Children? Developing Death Ambivalence as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Children's Relationship with Death, Dying and Bereavement."

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[9] Delphine Manceau and Elisabeth Tissier-Desbordes, "Are Sex and Death Taboos in Advertising?," *International Journal of Advertising* 25, no. 1 (January 6, 2006): 9–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2006.11072949.

[10] Elizabeth Anne Wood, " Why We Need to Share Stories about Sex and Death," Generations Journal , 2022.

[11] Sambulo Ndlovu, "Child Development through Ndebele Taboos: Motivation to Blend the Indigenous and the Exotic," *Inkanyiso* 12, no. 1 (2020): 36–55.

[12] Barbara Monroe and Frances Kraus, *Brief Interventions with Bereaved Children* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005).

[13] Tony Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?," *Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1991): 293–310.

[14] Maggie Jackson and Jim Colwell, "Talking to Children about Death," *Mortality* 6, no. 3 (2001): 321–25.

[15] Victoria Talwar, " Talking to Children about Death in Educational Settings," in *Children's Understanding of Death: From Biological to Religious Conceptions,* ed. V. Talwar, P. L. Harris, and M. Schleifer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[16] Jo Frankham, "Sexual Antimonies and Parent/Child Sex Education: Learning from Foreclosure," *Sexualities* 9, no. 2 (2006): 236–54.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of taboo is not new and has been explored by several researchers. Walter raised the question of whether death is taboo or not. Trying to unpack the sense in which death is taboo, Walter differentiates between the terms forbidden and hidden and locates the debate in traditional and modern societies.[17] The debate extends to exploring to whom death is taboo if ever it is. The author examined the taboo thesis as applied in various literatures and concluded that death is not forbidden but hidden and it is denied by traditional cultures and by modern individuals hence, it is not taboo. In Sesotho-speaking communities, not only death but also sex is not mentioned in conversations with children or in the presence of children as it is considered 'too much for them'. Discussion of both death and sex is regarded as morbid and children are exempted from it to protect their intellect and status.[18] Since adults can discuss the subjects privately, this concurs with the view that the subjects are hidden not forbidden.

Mcnamara and Wood explore the social dimensions of food taboos and health beliefs in rural Khatlon province Tajikistan, and their potential impact on household-level nutrition.[19] Food taboo refers to avoidance of a particular food item that is detrimental to the body. The study adheres to the authors' observation that interactions between food security and local knowledge influence household nutrition. The study informs the current paper because Sesotho observes food taboos. Certain food items influence the physical growth of both boys and girls and are unsuitable for their consumption. However, what is taboo in one society might not be taboo in another.

Rankoana investigated the role of culture in preventive health care. The population for the study is Dikgale community in Limpopo, South Africa.[20] Preventive health care in this case denotes observance of cultural taboos that limit the prevalence of illness and diseases. Cultural taboos are moral codes, and thus practicing taboos limits susceptibility to illness and disease. The results of this study revealed six cultural taboos such as association, food and sex taboos. Although the whole Dikgale community observes cultural taboos, most prohibitions are made for youths because they are groomed to be responsible future adults and leaders in a community. Taboos are preventive measures for protecting children from ill-health and anything that can be hazardous to their development.

There are ongoing debates on whether adults should discuss sex and death subjects with children. On the one hand, adults believe that the subjects are too heavy for children. On the other hand, sex and death form part of children's social world and denying them information puts their life in jeopardy and brings them confusion, lack of trust and ignorance.[21] In support of the latter, it is argued that children are a specific group due to their developing intellect and should not be involved in conversations about death.[22] Adding to the ongoing debate, the paper aims to explore the challenges teachers face when teaching sex and death-related topics, which are considered taboo in Sesotho.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on the principles of the constructivist theory. The constructivist theory believes that learners enter the classroom with a unique perspective on life, which they have gathered from their unique experiences.[23] They construct new knowledge on what they have already had. The theory advocates for dialogues and negotiations for successful learning. It emphasises the active involvement of students in building their comprehension of new knowledge. From the constructivist view, students are not passive recipients of information. They reflect on what they already know and integrate new knowledge into their schemas. Constructivism advocates that the child's environment plays a crucial role in the learning process because it influences what a child thinks about and how he thinks about it. Thus, both teaching and learning involve sharing socially created knowledge. The theory is suitable for the study because it

[17] Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?"
[18] Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?"
[19] McNamara and Wood, "Food Taboos Health Beliefs and Gender: Understanding Household Food Choice and Nutrition in Rural Tajikistan."
[20] Rankoana, "Preventive Health Care Potential of Cultural Taboos: A Case of Dikgale Community in Limpopo Province, South Africa."
[21] Hunter and Smith, "Predictors of Children's Understandings of Death: Age, Cognitive Ability, Death Experience and Maternal Communicative Competence."
[22] Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?"
[23] Serhat Kurt, "Constructivist Learning Theory," *Educational Technology. Https://Educationaltechnology. Net/Constructivist-Learning-Theory*, 2021.

enables teachers to prepare tasks that will engage learners and assist them in developing their comprehension of matters related to death and sex.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is qualitative because it seeks to understand the challenges teachers encounter in teaching the topics that cultures deem taboo and how they can overcome these challenges. It used data from the already existing literature on taboos and child development. Purposive sampling was used to select journal articles that address matters related to sex and death taboos and child development. The data was organised and interpreted to deduce information that informed the researcher's comprehension of Sesotho teachers' challenges in teaching the unspoken. Understanding the challenges facilitated the identification of possible explanations to facilitate both the teaching and learning of taboo topics.

DICUSSION

Understanding the Concept of Taboo in Sesotho

The concept of taboo, as indicated earlier, exists in almost all societies with differences in what is considered taboo. While taboos are defined in various ways, the core aspect is 'that which is forbidden'. It is claimed that anything considered taboo must not be done, talked about, touched, or looked at. People are repressed to question or challenge taboos because that is also taboo.[24] It is observed that in African communities, the purpose of taboos is ritual protection, thus the many taboos address every aspect of African life.[25] The equivalent term for taboos in Sesotho is **diilwa** and is not singularised. In Sesotho, as in other communities, prohibitions are for people of different ages and genders.[26]

Of the five categories of taboos identified, the most prevalent in Sesotho are actions, nourishments and words. Therefore, expressions such as 'don't do', 'don't eat' and 'don't talk about', are used to designate the forbidden.[27] Most Sesotho taboos are meant for young people because taboos are defined as pointers to cultural norms children learn from.[28] They regulate children's growth into responsible and sensible members of society and transmitters of good conduct to the succeeding generations. The greatest taboos in the upbringing of a Mosotho child are death and sex. Issues related to sex and death are not discussed with children or by adults in the presence of children. In cases when it is mandatory for parents to talk about sex and death-related matters, they use euphemisms.

Taboos in the Teaching and Learning of Sesotho

Sesotho Language teaching focuses on language structures and conventions, oral and modern literature. Language teaching can be descriptive or prescriptive. The latter involves laying down rules for the correct use of language as it considers language to be correct or pure. The main objective of studying language is to attain communicative competence. Communicative competence relates to knowing what to say, to whom, and how. It relates to the ability to use language correctly in different contexts, as it is attested that the taboo-ness of language is context-specific.[29] According to the school curriculum, language teachers teach Sesotho as a home or additional language. In both situations, the focus is on the appropriate use of language, which in most cases is determined by the sociocultural knowledge of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in the classroom. As indicated earlier, taboo language relates to words that speakers avoid using in public spaces or do not use at all. In cases where such words apply, both in written and spoken language, euphemisms are used.

In the teaching of Sesotho, there is language acceptable in a classroom and language that is not. However, learners can question or address unspoken issues in response to subjects that are metaphorical in nature. For instance, the teaching of *lenyalo la Sesotho 'Sesotho marriage'* involves phrases such as *ho*

[24] Sylvester N Madu, "Health Complaints of High School Students in the Northern Province and Taboo Themes in Their Families," *South African Journal of Education* 22, no. 1 (2002): 65–69.
[25] Emmanuel Abeku Essel, "The Role of Taboos in African Governance Systems," *Polgári Szemle: Gazdasági És Társadalmi Folyóirat* 14, no. 4–6 (2018): 372–86.
[26] Philip Thody, *Don't Do It! A Dictionary of the Forbidden* (St. Martin's, New York, 1997).
[27] Thody, *Don't Do It! A Dictionary of the Forbidden*.
[28] Colding and Folke, "Social Taboos:'Invisible' Systems of Local Resource Management and Biological Conservation."
[29] Jean-Marc Dewaele, "The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25, no. 2–3 (2004): 204–22.

tshwara dinokwane and *ho raha moritshwana.* The sub-topics arouse learners' interests, as it has been observed that sex-related topics can be highly productive because they often trigger interest and involvement in learners.[30] Since the sub-topics involve sexual activities, teachers become reluctant to discuss them with learners because sex-related matters are taboo in Sesotho. However, learners have access to the language and topics through the media, and they often bring them up in classroom discussions. As this happens, the teachers are left puzzled about how to respond, and experience discomfort in discussing sex-related subjects with learners.

Teachers experience discomfort in the classrooms due to their dual status. They are members of the communities that prohibit conversations about death and sex and are educators who should teach learners and raise awareness about topics related to both death and sex. This daunting experience forces them to avoid some subjects, thus denying learners access to information and knowledge. As the constructivism theory indicates, teachers should build on the knowledge learners already possess. This requires the engagement of appropriate teaching strategies on how to address the inclusion of such subjects in a way that does not affect learners' feelings or deprive them of access to information. Lack of knowledge of appropriate and relevant teaching strategies is a big challenge that teachers face in the classrooms.

The published texts and materials avoid the inclusion of taboo language but this language is in some way integrated as an aspect of language knowledge.[31] Proverbs in Sesotho, for instance, form part of language knowledge and are not taboo subjects but when taught in a classroom, learners due to the knowledge they possess can raise issues that relate to forbidden topics such as death and sex. The proverb *leshodu ke ntja le lefa ka hlooho ya lona* translated as 'a thief is a dog and it pays with its head', serves as an example. Learners can show interest and ask questions that unpack the connotative meaning of this expression, which relates to mob justice. Teachers could be puzzled and experience discomfort because death is taboo and the discussion, as argued, may involve someone in the class in the worst way. This follows that learners have experiences of areas society classifies as taboo as part of their daily lives. Kaye maintains that discussion of taboo topics provokes extreme reactions which can cause problems in the classroom despite the teacher's thought that he/she can manage the activity.[32] In several cases, learners' discussions are determined by the knowledge they gather from literature or the media. As a result, denying them explanations generates an information gap and harnesses their thinking and reasoning.

An attempt to use euphemisms to manage taboo language might not be successful because learners get too excited about death and sex-related subjects. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to employ appropriate pedagogical practices and prepare thoroughly. The teachers' knowledge of learners' sociocultural backgrounds can facilitate both teaching and learning. For instance, using the folktale of *Dimo* and *Mmadiepetsane*, the teacher can present a scenario that could trigger full participation and expression of individual thoughts without affecting other learners' feelings. This approach requires teachers' knowledge of different pedagogical strategies and preparedness for class discussion. As facilitators, teachers must implement effective classroom management and create a conducive teaching and learning atmosphere. The possession of these skills affords learners a chance to express their views and seek clarification confidently without fear of judgement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the teachers should build on learners' prior knowledge to facilitate participation, understanding and intellectual development. The teacher educators should inform prospective teachers about relevant pedagogical practices for handling situations appropriately without depriving learners of access to knowledge. The study further recommends that the school curriculum should respond to the learners' needs by including death and sex subjects to raise awareness and equip learners with relevant knowledge because they get involved directly or indirectly with the subjects in their daily encounters.

[30] Paul Kaye, " Taboo in the Classroom," 2015, https//:www.teachenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowing-subject/articles/taboo-classroom.

[31] Xuhong Guo et al., "Uncertainty and Reluctance in Teaching Taboo Language: A Case Study of an Experienced Teacher of English as an Additional Language," *Global Language Policies and Local Educational Practices and Cultures*, 2016, 232–43.

[32] Kaye, " Taboo in the Classroom."

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the challenges Sesotho teachers encounter in the classroom when teaching taboo topics such as death and sex. Research shows that the subjects arouse interest in the learners, but the teachers experience discomfort when presenting them. The topics can sometimes not be explicit but surface during the discussion of metaphorical topics. The knowledge learners gather from different sources leads to questions that direct discussions into taboo subjects, leaving teachers at a crossroads. The learner's excitement and search for deeper comprehension is the biggest challenge because teachers are members of communities that consider death and sex taboo.

The study concludes that learners should be taught about sex and death to protect them from danger and risk. They should not be denied access to information. Although the teachers should respect the taboos and norms of the communities they serve, they also have a responsibility to educate and protect their learners. They should implement relevant pedagogical practices to teach taboo topics without causing offense or breaking cultural norms. Techniques such as using learners' prior knowledge, using folktales and understanding learners' cultural backgrounds can assist teachers in obliterating the discovered challenges while still appealing to the learners' interest.

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