



## Research Article

# Parents' views on teaching comprehensive sexuality education in early grades: a South African case study

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### Abstract

Child abuse is described as a worldwide pandemic extending across all races, tribes, cultures, and social classes. To prevent this pandemic there is a need for the teaching and learning of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in the early grades. The knowledge and skills of this programme will empower young children with the basic skills of decision-making and communication to report such incidences. However, many South African parents have formed negative views towards CSE due for various reasons, such as values, culture, religion and lack of knowledge. This has led to parents requesting to withdraw their children from the classes where the teaching of CSE takes place. This article explored parents' views towards teaching the CSE programme in the early grades. The study was conducted in the Gauteng province, involving ten parents purposively selected who had children in the early grades in public schools. A qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm guided the research. The study utilised a case study, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a reflective journal as data-collection methods. This study used both Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowens Family System Model as a lens to explore the views of parents. Data revealed that many parents were ill-informed on the content of CSE. They believed that CSE content primarily focused on teaching sexuality education and sexual relationship. Other factors that contributed to their attitudes were cultural, religious, and family norms. The study recommends that there is a need to facilitate more in-depth and frequent consultations with parents to discuss the nature of CSE teaching in the early grades and the content of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the early grades. Parents need to be informed thoroughly of the content of CSE. Together with the School Governing Bodies, parents should meet with the school officials to discuss CSE age-appropriate content. It was also recommended that a Handbook for Parents on CSE outlining the age- and grade-appropriate content should be made available to every parent.

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## Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child abuse affects more than one billion children worldwide, leaving them with long-lasting emotional, social and economic ramifications (WHO, 2020). Child abuse is a national pandemic affecting children of all races, tribes, cultures and social classes. To prevent child abuse and empower young children with the knowledge of abuse and neglect, the authors believed there is a recognised need to teach comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the early grades (Gwirayi, 2011; Magwa, 2014; Nyamanhindi, 2015). Venketsamy (2018)

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believes that to minimise child sexual abuse and empower young children with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes about their personal well-being, it is highly significant that CSE content is taught to all learners.

Parents are important role players in their young children's educational development and thus play a significant role in ensuring that they are provided with quality teaching and learning opportunities (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2017a). According to the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS), the curriculum aims to capacitate children with the skills of decision-making, communication, assertiveness and interpersonal relationships (DBE, 2011) to enhance their holistic development. For young children to develop holistically, parents should become active participants in the child's teaching and learning through familiarisation with the content delivered in the classroom. The authors argue that CSE is essential in the early grades within a South African context since parents are responsible for the well-being and protection of their young children. This article aims to provide insight into the views of parents regarding teaching CSE in the early grades in South African classrooms. In this study, early grades refer to learners who are enrolled in public schools in Grades R-3.

## **Literature Review**

### **Explanation of CSE for the South African context**

Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and even spiritual aspects of sexuality (Olufadewa, Adesina & Oldele 2020; Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). CSE aims to empower children by helping them understand their rights and the choices they make (including the consequences of their decisions), help them realise their health, well-being and dignity, and develop healthy and respectful social and sexual relationships in their lives (UNESCO, 2018). The CSE programme is embedded within the Life-Skills curriculum in the early grades in South Africa (Kinnear, 2018). The programme is intended to achieve the specific aims of the Life Skills curriculum by strengthening young children with skills to enhance their physical, social, personal, and emotional development; also providing knowledge on personal health and safety and strengthening relationships (DBE, 2011).

CSE also aims to reduce risky behavioural practices, reduce the transmission of HIV and STIs, reduce gender-based violence, and make learners aware of health and psychosocial services in the South African government provides through their various departments (DBE, 2019). Through the CSE programme, the department envisaged empowering young children with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to make decisions about their personal well-being and to prevent child abuse. Recently, child abuse has been gaining much attention in the South African media. One example cited by Kinnear was of young children in a Gauteng school who were sexually abused by a scholar-patroller (Kinnear, 2018). Other cases go unreported since children and parents do not have the knowledge and understanding of where and how to report such incidents. Therefore, it is significant that CSE age-appropriate content is taught to all learners to prevent child abuse. According to Gwirayi (2011), Magwa (2014) and Nyamanhindi (2015), there is an urgent need for the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education age-appropriate content in the early grades. This paper focuses on parents' views on teaching CSE to early-grade learners in South African schools.

### **Parents' Views Towards the Teaching of CSE**

Parents are essential in communicating with their children about sexuality education, relationships and well-being, particularly in early grades (UNESCO, 2018). The DBE's rollout of the CSE programme was conducted in partnership with UNESCO, whose vision is to empower and protect children with age-appropriate knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education (Herbst, 2021; Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). The teaching and learning of CSE in the early grades resulted in mixed responses from parents. Some parents believe that teaching CSE in the early grades effectively protects their children against CSA and informs them about their bodies (Nkoy, 2022). On the contrary, many movements have risen from the South African community, such as lobbying from the conservative human rights organisation: Cause for Justice (CFJ), which believed that the teaching of CSE is weakening the family structure and creating a barrier between parent and child (Herbst, 2021). Another faction is a Facebook Group, #LeaveOurKidsAlone, which advocates that

parents should maintain their rights regarding raising and educating their children. Several studies by Badenhorst (2018), DBE (2019) and Kirby (2011) found that engaging the child in CSE from an early age can lead to a delayed sexual debut and more responsible decision-making; however, there is still resistance from parents prevalent in South Africa. The misunderstanding of the nature, content, effects, and purpose of CSE results in heightened emotions and resistance toward the teaching of CSE. This is a barrier to sensible discussions surrounding the CSE needs of the young child (Robinson, Smith & Davies, 2017; Ketting et al., 2018; Cacciatore et al., 2020). Parents have a strong influence on their child's behaviours and identities and exploring parents' views towards the teaching of CSE is a crucial component in gaining parental support for CSE teaching and learning (Abdullah et al., 2020).

In a media briefing in 2017, the DBE brought to light the concerns some parents had shared with the media. Parents explained that they felt that teaching CSE in the early grades would lead to early sexual initiation and deny children of their innocence. They described learning material as being non-age-inappropriate and vulgar. Parents felt meaningful consultations had yet to occur regarding the content to be taught (Ellerbeck, 2019). Many parents felt that topics should be taught from grade six upwards, with more controversial topics being taught in the last years of high school (Ketting et al., 2018). Parents criticised the curriculum as deriving from childhood's honest discourse and argued that CSE topics belong in adulthood (Mayeza & Louise, 2018).

On the contrary, parents who felt that the teaching of CSE equipped children to make informed, healthy decisions mentioned that CSE should be age-appropriate and based on the mental maturity of the child, starting with biological content and moving to more comprehensive material as the child increases in age (Kee-Jair & Shih-Hui, 2020). The DBE addressed these concerns by explaining to parents that values and knowledge gained from the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education would empower young learners with critical skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to prevent child sexual abuse. The benefit of learning age-appropriate content that is scientific and non-judgemental will capacitate children with decision-making, interpersonal relationships, communication and assertiveness skills about their personal well-being (DBE, 2011). Therefore, the CSE curriculum is a valuable tool to empower young children with good decision-making skills and develop them holistically into responsible adults (Mayeza & Vincent, 2018).

Despite the DBE's clarification that the CSE curriculum does not include sexually explicit content, it focuses on respecting and protecting your body, healthy relationships, life skills, and values-based education; parents still expressed their resistance to the contents of the CSE curriculum (DBE, 2017). According to Ellerbeck (2019), parents believe that the CSE content teaches children about masturbation, sexual pleasure, gender orientation, and sex. Gunasekara (2017) states that most parents have an inherent fear that the teaching of CSE will stimulate children who explore sexual diversity from a young age and are more likely to engage in sexual pleasures. Parents described the content as 'the type of graphic and ideologically-laden content used in the new curriculum is completely inappropriate' (Ellerbeck, 2019:1). According to Rouhparvar, Javadnoori & Shahali (2022), parents indicated that they would feel more comfortable with the teaching and learning of CSE if it avoids topics of pre-marital sexual activities and homosexuality. Parents acknowledged their child's exposure to technology and graphic content on the internet; however, parents expressed that empowering their children with the knowledge to navigate unsafe content found on the internet would be valuable (Kee-Jair & Shih-Hui, 2020). Abdullah et al., (2020). States that parents understand their responsibility in educating their children on CSE topics but feel ill-equipped in doing so and communicate a need for help to gain skills and CSE content. Ganji, Emamian, Maasoumi, Keramat, and Merghati (2018) found that parents advocated that they should be their child's first source of CSE knowledge. However, an overarching culture of embarrassment and cultural sensitivity prevents parents from discussing these topics (Nkoy, 2022; Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). Abdullah et al. (2020) found that despite this embarrassment, there is a willingness amongst female parents to discuss CSE topics with their girl child. They (female parents) feel more open to discussing hygiene, physical changes, bodily protection, and abstinence than boys.

Parents further expressed cultural and religious concerns and highlighted that CSE does not align with the values and traditions taught at home (Ellerbeck, 2019). Parents are strongly influenced by their cultural and religious beliefs and

fear that the CSE content will contradict their religious and cultural teaching (Kee-Jair & Shih-Hui, 2020; Venketsamy, 2018)). Gunasekara (2017) found that historical antecedents and religious doctrine are vital influencers in parents' views towards the teaching of CSE in the early grades due to their moral precedents regarding the suitable age children should be exposed to sexuality topics. Religious and cultural components are an 'add-on' to the primary CSE curriculum. According to Sanjakdar (2018) and Haggis and Mulholland (2014), this is highlighted as a concern as children may find it challenging to navigate what is learnt in the classroom to their cultural and religious beliefs. Sanjakdar (2018) proposed that including religion and culture in the CSE curriculum will allow children to use critical thinking skills about their and others' values and belief systems. In their address to parents, the DBE explained how CSE addresses harmful social norms and practices such as a culture of silence, child marriages, and genital mutilation (DBE, 2017). A National Consultative Forum has been formed where the stakeholders continuously discuss the views of parents, religious groups, and non-governmental organisations and continuously engage with religious and traditional leaders (DBE, 2017; Hlangani, 2019). The DBE believes that religious and traditional learners have been hoodwinked about the content of the CSE curriculum and believes it is time to set differences aside and unite to protect children (Herbst, 2021).

Despite in-service training established to equip teachers to deliver content sensitively and appropriately, parents expressed that teachers need to be trained and comfortable in teaching CSE content. They (parents) felt they should be given the right to teach their children about CSE since teachers are uncomfortable, and they need to understand the cultural background of their learners. Teachers are uncomfortable talking about CSE topics and therefore were found to be impressing their own beliefs to learners during the lessons (Reygan & Francis, 2015). To ensure proper implementation of the CSE programme, the DBE published multiple policies, such as the DBE Policy for HIV, STIs and TB (2017-2022); Integrated Strategy for HIV, STIs and TB (2012 to 2016), and the CAPS: Life Skills to inform the teaching and learning of CSE content in the classroom (Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). Diale (2016) explains that some teachers need more confidence in teaching CSE to children due to policy changes and a lack of DBE support. Teachers' training in CSE fosters social justice and equality (Reygan & Francis, 2015; Venketsamy, 2018). Recommendations from Venketsamy and Kinnear (2020) support the ongoing training of teachers in CSE content knowledge and skills, and contextualised policies would result in confident and able teaching of CSE.

Ellerbeck (2019) argues that due to the parent's right to raise their child based on their values and beliefs, parents must be consulted and shown the CSE curriculum and be afforded the option to withdraw their children from CSE classes. The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, stated that parents have the right to withdraw their children from the current CSE programme, provided they supply their learners with an alternative curriculum that meets the CAPS criteria for competency (Hlangani, 2019). Parents should know what their children are learning and work together with schools and policymakers to produce the most effective CSE programme for children (Rabbitte & Enriquez, 2019). Ellerbeck (2019:1) reports that the DBE has described parental concerns as 'parental prejudice' and 'cultural taboo'. Rabbitte & Enriquez (2019) articulates that the DBE and policymakers need to listen to the needs of parents to improve the teaching of CSE programmes in the early grades. The holistic development of children can be achieved when parents, schools, policymakers, and the department realise the success of teaching CSE in the early grades and work together to produce high-quality, comprehensive sexuality education (Jozkowski & Crawford, 2016).

### **Parental Responsibility in Protecting Children**

Every child has the right to be protected from hurt or harm (Constitution of South Africa, 1996), and it is the parent's responsibility to ensure that the young child is safe from harm. To protect children and to ensure their well-being, the authors agree that CSE should be implemented in all schools for all grades as an empowering tool in education. The UNFPA (2015:2) expresses the view that the teaching of CSE is 'the responsibility of all stakeholders and government across all sectors and should include parents' empowerment.' Parents play an essential part in their children's holistic development, a fact accepted worldwide. It can be argued that parents are the child's primary source of socialization agents and source of information (Abdullah et al., 2020). Whilst parental responsibility is a widely accepted notion,

parents' discomfort and aversion towards speaking to their children about topics of CSE and the consequences are less widely explored. Global studies by Athanasel (2018), Makol-Abdul, Nurullah, Imam and Rahman (2009) and Weiss (2007) confirm that although parents acknowledge their role in giving their child information on CSE, they find conversations difficult and uncomfortable (Abdullah et al., 2020).

Parents in South Africa have displayed their stance on their right as a parent to choose how to raise and educate their children (Nkoy, 2022). With 100 000 parents joining the #LeaveOurKidsAlone movement, little activity has focused on the parent's responsibility to care for and protect their children. The Bill of Rights Section 28 describes children as the most vulnerable members of society and need special protection from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, or degradation (Constitution of South Africa, 1996). Children who do not know about healthy relationships, protecting their bodies, or reaching out for help are more likely to become victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) and have their rights exploited (Council of Europe, 2020). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 outlines responsibilities parents have towards their children: to care for a child; keep in contact with the child; act as a guardian of the child; and contribute to the maintenance of the child (Constitution of South Africa, 1996). By exercising the parental right to raise and educate one's child in the way they choose and removing children from CSE, parents deny the child the tools that can be used to protect themselves against CSA, neglect, or degradation. UNESCO (2018) in their report outlines that CSE is a tool that empowers children with skills and knowledge to realise their health, well-being, and dignity and to ensure the protection of their right to life. Therefore, it can be argued that it is the parent's responsibility to provide access to children to educate themselves with CSE knowledge to protect themselves and support them in becoming responsible citizens.

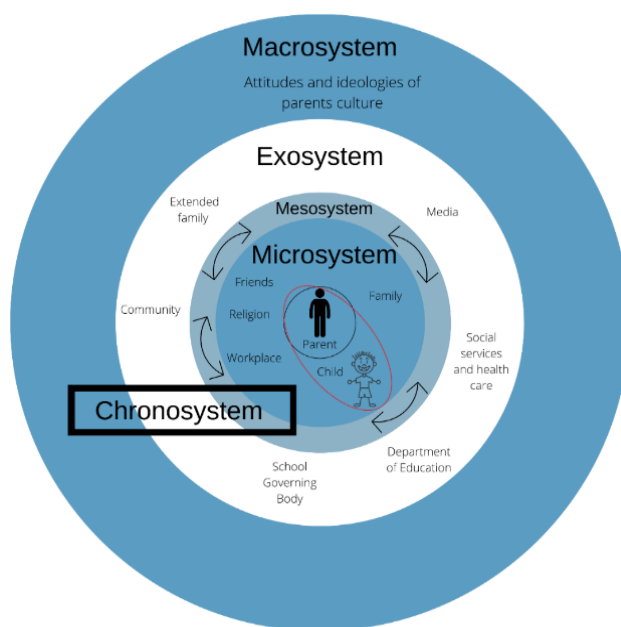
While the parent's rights to raise their children are acknowledged, the child's human rights cannot be overlooked. Empowering the child by developing the ability to make informed decisions about their lives, health, and body form the foundation of The Human Rights Framework (Council of Europe, 2017). The child's right to the highest standard of physical and mental health is entrenched in Section 28 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa and Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, stating that every child should receive information that is evidence-based, scientifically accurate, objective, current, and does not misrepresent or is censored. CSE is age-appropriate, evidence-based information tailored to the child's need and is a mandatory part of the school curriculum (UNFPA, 2015).

The Council of Europe (2017:58) Human Rights commissioner explains that 'international human rights standards on the right to freedom of religion or belief do not entitle parents to withdraw children from such classes where relevant information is conveyed objectively and impartially.' Emanating from the literature, the authors argue that parents have a crucial role to play in protecting their children from hurt or harm.

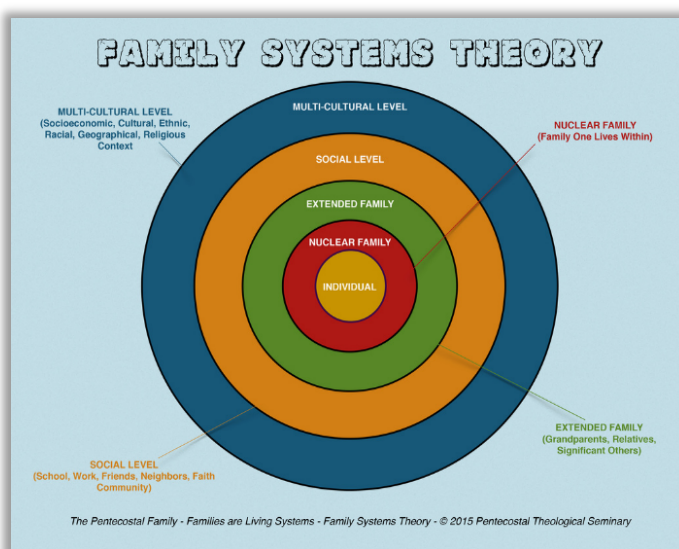
### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, the authors agreed that Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory and Bowen's Family System Theory were pertinent lenses to explore this study. Both theories highlight an integrated family approach when exploring parents' views towards teaching CSE in the early grades. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowen's Family System Theory guided every aspect of this research, from the definitions of the research problem to the selection of relevant literature, research methodology, and the presentation of the discussions and findings (Adom et al., 2018). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowen's Family System Theory created a foundation for a credible study rooted in established theory rather than the researcher's opinion or instincts (Akintoye, 2015). Ecosystemic factors, such as culture and religion, are crucial when exploring parents' views towards teaching CSE in the early grades, as many cultural and religious practices are deeply entrenched in society (Mahoso, 2020). The microsystem is the first system in which the child engages with his or her parents and siblings. Parents, siblings and significant others are the primary protectors of young children. The authors agree that since parents are the primary protectors, they are protecting their children from being exposed to content that is not age-appropriate, therefore, their negative attitudes towards the teaching of CSE. According to Bowen (1978), the family system creates a safe space for the child. Within this space, the

child can explore his or her own life world (Venketsamy, 2018). Giddens (2010) states that culture shapes and guides people's lives and forms their norms, values, myths, and taboos. Studying exosystemic influences such as culture is essential in South Africa, as diverse cultures and norms characterise the community. Many South African cultures consider topics of sex, sexuality, the developing body and CSA taboo, and discussions surrounding these topics are thought to increase promiscuity and early sexual debut (Depalma & Francis, 2014). Both these theories contribute significantly to the views of parents regarding teaching CSE in the early grades.



**Figure 1.** Graphic representation of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (adapted from (Gray & MacBlain, 2015; Morrison et al., 2015).



**Figure 2.** Graphic representation of Bowens Family Systems Theory (adapted from the Pentecostal Family – Families are Living Systems, 2015).

### The Aim, Problem of the Study and Significance

The main aim of this study was to gain deeper insight into parents' views towards teaching CSE in the early grades. Furthermore, this study examined factors that influenced parents' views towards the teaching of CSE and established parents' knowledge and understanding of CSE and their responsibilities of protecting their young children.

The South African government mandated the DBE to introduce a comprehensive sexuality education programme into its Life-Skills/Life Orientation curriculum. The programme aimed to minimise child sexual abuse, delay sexual debut and prevent the infection of HIV/Aids, TB and STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections). The word 'sexuality' has raised much concern among parents in South Africa. Parents were ill-informed of the content of the CSE programme, thus resulting in a misconception and understanding of the relevance of teaching CSE in schools. As a result, parents formed negative attitudes towards the teaching of the CSE programme (DBE, 2019). This led to many parents requesting to withdraw their children from classes where the CSE content was being taught (Swain, 2019). Parents were concerned about the content that would be presented to their young children. They believed that if their children are exposed to CSE content in the early grades, this will encourage young children to engage in sexual activities. For this reason, this paper explored the views of parents towards teaching comprehensive sexuality education content in the early grades. This paper emanated from a PhD study conducted by the first author.

This study is significant in that it envisages eliminating and clearing any misconceptions or misunderstandings parents hold regarding the teaching of CSE. Furthermore, it also aims to empower and capitate parents with the knowledge and understanding of the age-appropriate content for early-grade learners.

## **Method**

### **Research Model**

This study aimed to explore the lived experience of the participant's views on the teaching of CSE in the early grades. For this reason, interpretivism was the most approach. The authors adopted a qualitative research method of a descriptive nature. According to Creswell (2014) and Maree (2020), interpretivism is the participant's subjective view of the phenomena. In this study, the phenomenon is the teaching of the CSE programme in the early grades. The advantage of interpretivism is that it allows the participants to discuss their experiences without fear or restrictions. Since this was a qualitative study, it required authentic and unique reading of parents' experiences (Maree, 2020). In this context, the descriptive research design allowed the authors to elicit detailed accounts of the participants' lived experiences regarding the teaching of CSE in the early grades. The study was conducted in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were purposively selected. Ten (10) parents were selected to participate in the interview process. For the purpose of this paper, the inclusion criteria were specific and purposeful: all the parents had to reside in the Gauteng province. Parents had to have a child in the early grade classes (Grades 1-3) in public school. The participants varied in age and gender during the selection. The authors agreed that the unit of analysis was ten parents accurately represented to share their insights into the phenomena under investigation. Participants were invited to participate from one school in Pretoria West. The school was a feeder school for a lower-income community in Kwaggasrand. A sample of parents was selected to gain rich information to answer research questions and to generate transferable data, as participants provided trustworthy and reliable information. Furthermore, parents were an appropriate selection as they were readily available in terms of time and cost (Maree, 2020). The authors used codes for each parent participant to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

**Table1.** Participants' biographical information

Participants	Gender	Age	Grade of Learner	Code
Participant 1	Male	34	R	PT 1
Participant 2	Female	38	3	PT 2
Participant 3	Female	31	1	PT 3
Participant 4	Male	32	2	PT 4
Participant 5	Female	30	3	PT 5
Participant 6	Male	42	3	PT 6
Participant 7	Male	30	1	PT 7
Participant 8	Female	39	3	PT 8
Participant 9	Male	42	2	PT 9
Participant 10	Female	35	3	PT 10

### Data Collection Instruments

This study utilised three data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews, textual data, and a reflective journal. These instruments were chosen because they were consistent with the qualitative approach. The use of a semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to explore pertinent ideas further whilst maintaining a focused interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The researcher ensured to be detail orientated when asking probing questions, elaboration probes were used to ensure the 'full picture' was captured, and clarification probes were used to ensure what the researcher understood was accurate (Creswell, 2014). Sensitivity was maintained when asking probing questions. By being sensitive to the participants, they were not forced to answer or respond to questions that they were uncomfortable with (Maree, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were best suited for this study as a holistic understanding of the CSE within its context was gathered. It also allowed participants to share what they felt was essential and allowed for different perspectives to be studied (Creswell, 2014). Textual data was used in two ways; firstly, documents were analysed by the authors to convey the message of the CSE phenomenon (Bowen Centre, 2017). Secondly, textual data was a valuable tool for triangulation by corroborating data collected in interviews and the reflective journal with documents (Frey, 2018). Documents proved to be an easily accessible and feasible form of data collection for the authors and provided a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Analysis of the chosen documents was essential for this study as it provided a landscape of existing policy surrounding CSE and detailed past events in forming the CSE curriculum (Bowen, 2017).

Journal notes were captured through written observations during interviews or interactions with participants. The researcher made anecdotal records to capture critical phrases and words; these notes were short explanations without personal reflection (Maree, 2020). Running records were kept detailing continuous observations; these notes focus on the actions and the context (Creswell, 2014). Structured observations were made of participants' body language and tone of voice to gauge the participant's comfortability when discussing CSE. These observations were noted in a journal to add a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question and during the research process to capture day-to-day procedures and methodological decisions.

### Results

Emanating from the semi-structured interviews, the authors presented the verbatim views expressed by participants (parents) regarding the teaching of CSE in the early grades.

Parents expressed mixed views towards teaching CSE in the early grades and voiced their misconceptions. Some participants felt that the teaching of CSE in the early grades was vital for children to protect themselves against CSA, such as P5, who expressed:



*It is a good one. Looking at the statistics on the news, learners are getting pregnant as early as ten years old. You start asking yourself if these kids were even aware of what was happening to their bodies at that time. I would love for my kids to be educated (PT-5).*

Other parents disagreed and explained they felt as nervous about the nature of the content being taught in the early grades. P6 highlighted:

*Some of the reasons that made me feel apprehensive were that I think topics of sexuality at this age should be from a family perspective, not from a school perspective. My concern is that I don't know how far the curriculum will go in terms of the child's age, which makes me feel apprehensive (PT-6).*

Participants who had positive attitudes towards the teaching of CSE in the early grades shared the following: P10 stated:

*It is the best learning situation for me because of the current situation. Our kids are being raped by elders and sometimes their friends. I think it's a good thing to introduce it to the learners. Then they can understand more about their bodies, their rights, and how to protect themselves against sexual abuse (PT-10)*

Parents who had positive attitudes towards teaching CSE in the early grades agreed with this view. Parents believe CSE supports their children to protect themselves against CSA and ask for help when necessary. The researcher agrees that CSE empowers young children with the skills to protect themselves against CSA and make healthy decisions about their bodies. Mahoso (2020) concurs by explaining that the African continent has the highest rates of CSA, making the need for CSE in the early grades instrumental in protecting children. Whilst some parents with positive views explained that they were not comfortable with the teaching of CSE in the early grades, they felt its benefits outweighed their discomfort. Despite this positive, progressive thinking, some parents still felt apprehensive about teaching CSE in the early grades.

P8 stated:

*I think it's wrong to some extent. My child has not grasped decision-making skills. For the Department to introduce topics such as sexuality, the child then understands this term; he has access to the internet and might go and explore. It's risky for me; I don't think they should include everything included there (PT-8).*

Parents with negative views of the teaching of CSE in the early grades displayed limited knowledge and understanding of CSE, with many parents feeling as if CSE was about sex and sexuality and misconceptions have led to apprehension amongst parents about the teaching of CSE in the early grades.

P3 explained:

*I'm not too sure if I understand completely, but I have read articles. My understanding is that it is more about sexual education at school, in terms of making the children talk about sex and the mechanism around sex. "I'm not too sure how in-depth it goes or to what level (PT-3).*

Major contributors to parental views of the teaching of CSE included cultural, religious, and societal and family. Parents expressed a desire and active commitment to being more open, transparent and trusting in conversations about CSE with their children.

P3 explained:

*In my house, it's a little bit different because I'm trying to be more open to my kids. I'm giving it a shot, I don't know if it's the right thing to do, but because society is dangerous, for example, children can go missing. I'm trying to open up and create more of a warning rather than it being a topic of conversation (PT-3).*

P5 added:

*In my home, it's different, from the way my kids are raised to how our culture raised us. I've noticed our kids are different. Our kids are fragile, even in the way we punish them. I've never ever had to sit down and go into detail about sex and sexuality, but my child knows that no one should touch her body in certain places (PT-5).*

Despite this, a 'culture of silence' is still evident and its legacy continues to influence the way parents interact with their children on this topic. This is explained by their childhood experience, where child sexual abuse and CSE were not discussed or addressed and bodily health and safety were considered taboo.

P5 indicated:

*In our culture, they don't think talking about sex with kids is normal. You will never find a parent sitting and talking until the kids start asking those questions (PT-5).*

Religion was considered a key influencer in forming their views towards the teaching of CSE in the early grades. Fears that the content being taught in CSE was different from their religious beliefs or too explicit compared to the norm found in their places of worship.

P6 shared:

*We are Christians. We have our own way of doing it. We choose what to follow. I guess because the media is exposing us to homosexuality or gay people, that is a topic we must cover, so I do talk to my children about these things, but I must say I'm not open to my children being gay. Being gay is a choice, and my children won't choose that. I am concerned that the education system will not teach my children how I want them to be taught (PT-6).*

A motivating force for parents to initiate conversations about CSE lies in the perceived danger in South African society. These include the level of exposure to explicit content on social media and the high level of child sexual abuse. Parents acknowledged their responsibility to protect their children and, despite feeling uncomfortable, they want to be actively involved in the wellbeing and health of their children.

P9 stated:

*I think she should learn about all of it, whether I am comfortable or not. I should be comfortable with getting uncomfortable because ultimately, I do not want my child to fall pregnant at a young age or be raped, to be assaulted in any way, be in a position where she is not in control of her body or her relationships, or be in a world where she is someone she is not (PT-9).*

Parents identified CSE as effective means to protect their children from child sexual abuse. Keeping my body safe, how to ask for help and how to report child sexual abuse are topics that would support their child's safety with TV and multimedia as useful tools to generate conversations around CSE and overcome the discomfort felt by parents. Storybooks which included life lessons and responsible decision-making we also used for this purpose.

P2 explained:

*We have a book called The Stories of Rebel Girls, which helps me to facilitate these conversations, such as conversations about self-image and self-concept. At the end of the day, I just don't feel equipped to have the conversation (PT-2).*

Parents felt that stakeholders had not provided sufficient opportunity for parental consultations regarding the teaching of CSE in the early grades. This resulted in a lack of confidence, a feeling of exclusion and a loss of control when it came to this aspect of their children's education.

P5 explained:

*They never consult us. They need to get a feel from the parents. They need to say, 'Parents, this is what we are thinking of doing, but how do you feel? Is there anything you want to add?' (PT-5).*

P8 shared:

*We want better access to public comment on the curriculum. They should make information accessible in the school newsletter and on the communicator so we can also be involved in public comment. The department must come to meet us on our level (PT-8).*

Parents advocated for open communication from the DBE and transparency in the content being taught to children, with a need for further CSE training and support from stakeholders.

P9 added:

*As a parent, I would like to feel more engaged in the process of teaching and learning of CSE through school-based information sessions, conversations, and supporting documents that empower us to make informed choices. If there is a topic being covered in the curriculum, I just want to be able to know about it so that I can have my own personal conversation with my child and explain how we do things in our family values and culture (PT-9).*

### Conclusion and Discussion

The findings in this study highlighted parents' mixed views on the teaching of CSE in the early grades. There were parents who embraced the idea of teaching and learning of CSE content in the early grades and there were others who disagreed for various reasons. According to the DBE (2019) CSE aims to prevent child sexual abuse and to delay early sexual debut. The programme also envisages to minimise the risk of STIs and HIV/Aids and TB. As participant P5 indicated that it is important to ensure that children are taught CSE content from an early age. The knowledge will empower them to become vigilant, communicate if they are abused and make decision about their personal well-being (Venketsamy & Kinnear, 2020). According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) every child has the right to be protected by their parents. The authors agree with P5 and P10 that parents play an important role in ensuring that their children receive age-appropriate CSE content in the early grades.

In contrast to parents who are positive, there were parents who are completely averse to their young children learning about CSE (P6). These parents believe that their children will be exposed to sexually explicit materials and behaviour. This view is supported by various anti-CSE groups such as #LeaveOurKidsAlone movement. According to Herbst (2021) many movements have risen among the South African communities lobbying against teaching of CSE. The Cause for Justice (CFJ) movement believes that teaching young children CSE will weaken the family structure. However according to Bowen's Family Systems theory, when parents are involved with their children, the family structure is strengthened and stronger bonds are created between parent and child. Therefore, the authors of this article disagree with the anti-CSE lobbyist.

There is a culture of silence among parents regarding the teaching of CSE. Despite the literature highlighting that parents should be the primary information giver regarding CSE to their children, the study found that many parents do not have the appropriate knowledge or terminology to teach their children appropriate CSE content. Kinnear (2018) argues that every child should be taught the appropriate nomenclature of the body parts. The penis and vagina should be called by the appropriate vocabulary. The study also found that parents often avoid discussing comprehensive sexuality content with their children. They expect their children to learn about CSE from their peers, teachers or priest. Culture and religious factors played a major role in parents' views on teaching CSE. In some cultures, it is taboo for children to learn about CSE content. This view is clearly expressed by P5 and P6 who indicates that their culture do not allow for children to learn about sexuality education.

Data as indicated above, reveal that parents have limited knowledge of CSE and the CSE curriculum, which leads to negative views towards the teaching of CSE in the early grades. When parents have an understanding and knowledge of CSE and its content, they are able to see its value. The study firmly recommends that the DBE should design material such as a Comprehensive Sexuality Education handbook for Parents and the Community, that is made easily accessible to parents, perhaps at registration and enrollment of their child at a school, to support their knowledge and understanding of CSE. The study further recommends that the DBE provides parents with training in what CSE is and what the curriculum in the early grades delivers. The study revealed that insufficient parent consultations took place regarding the teaching of CSE in the early grades, which led to the belief that they had been left out of their child's learning experience. Due to the lack of parental consultations it appears that the DBE had not been transparent in the implementation of CSE in the early grades. The article recommends further opportunities for consultation in order to build trust between parents and stakeholders. Despite a renewed effort by the DBE (2017a) to hold parent consultations, parents did not feel that these consultations were sufficient. It is recommended that the DBE and other stakeholders host another series of parent consultations. Consultations should provide information for parents on the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education in the early grades and an opportunity to ask questions. It is also recommended that each school has a CSE ambassador whom parents can consult with on a regular basis to further alleviate the ongoing negativity towards CSE as part of the curriculum.

Parents expressed they wanted to be more supportive of CSE learning and transparent in conversations about CSE but lacked the skills and confidence to initiate and facilitate these interactions. The study maintains the view that practical parental training and support should assist parents in furthering the child's CSE knowledge and support the child to develop and empower them against child sexual abuse holistically. It is recommended that the DBE provides parents with practical training to help them facilitate open conversations about CSE with their children. It is further recommended that parents are supplied with materials with real-life scenarios to help support them in empowering their children.

### Limitations of Study

The study aimed to improve access to the teaching and learning of CSE in the early grades by gaining deeper insight into parents' views. The article, therefore, proposes that by increasing parent knowledge and understanding together with providing adequate parental support in CSE, parents will be more supportive of CSE teaching in the early grades. Despite achieving its aims and objectives, some limitations were present in the study. This is supported by Ross and Zaidi (2019), who explains that all research contains limitations. Firstly the study was limited to exploring parents' views toward the teaching of CSE in the early grades only in the Gauteng province in South Africa. For this reason, the comparison of results to other eight provinces is limited. This study did not group parents into gender or age groups. Consequently, a detailed age and gender profile connected to dominant views could not be provided. The study also notes the small sample size and recommends that a larger sample size may result in different findings. However, with the guidance of Weise, Buchter, Pieper and Mathes (2020), who argue that the foundation of transferability research findings is determined by the reader's discernment. Due to the subjective nature of Interpretivism, the paradigm of this study can be considered a limitation, with this in mind; however, the study followed strategies to ensure trustworthiness was achieved.

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