Pupils ignore sex lessons

Research into sex education in schools reveals that although it's sound, it doesn't prevent risky behaviour:

Charmel Payet reports

Teenagers in the province's schools are being taught about safe sex, how to prevent teenage pregnancy and contracting HIV/Aids. Yet in the heat of the moment, they disregard the information taught to them during Life Orientation and rather engage in risky behaviour.

This was the finding of Busisiwe Khati, 43, who researched sex education at schools for her Master's degree. She graduated at the University of KwaZulu-Natal last month.

Her dissertation was titled "An exploration of educators' experiences in implementing sexuality education in selected eThekwini-based secondary schools."

She spent nine months interviewing Life Orientation teachers from six Eastern Cape high schools (in Redhill, Greenwood Park and Durban North) and also sat in on classes.

Life Orientation became a compulsory subject at school in 2005, covering topics like masturbation, the menstrual cycle and sex and gender relations.

"The knowledge displayed by the teachers was surprising. All those interviewed had diplomas or degrees and were studying further. Teachers transmitted the information well, were knowledgeable and happy to teach the subject."

"Older teachers could go so far as training their classes, while newly trained teachers could choose this subject in classes. But the reality is despite the information taught to them, teenagers are still practising unsafe sex. From the HIV/Aids infection rate and high teenage pregnancy numbers, teenagers' knowledge about unsafe sex and the risk of promiscuous behaviour was very different from their behaviour."

She said while most pupils received distinctions in the subject, they did not use the knowledge.

"I discovered children were learning to pass, not to use the information in life."

The annual schools survey for 2010/2011 found that of the 56,000 teenage pregnancies in South Africa, the highest rate was in KwaZulu-Natal.

KZN still has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world, at 25 percent, while the national average is 17.5 percent. More women are living with the virus than men.

"Children's rights specialist Linda Naidoo said despite having the knowledge, teenagers were influenced by their culture, society and role models.

"It is not just about imparting the information to children. What they learn needs to be connected with their culture, values and morals of the society they are exposed too. There is high sexual exploitation of children in South Africa. This shows with their high-risk behaviour and phenomenon like sugar daddies."

She said the patriarchal ideology in South Africa, where the man was viewed as dominant in society and the household, also influenced behaviour.

"How then does a girl ask him to use a condom? Culturally, millions of boys want to feel sex without a condom. Also, do young children have role models in society? They are hearing this information on the one hand, but seeing our leaders do something else. This perpetuates immoral behaviour."

Naidoo said: "U/SAid, Unfpa and Unicef have pumped millions into programmes for the youth in this country. But behaviour will not change, as it is not just about education."

However, Khati believes life orientation is still critical in schools. "One teacher was approached by a pupil who was raped the day before."

"The pupil told the teacher when the subject was covered in class she realised she could talk to the teacher. She did not know who to turn to before that class. While the subject is key, it needs to be revisited to close the gaps."

Busisiwe Khati graduated with a Master's degree in nursing from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in April. Her research looked at sexual education in high schools and whether teachers were adequately trained.

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