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A Critical Thematic Analysis of Discourses of Gender, Sexuality, and Relationships at play in the South African Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation Curriculum

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Abstract

The need for thorough and effective sexuality education for youth in South Africa is necessitated owing to the disproportionate rate at which the youth is affected by human immunodeficiency virus, sexually transmitted infections, and the high teenage pregnancy rate. The primary aim of comprehensive sexuality education and the scripted lesson plans (curriculum) provided by the Department of Basic Education is to assist learners in understanding concepts, content, and values around healthy sexual behaviour and sexuality. However, the fundamental discourses are not always understood in the same way by all learners. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the discourses and how they are constructed relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships featured in the Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum for Grade 9 learners in South Africa. The study explored the discourses through a critical thematic analysis. After a critical analysis of the curriculum, four main themes emerged in the data. The themes illustrate the potential for improvement in sexuality education to be more inclusive of non-normative genders, sexualities, and relationships and to consider the lack of information on sexual pleasure and desire.

Keywords: South African sexuality education, discourse, non-normative, gender, sexuality, relationships, monogamy, heteronormativity, sexual health, Life Orientation curriculum, sexuality education, comprehensive sexuality education, norms

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Glossary of Acronyms

AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
DBE	Department of Basic Education
GBV	gender-based violence
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex
LO	Life Orientation
CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements
SE	sexuality education
SLP	scripted lesson plans
STI	sexually transmitted infection
The curriculum	South African Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum

A Critical Thematic Analysis of Discourses of Gender, Sexuality, and Relationships at play in the South African Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation Curriculum

This study explored gender, sexuality, and relationship discourses featured in the South African Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum (*the curriculum*) through critical thematic analysis. This section describes the study's context and background, the motivation and significance, the research questions, and objectives.

Context to the Study

The researcher is interested in how people understand gender, sexuality, and relationships. More specifically, how the understanding developed from what is taught at school. Today, several ways exist to understand gender, sexuality, and relationships that may differ from the norm. Individuals' perspectives may differ depending on various aspects, including a person's background, history, culture, religious perspectives, and social background. What the researcher considers important to understand is the underlying meaning and construction of gender, sexuality, and relationships in t*he curriculum* in South Africa. The researcher considers this important; what is taught at schools and interpreted by the learners supports their understanding carried throughout their lives. There are positive and negative implications for a learner's understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships; therefore, it is pertinent to explore its discourses.

Introduction and background

The need for thorough and effective sexuality education for youth in South Africa is owing to the disproportionate rate at which youth are affected by HIV (Smith & Harrison, 2013). The research established that young adults between the age of 15 and 24 years fall within the most at-risk population for new HIV infections due to various factors; one-third of South African women aged 19 have been pregnant, according to reports (Koch & Wehmeyer,

2021; Zuma et al., 2022). The reported average age of sexual debut is 15 years for males and females; however, several report they are sexually active during their teen years (Zuma et al., 2022). Owing to the age of sexual debut, a need exists to educate learners on the physical, emotional, and psychological development related to sexual activity (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Smith & Harrison, 2013); therefore, the curriculum regulates aspects of the skills, knowledge, and values essential for a young person's development, preparing them for sexual debut (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019). Evidence supports schools in educating learners on sexual activity as it is protective against "risky behaviours" (Smith & Harrison, 2013). The SE focuses on educating learners about the risks involved in sexual activity to combat the high rate of HIV and youth pregnancy.

The primary aim of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and the scripted lesson plans (SLPs) supplied by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is to assist learners in building an understanding of concepts, content and values around healthy sexual behaviour and sexuality (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021c). A significant number of adolescents and youth in South Africa contract human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS); a severe level of female learners drop out owing to pregnancy; and an alarming number are victims of sexual gender-based violence. Because of the aforementioned challenges, SLPs aim to delay sexual debut among learners, increase their knowledge of the consequences of sexual behaviour, and increase safe sexual practices through contraception (DBE, 2021c; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019).

The foreword of *the curriculum* reiterates the high rates of pregnancy and HIV infection among the youth in South Africa, reaffirming the efforts of the SLPs to encourage the delay of sexual activities (DBE, 2021a). Contrary to abstinence-only education, CSE recognises that learners are or will become sexually active, emphasising the importance of

teaching learners about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the prevention of diseases (Francis & DePalma, 2014).

SE in South Africa previously adopted a preventative approach. The literature established that SE in South Africa has become equivalent to HIV prevention (Francis & DePalma, 2014). The purpose of the curriculum was predominantly to create an awareness of HIV/AIDS and sexuality (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019). SE has moved towards a more comprehensive approach encompassing a broader spectrum of topics beyond aspects covered in sexual education including but not limited to gender identity, sexuality and society, relationships, communication, consent, values and decision making, and sexual abuse and violence prevention (DBE, 2021c). Sexuality is included in the broader topic of "development of self in society" as one of many topics covered in the LO curriculum (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019, p.136). CSE aims to teach learners about the cognitive, physical and social aspects related to sexuality as it offers the opportunity to gain comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based information on sexuality (Koch & Wehmeyer, 2021). As the focus of SE is creating awareness of the risks involved in sexual activity, the literature established that learners implicitly learn about sexual activity, sexuality, and gender from their educational environment and the curriculum in this environment (Slovin, 2016). The implied meaning of what is taught to learners, therefore, becomes important to understand and explore as *the curriculum* uses various scare tactics to enforce the aim of the CSE.

This study explored gender, sexuality, and relationship discourses in *the curriculum*. Discourses are "a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language" and represent aspects of the world (Hassen, 2015, p.119). Discourses affect individuals' observations and perspectives of things, as they have become a means of transmitting knowledge (Hassen, 2015). Discourses may be shaped by and shape culture, language, people, and history, therefore, preserving social change (Hassen, 2015). Hassen (2015)

describes discourses' power as they shape and define the realities of society, sustaining tradition, history, culture, and the way of life.

Discourses in *the curriculum*, therefore, become important to understand to explore the fundamental meaning that learners may benefit from teachings. Francis (2019) established that discourses produce and acquire power through textbooks and lesson plans, producing a truth. In this study, discourse relevance involves exploring how *the curriculum* produces dominant societal perspectives of how counter-normative sexualities, genders, and relationships should be interpreted (Francis, 2019). Exploring how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in *the curriculum* is important, enabling awareness of the potential fundamental meaning interpreted from the lessons.

Motivation and Significance

The curriculum may seem inclusive and neutral but often holds a normative agenda—not always apparent. This applies to the sexuality education component and how it constructs gender, sexuality, and relationships. Recently, there has been a strong emphasis on the experiences of gender-diverse individuals and those with sexual orientations—not heterosexual. Butler (1990) contends that gender is socially constructed through normative assumptions based on a gender binary. Sexual health curricula are a way these normative assumptions are reproduced. A divergence exists between policy intention and the lived experiences of teaching gender and sexuality within schools (Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Although *the curriculum* is directed towards challenging inequalities and portraying diversity, research established a lack of influence as a negative framing remains when constructing sexualities in *the curriculum* (Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

Research was conducted to determine the discourses prevalent within various curricula globally (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Farrelly et al., 2007; Mayeza & Vincent,

2019; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Surette, 2019). Although there have been analyses of sexual health curricula before, limited research explores the discourses in the sexual education curriculum in South Africa and more specifically *the curriculum* aimed at Grade 9 learners. Grade 9 learners are typically between the ages of 14 and 16. This age group is within the aforementioned statistics, at risk of HIV infection and an age just before the reported age of sexual debut (Smith & Harrison, 2013). Owing to the importance of SE for this age group, the researcher explored discourses within the Grade 9 curriculum. It is this divergence that the study aimed to address. The study explored how sexual health curricula represent gender, sexuality, and relationships, as this is a crucial step in developing sexual health content and education inclusive for the South African context.

The analysis in this study is important to explore and identify the concepts and ideas supporting the explicit data content in *the curriculum* and the underlying meanings of how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed are determined. This study does not judge the discourses but aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the discursive elements in *the curriculum*.

Location and Setting

This text-based study analyses the national Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) Life Orientation curriculum provided by the DBE in South Africa. *The Curriculum* comprises the 2021 SLPs for the Grade 9 learners. CSE was incorporated into the Life Orientation subjects across South Africa in 2000 (DBE, 2021c). The integration prevented learners from receiving confusing information regarding sex, sexuality, gender, and relationships (DBE, 2021c). It provides scientifically accurate information based on positive values, empowering learners to navigate the journey into adulthood safely (DBE, 2021c). *The curriculum* is an electronic document accessed online (DBE, 2021c).

Research Aims and Objectives

This research aimed to explore gender, sexuality, and relationship discourses in *the curriculum* in South Africa. The study focused on identifying and understanding the discourses active in *the curriculum*; therefore, the study's objectives were:

1. To explore which discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships that feature in the research literature are active in the Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum (*the curriculum*).
2. To explore how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in the Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum.

Research Questions

1. Which discourses relating to sexuality, gender, and relationships that feature in the research literature are active in the Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum?
2. How are gender, sexuality, and relationships constructed in the Grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum?

Outline of the Report

The report uses critical thematic analysis to achieve the objective of investigating and examining the discourses of gender, sexuality, and relationships present in *the curriculum*. This section provides a brief background, the aims, objectives, and research questions of the study. The literature review section describes the discourses identified in the literature and discusses the discourses in sexual health curricula. The theoretical framework section of social constructionism explains the foundation for understanding this study. The subsequent section includes the methods and techniques employed to conduct the study by discussing the research design, paradigm, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The findings and discussion are combined in the subsequent section,

describing the emerging themes. The last section concludes the study while presenting the recommendations and limitations.

Literature Review

The literature review considers the literature that investigated and explored discourses of gender, sexuality, and relationships present in the SE. This section identifies the discourses already identified in various SE curricula. This literature review discusses the gender discourse; responsibilisation of women; heteronormativity; asexuality, sexual innocence; sexual desire; danger, disease and damage; violence and victimisation; disconnect; and the lack of expression and emancipatory discourse.

This literature review assesses discursive research identifying discourses involved in SE in diverse contexts. The discourses often overlap and appear together within the texts. This study attempted to deconstruct the discourses; from the discussion, they are intersecting, therefore, it was not always possible to describe a discourse without linking it to another discourse identified and discussed.

In a review of six articles focusing on youth school-based sexuality, Shefer and Macleod (2015, p.4) remark that a common discourse of "danger, disease, and damage" emerges. They describe how this discourse constructs youth sexuality and its outcome on how youth experience their sexuality (Shefer & Macleod, 2015). According to Shefer and Macleod (2015), this discourse presents challenges for school-based SE in South Africa; for example, the dominance of a guiding metaphor of danger and disease in the curriculum means that education is directed at regulating and preventing HIV/AIDS, the preference for abstinence-only education, and the implication of moral injunctions (Shefer & Macleod, 2015). By implication, desire and pleasure are omitted as innocence and danger are emphasised. A related challenge avoids discussions in the classroom around sexual diversity, which, therefore, endorses the norm of heterosexuality (Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

Shefer and Macleod (2015) explain that, whereas SE is directed towards gender equality, challenging the inequalities apparent in unsafe and violent practices, the discourses

and content of teachings do not have this influence on learners. Likewise, Farrelly et al. (2007) identify and discuss fundamental discourses present in Australian sexual education curriculum documentation. The study explains how the curriculum policy does not translate directly into practice, as what students are taught in the classroom is not automatically what they will acquire from the lesson (Farrelly et al., 2007). Each discourse identified implies an observation of the emergence of an appropriate set of attitudes and behaviours related to sexual expression and identity (Farrelly et al., 2007); therefore, the discourses imply how learners should be educated while identifying appropriate teaching and learning strategies (Farrelly et al., 2007).

Gender

A review of the literature demonstrates that several researchers identified a "binary discourse" within various sexual health curricula (Frizelle et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2017; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Nayak & Kehily, 2006; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). In sexual health education, gender is constructed within a binary discourse as two natural biological categories, differentiating between behaviour and characteristics considered normative and non-normative for those categorised as male and female (Graham et al., 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). This binary discourse within the sexual education curriculum constructs how a young person is expected to act in a sexual situation based on the gender category they have been assigned (Frizelle et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2017).

Rigid gender categories and roles are present in sexual education curricula, with males often portrayed as "dominant, predatory, and sexualised" and females as "submissive, lacking sexual desire, and potential victims" (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017, p.556). The binary is reflected through the socially constructed use of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" (Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p.460). The masculine stereotype includes associations of being strong, active, hard, and rational; the feminine stereotype involves being weak,

passive, soft, and emotional, reinstated through the discourse (Shefer et al., 2015). These complimentary masculine and feminine norms sexualise gender (Farrelly et al., 2007). Men are presented as perpetrators and predators and are perceived as the problem; women are portrayed as victims, vulnerable to male power and at risk of sexual violence (Frizelle et al., 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

The rigid gender categories guarantee the reinforcement of gender binaries that reinstate the confines of a "heterosexual-based system of marriage" (Butler, 1988, p.524). This gender binary reinforces hegemonic gender norms (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Graham et al., 2017; Nayak & Kehily, 2006; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Instead of the SE providing the space for young people to participate actively and make their own meaning of gender and sexuality, the gender binary is reproduced, suggesting the dominance of a didactic pedagogy (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). The didactic pedagogy serves to "produce and reproduce discourses aimed at disciplining and regulating sexual practices of young people" instead of "facilitating that agentic and positive sexualities that are the prerequisite" for a young person to negotiate a positive sexual relationship free from violence (Shefer et al., 2015, p.73). The discourses embedded in the curriculum and how the content surrounding topics, such as HIV and GBV, are taught, create an understanding of an appropriate gendered way of being (Graham et al., 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The SE curriculum and how it is taught, therefore, regulates normative gender roles as normative constructs of gender and sexuality are continuously reproduced, which collectively reinforce heteronormativity based on the widely accepted gender binary (Graham et al., 2017; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015).

One way the sexual health curriculum reinforces gendered norms is by addressing sexual desire, framing it as problematic and punishable (Graham et al., 2017; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). This framing tends to, for example, portray young women as

having questionable morals (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Schools inevitably reproduce dominant gendered norms, reinstating submissive and vulnerable femininity and denying a woman's sexual desire and agency (Graham et al., 2017; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Punitive responses are in the foreground regarding a young woman's sexual pleasure and desires (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). It is constructed as "morally reprehensible and inherently punishable" to have these sexual desires (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.74). Female sexuality is only linked to reproduction, appropriate at a certain age, and, therefore, eliminates the possibility of it being linked to sexual pleasure (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017). This construction is founded on normative assumptions about how a young person should act regarding sexuality, dominated by moral, cultural, and ideological positions (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). The SE curriculum in South Africa, particularly concerning pregnancy and parenting at school, continues to serve a further disciplinary and punitive response to women's sexuality (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006); therefore, women's freedom regarding their sexual agency is restricted by these fundamental discourses (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Kruger et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015).

Another way the sexual health curriculum reinstates gendered norms is the way it addresses teenage pregnancy—represented as problematic and damaging (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). Teenage pregnancy has been constructed as problematic, disastrous, and damaging for young women and the broader society (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). Several young people are shamed for disturbing the normative representation of asexual childhood, and punitive responses to pregnant learners in schools are common (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Pregnant learners are, therefore, used as an example of the consequences of transgressing the prescribed femininity and hegemonic family values (Cameron-Lewis &

Allen, 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). The continued stigmatisation of teenage pregnancy, therefore, reinforces the discourse of "denial and repression of young women's sexual agency" (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.65). As a pregnant teenager threatens the social order, the discourse of "moral degeneration" is associated with the discourse of silencing and denying young female sexuality and agency (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.65).

'Responsibilisation' for Women

Through the gendered discourse in the sexual health curriculum, a "discourse of responsibilisation" arises (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019, p.426). This discourse is present as women are told they are responsible for their sexuality and sexual well-being and will, therefore, suffer the consequences if they are not conscientious and cautious in managing their sexual desires (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The framing narrative of consequence and responsibility within the curriculum is powerfully gendered at multiple levels, as aforementioned (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). This discourse reproduces a "gender logic in which representations of oppositional gendered sexual roles are rationalised and reinforced" (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019, p.426).

The consequences of young sexualities are, therefore, feminised while women are portrayed as subjects of "danger, disease, and damage" (Shefer & Macleod, 2015, p.4). This discourse overlaps with the discourse of danger, damage, and disease, explored further below. A discourse of responsibility, interpreted as contradictory, is reproduced. For example, young women are taught that abstaining from sex is their only option; they should take responsibility for this, and yet they are also taught to exercise agency over their sexuality (Shefer & Macleod, 2015). They are implicitly told to follow prescribed gender practices where the desires and needs of men are to be kept dominant; women are merely submissive and sexually passive (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

The SE in the curriculum is, therefore, feminised as it focuses on girls' sexuality problems at the expense of a male's sexual interests and needs (Le Mat, 2017). The continuous reinforcement of feminised responsibility builds onto the stereotypical assumptions of male irresponsibility while maintaining gendered hierarchies within the school environment (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). This ideology produces and inevitably sustains the stereotypical binary opposites of masculinity and femininity (Shefer et al., 2015). The discourse of responsibilisation produces gendered, contradictory, and confusing messages.

Heteronormativity

The literature review demonstrates that researchers identified a heteronormativity discourse arisings in numerous ways in sexual health curricula (Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Slovin, 2016; Surette, 2019). Heteronormativity is based on the widely accepted gender binary (Graham et al., 2017). Judith Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix describes the "conflation of sex-gender-sexuality which leads to the normalisation of heterosexuality" and, therefore, heteronormativity is portrayed as natural (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009, p.17). Heterosexuality is, therefore, always acceptable and perceived as a naturalised fact (Butler, 1988; Shefer et al., 2015; Slovin, 2016).

Naturalisation refers to a concept historically and socially constructed over time and becomes perceived as a natural fact (Burr, 1995). Opposite-sex attraction is portrayed as natural behaviour and, therefore, is conceptualised as heteronormative hegemony (Graham et al., 2017). Discussions within the textbooks around family, dating, safe sex, and marriage assume heterosexuality as the norm (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Wilmot and Naidoo (2014) identified the universal normalisation of heterosexuality and the reinforcement of binary constructions of sexuality within the text. The more an ideological assumption is reproduced

and repeated, it becomes accepted as natural, such as heteronormativity (Surette, 2019). The discourse, therefore, carries ideological norms and social conventions perceived as natural and hides the reality that sexuality is a social, historical, and political construct (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

The discourse of heteronormativity is also present in sexual health curricula, as sexuality is implicitly represented only in heterosexual terms. Sexuality is only presented within heteronormative terms, as sexual activity is conflated with heterosexual penetrative sexual practice (Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Surette, 2019). Shefer and Ngabaza (2015) refer to the negative consequences of sexual activity (such as pregnancy), leading to the assumption that sexual engagement is heterosexual. Furthermore, the curriculum focuses on physical growth and developing reproductive systems (Farrelly et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2017; Surette, 2019). This further perpetuates the discourse of heteronormativity.

As reproduction taught in schools focuses on biological explanations, heterosexuality is constructed as the natural and normal way humans are reproduced (Butler, 1988; Slovin, 2016). Farrelly et al. (2007, p.63) identified the discourse "cultural 'preservation' perspective" in the Australian sexual education curriculum documentation—a conservative discourse that draws on biology to justify its perspective; therefore, heterosexuality and procreative sex are perceived as 'normal' within this discourse (Farrelly et al., 2007). Heteronormativity is presented as superior and the norm as it supports the representation of sexualities within the textbooks (Francis, 2019; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Surette, 2019; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Heteronormative sexual relationships are reinstated, and schools perpetuate a heterosexual curriculum (Graham et al., 2017; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Slovin, 2016).

A discourse of heteronormativity is present in the literature, illustrated in several ways, including the representation of a nuclear family structure based on the socially constructed gender binary (Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) remark that SE in South Africa reinforces and perpetuates gender binarism and heteronormativity by re-establishing global family values of a nuclear family within a pro-family discourse. Despite presenting an untruthful representation for most South Africans, stereotypical traditional family structures and related moralities underlie much of the sexual education curriculum (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The curriculum assumes a heterosexual nuclear family as a natural outcome, excluding any family structure or sexuality beyond this (Francis, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Surette, 2019). The portrayal of nuclear family structures within the curricula, therefore, reinstates the discourse of heteronormativity.

The heteronormative discourse is reinstated through the silencing of non-normative sexualities. Despite the mandate to be inclusive of sexual diversity and government policy that adopts a holistic approach, evidence illustrates that heterosexuality remains at the forefront, whereas non-normative sexualities are silenced (Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Heterosexuality is positioned as superior to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI+) sexualities through normalisation and exclusion, perpetuating heterosexism (Francis, 2019; Surette, 2019; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Heterosexuality is reinforced as homosexuality appears to be excluded from the dialogue surrounding sexual health education (Khau, 2012; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Zulu et al., 2019). In a rural community in Lesotho, Khau (2012) established that homosexuality was not discussed as it was assumed to be nonexistent. The research established that teachers' "gendered identities and socialisation determine how they acknowledge and address sexuality discourses within the school setting in relation to societal norms" (Khau, 2012, p.66).

Teachers fear teaching against the societal norms and values of the community, hindering effective SE facilitation (Khau, 2012; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Zulu et al., 2019). Mayeza and Vincent (2019, p.479) established that non-heterosexuality is constructed as "deviant, immoral, and unnatural". Teachers cannot freely discuss homosexuality in the classroom; therefore, the discourse of heterosexuality is foregrounded (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019).

The negative attitude towards non-normative sexualities within SE is informed by broader societal heterosexism (Francis, 2019). Mayeza and Vincent (2019, p.472) explore how learners observe the Life Orientation SE they are taught and established how the curriculum implies "a gendered, heteronormative, and moralistic approach to youth sexuality which silences and negates same-sex relationships and girls' accounts of sexuality". Heteronormative sexuality is interwoven into HIV messages and general reproductive health education; therefore, any sexual intimacy or sexual relationship beyond the male-female normative partnering is perceived as unimaginable (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019).

The erasure of non-normative sexualities within the curriculum is shaped by and informed by the broader discourses within society (Francis, 2019). By ignoring and avoiding sexuality diversity, further marginalisation of non-normative sexualities is created (Francis, 2019; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017). Similarly, Wilmot and Naidoo (2014) explored the extent to which Grade 10 Life Orientation textbooks construct sexualities. The research reveals a normalisation of heterosexuality by excluding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sexualities and "differentiation, hierarchisation, and homogenisation" (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014, p.323). These techniques compare, differentiate, exclude, and homogenise non-normative sexualities in the text and, therefore, normalise heteronormativity (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Heteronormativity is, therefore, reinforced in the sexual health curriculum by silencing non-normative sexualities.

The dominant Christian ethos present within several schools alludes to homosexuality as sinful and wrong (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Surette, 2019). Teachers are also wary of parents' criticism of how the curriculum is taught, influencing how they interpret and teach their lessons (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). Mturi and Bechuke (2019) identified a challenge encountered by teachers as their unwillingness to teach the subject and how seriously it was taken by the school and the teachers, owing to the taboo regarding the content of sexual education. The research demonstrates that some school educators fear opposing societal norms and morals to educate learners on non-normative sexualities and genders (Davids, 2014; Khau, 2012; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019). Life Orientation teachers lack the pedagogical knowledge to teach gender and sexual diversity (Davids, 2014; Francis, 2019). The combination of this lack of knowledge, the fear of going against societal norms, and the taboo nature of the content taught results in a challenge for rural teachers to teach SE effectively (Davids, 2014; Francis, 2019; Khau, 2012). These authors collectively emphasise the importance of context and culture and how the curriculum will be interpreted and taught differently depending on where and by whom.

Heterosexuality is further framed as superior, while homosexuality is framed as requiring acceptance (Slovin, 2016). Slovin (2016, p.521) explores the SE in Vancouver and illustrates how the explicit discussion that "being gay is okay" frames homosexuality as requiring acceptance. Because homosexuality is taught diversely, using different language, it is understood as different and strange (Shefer et al., 2015; Slovin, 2016). The message conveyed through encouraging acceptance of homosexuality is that of tolerance (Francis, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015; Slovin, 2016); therefore, homosexuality is perceived as non-normative.

Asexuality, Sexual Innocence, and Sexual Desire

Moralistic Discourses to Maintain Sexual Innocence

One of the prominent discourses in the literature is the moralistic discourse to maintain sexual innocence by portraying sexual activity as contrary to moral and religious values (Le Mat, 2017; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The messages in SE are infused with gendered, moralistic, and contradictory discourses (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). These discourses defeat the intended purpose of the curriculum, as learners are made to feel that sex outside of marriage is a sin (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). Sexual innocence is portrayed as the correct and morally proper approach; SE is taught in a way that strives to morally address the high levels of unplanned teenage pregnancies and HIV among youth in South Africa (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019); therefore, messages about preserving virginity until marriage and abstinence dominate the classroom (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). SE based on abstinence promotes fear-instilled abstinence of sexual intercourse until marriage, imposing religious and moral values (Le Mat, 2017).

As an aid to the sexual education curriculum, video materials are used in the classroom to paint a graphic picture for the learners to ‘scare’ them into abstaining from sexual activity (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Educators tend to apply authoritative and judgemental approaches, while they also “deploy moralistic discourses to silence and challenge non-normative sexualities and genders” (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019, p.424). In this way, SE is a tool for regulating sexualities in a context directed at disciplining young people as sexual agents (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). The conservative nature of the curriculum is to promote sexual abstinence until heterosexual marriage to preserve a conservative and moralistic society free from consequences that may arise from sexual activity beyond appropriate (Shefer et al., 2015).

Innocence and Asexuality

Pleasure is a missing discourse in sexual health curricula (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Frizelle et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2013) as they appear to preserve the innocence of youth and disregard positive messages around sexual pleasure (Frizelle et al., 2013; Slovin, 2016). It has been a priority for several years to desexualise schools by creating discourses on non-sexual children, depicting children as innocent and vulnerable (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Frizelle et al., 2013; Slovin, 2016). The reason for this desexualisation is to preserve children's innocence (Slovin, 2016). Several societies still operate within the discourse of "childhood sexual innocence" (Khau, 2012, p.64). Instead of discussing various aspects surrounding sex and romance and applying a holistic approach, aspects of positivity around sexuality, such as pleasure and intimacy, are ignored (Graham et al., 2017; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). Learners are taught "what not to do", and the curriculum does not reflect their subjective experiences and desires (Shefer & Macleod, 2015, p.5). This conservative perspective perceives that a child needs protection and should not be corrupted by premature exposure to sexual experience (Farrelly et al., 2007; Frizelle et al., 2013). The ideal that a learner is 'non-sexual' is emphasised as they are expected to be sexually innocent, and a consequence, such as teenage pregnancy, destabilises the traditional notion of authority (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). The aim of the curriculum is, therefore, to reduce STIs and unwanted teenage pregnancies; however, this represses sexual desires and practices (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019).

Teachers influenced by the discourse of sexual innocence are convinced that they should not discuss sexual pleasure out of fear of being perceived as "promoting teenage and premarital promiscuity" (Khau, 2012, p.64). The lessons imply that sexual engagement while in school is "not fun" but represents "doom and despair" (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.73). The curriculum, therefore, imposes a fear-based teaching approach as learners are positioned

as asexual and innocent children dependent on adults for guidance and protection (Frizelle et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 2013). Conversely, adolescents are represented as "sex-crazed" teenagers unable to control their behaviour owing to their "raging hormones" (Frizelle et al., 2013, p.99). The implication of being unable to control their hormones and sexual urges, therefore, further necessitates the need for guidance and protection from adults (Frizelle et al., 2013).

The curriculum constructs the human body as primarily a reproductive organ and is silent on the pleasures of sexuality (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Graham et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2013). Slovin (2016) finds that male learners lack the language to discuss pleasure associated with sex, therefore, the learners misconceive that sex and pleasure could co-exist, as they are only taught about sex regarding reproduction and puberty (Slovin, 2016). Information about masturbation, sexual positions, fantasy, non-genital activities, and oral-genital contact is omitted in curricula (Lamb et al., 2013). The intentions behind the curricula are, therefore, perceived as constructed by a moralistic approach, denying the youth sexual desires and practices while constructing them as asexual and gender-neutral (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). The discourse of consequence is implicated by Shefer and Ngabaza (2015, p.69), as pleasure and positive aspects of sexual intimacy are rendered "unimaginable or unspeakable". The findings in Khau's (2012) study indicate that the curriculum is silent on sexual pleasure and desire, particularly regarding women. As the curriculum focuses on the biological and reproductive aspects of sexuality, positive aspects of pleasure are silenced.

Gender and Desire

Women's positive sexuality is rarely portrayed in sexual education; the desires of females are absent from heteronormative practices and ideologies (Graham et al., 2017; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Slovin, 2016). A young woman's pleasure and desire are silenced

within the discourses of curricula (Lamb et al., 2013; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Slovin, 2016). The messages of danger, damage, and disease produce presumptions of gendered responsibility of female restraint when encountered with the assertion of male desire (Lamb et al., 2013; Shefer et al., 2015).

The emancipatory discourse that Farrelly et al. (2007) identify emphasises the absence of a discourse of desire, particularly regarding females (Farrelly et al., 2007). Puberty is illustrated as exciting and powerful for boys, yet for girls, it is illustrated concerning future reproduction, therefore, lacking the element of pleasure (Farrelly et al., 2007). There is great emphasis on consequence and responsibility directed at women versus men (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). The focus on a female's internal reproductive organs and the lack of illustrations of the female clitoris in representations of female genitalia illustrates the disciplinary practice of constructing a female's role as reproductive while eliminating reference to desire (Graham et al., 2017).

Sexual innocence is strongly gendered as female adolescents are encouraged to abstain and maintain innocence, but male adolescents are encouraged to practice safe sex and receive positive messages about their bodies (Graham et al., 2017; Le Mat, 2017; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). This implicitly reproduces a heteronormative discourse of normative masculinity involving an uncontrollable desire for the opposite sex (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). The discourses around desire are, therefore, gendered as female sexual pleasure, and desire is not represented in sexual education curricula.

Danger, Disease, and Damage

Risk and Danger

One way the sexual health material reinforces the discourse of danger is the implication of consequences because of youth sexuality (Frizelle et al., 2013; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Shefer and Macleod (2015, p.5) identify "danger, disease,

and damage" as a dominant discourse in the Life Orientation curriculum. SE negatively constructs young sexualities while emphasising disciplinary responses to a young learner's sexual desires (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Youth sexuality is constructed as dangerous and deviant, particularly within African contexts (Frizelle et al., 2013). This discourse implies negative consequences to sexual agency and sexuality, inevitably resulting in unwanted pregnancy, disease, and violence (Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). Ngabaza and Shefer (2019, p.424) also identify a discourse of "danger, damage and disease in young people's experience of SE classes and materials". This discourse promotes abstinence from sexual practices as sexual activity is described in a language of consequence (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). The language of consequence in the curriculum implies the discourse of risk and danger.

Shefer and Ngabaza (2015, p.67) identify narratives, illustrating how sexuality teaching is dominated by a lens of "danger and consequence" directed at women; this leads to young women feeling responsible for their own protection from physical and social damage and the fundamental need of women to uphold the larger social framework of moral practice for young people (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015); therefore, young female sexuality is within the discourse of "vulnerability and fear" (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.67). This illustrates the interaction between discourses of gender, danger, and risk. Instead of merely incorporating the negative outcomes of unsafe sexual practices, sexuality is taught within the discourse of the "danger and consequences" of being sexually active (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.67).

Damage and Disease

The sexual health material reinforces a discourse of damage and disease by emphasising the consequences of sexual activity (HIV infections, STIs, and unwanted pregnancy). These are portrayed as damaging and disastrous consequences that should be

avoided (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). The adverse outcomes of HIV infections, STIs, and teenage pregnancies are often emphasised and presented negatively (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). Emphasis is on pregnancy and disease, therefore, the negative outcome of engaging in sexuality (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Teenage pregnancy has been constructed as a disastrous and damaging consequence for young females and the broader society (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). These adverse outcomes are depicted as perilous, unavoidable consequences that can negatively influence a learner's life (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). This implication leads to the discourse of damage.

Within the discourses of "sex as dangerous for young women's current lives and futures", women are presented as primarily responsible for policing sexual practices (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.71). The discourse on damage, therefore, further links to gender and responsibilisation aforementioned. The narrative of 'damage' arises when young women are observed as 'spoilt' for engaging in sexual activity, yet men are perceived as immune from this consequence (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Women are often portrayed in a manner that positions them at a natural disadvantage when engaging in sexual activity as they will inevitably bear the consequences of sexual activity, they are vulnerable to potential sexual violence, and are expected to uphold societal morals (Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015).

Violence and Victimisation

The discourse of violence and victimisation is also present in SE, related to danger and gender. Youth sexuality is strongly presented through a lens of sexual violence (Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Sexual violence rates are a concern in South Africa; however, if sexuality is only dealt with within the framework of sexual violence,

learners are forfeited the opportunity to observe sexuality as “a realm of pleasure, of agency, within a positive and equal relationship” (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.71).

Owing to the high incidence of GBV, young women are in a constant state of vigilance and are expected to respond in protective ways to avoid the “danger” through a “regime of self-regulation and precautionary strategies” (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.72). An undertone of ‘violence’ and ‘victimisation’ underlies discourses regarding females (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Farrelly et al., 2007; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Khau (2012) emphasises risk and vulnerability as women are positioned as victims of male sexual violence. Women are portrayed as in “need of protection and vulnerable to damage of moral, emotional or physical kind” (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.74). This calls for “self-policing and control”, which is problematic for practices of gender justice (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015, p.74); therefore, the discourse of violence and victimisation is also gendered.

A Lack of Self-Expression and Emancipatory

Sexual education materials do not provide youth the opportunity for self-expression as they inform learners what is appropriate and inappropriate regarding their sexuality (Farrelly et al., 2007; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017). Farrelly et al. (2007) identify an emancipatory discourse in the Australian sexual education curriculum documentation (Farrelly et al., 2007). The emancipatory discourse assumes that “current mainstream accounts of sanctioned sexuality are psychologically repressive, socially discriminatory and overtly sexist” (Farrelly et al., 2007, p.66). The discourses emphasise how sexual expression is crucial to a learner’s self-realisation and can, therefore, be healthy (Ezer et al., 2019a; Farrelly et al., 2007). From this perspective, a learner is informed about self-expression and develops the competencies to approach situations as they arise through cognisant decisions (Ezer et al., 2019a; Farrelly et al., 2007). The positive aspects of sexualities, pleasure, relationships, connection conversations, and self-agency are omitted from the curriculum

(Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017). The curriculum is structured to disallow learners to reason for themselves and make informed decisions about their health, well-being, relationships, and sexualities (Ezer et al., 2019a). Youth sexuality is, therefore, confined to the limitations of the curriculum.

In contrast to the lack of self-expression established in most curricula, Farrelly et al. (2007, p.63) identify "a risk minimisation perspective". The risk minimisation discourse relates to separate sexual preferences and their expression from any religion sanctions; therefore, children are educated about the technical and harmful aspects of sexual expression, allowing socially desirable decisions regarding sexual relationships (Farrelly et al., 2007). This risk minimisation discourse connects to danger, disease, and damage as it also aims to reduce the risk and consequences associated with youth sexuality. Learners are expected to understand the risks associated with sexual expression and develop ways to avoid the risks by only engaging in "safe sexual practices" (Farrelly et al., 2007, p.70). A study conducted in Zambia established that religious values emerge in SE, as Zambia has been declared a Christian Nation (Zulu et al., 2019). Christian morality is prominent in Zambian society and, therefore, intricately links to cultural norms and moralisation regarding sexuality and religious values (Zulu et al., 2019). If religious sanctions are not imposed on SE, rational learners can assess the appropriate sexual information and manage their own risk as they have been impartially educated (Farrelly et al., 2007).

There are multiple challenges to the mandate that schools have set out to equip learners with the necessary skills to find their own agency in their sexualities, sexual desires and interpersonal relationships (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) contend that the sexuality curriculum is a site of regulation and discipline directed at young sexualities instead of a constructive engagement platform allowing learners to make informed decisions. The intention to create an environment for

rethinking normative and oppressive gender norms is not realised in the lived experience of learners at school (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019).

Disconnect

Shefer and Macleod (2015, p.6) identify a "discourse of disconnect", illustrating the lack of expression of young people regarding their sexuality and the repetitive need to be guided by adults (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). This discourse relates to the dominance of an "authoritative, adult-centred, non-relational mode of communication" in SE reinforced in other contexts of a learner's life (Shefer & Macleod, 2015, p.6). The curricula are missing the perspectives of young individuals, and a need exists for a more critical and reflexive approach to be incorporated as this would allow the curricula to include young individuals' perspectives (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). This reflexivity could assist in avoiding normative discourses being reproduced within the classroom (Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

An unspoken assumption proclaims that learners need to be guided by adults (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Frizelle et al. (2013, p.101) identify a parental discourse where adults are in a position responsible for "guiding and monitoring youth sexuality". In the earlier discourse of innocence and asexuality, youth sexuality is delineated, requiring adult protection to preserve vulnerable and innocent children (Frizelle et al., 2013). Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) contend that SE has been established to regulate and discipline young sexualities. The developmental psychological discourse supports this assumption and constructs the youth as a constant state of development towards mature adulthood (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Adult authority is perpetuated, and young persons are expected to comply as "irresponsible" sexualities are controlled and regulated (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019, p.429). This discourse illustrates the

disconnect between the curricula and the need to incorporate reflexivity to change the dominant discourses in the curricula.

Chapter Conclusion

This section presents the dominant discourses in various sexual education curricula. A body of discursive research identifying these discourses in various contexts is reviewed. Throughout the literature, the discourses overlap and appear simultaneously. Discourses intersect and are sometimes contradictory.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach in this study is social constructionism. The theoretical framework is discussed while explaining why it was chosen for this research. The four assumptions identified by Burr (1995) are included. The researcher further elaborates on social constructionism and how it connects to gender.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theoretical framework that rejects a single and ultimate truth (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edley, 2001). Social constructionism observes psychological and social phenomena arising out of social life through interactions with people, then provides structure and content by the culture where they live and the power relations where they are embedded (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism has further been described as opposing the biological essentialist observation that "portrays various human phenomena as being biologically essential or natural to the human condition, rather than merely a product of culture" (Giles, 2006, p.265). This theoretical approach is appropriate as several social constructionist models reject "transhistorical and transcultural definitions of sexuality" and propose that sexuality is medicated by cultural and historical factors (Giles, 2006, p.225); therefore, humans are social beings that have become enculturated and constructed through the inherent immersion of a shared experiential world with the surrounding people (Lock & Strong, 2010).

This theoretical approach is appropriate in this study as it concerns meaning and understanding as the focus of human understanding (Edley, 2001; Lock & Strong, 2010). Social constructionism focuses on how meaning is deduced from language and what language does to create meaning (Lock & Strong, 2010); therefore, social constructionism allows the researcher to explore the discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships that feature in the research literature and are active in *the curriculum*. The flexibility of the

approach enables the researcher to explore the construction of the discourses in *the curriculum*.

Burr (1995, p.1) discusses four key assumptions of social constructionism, "a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, historical and cultural specificity; knowledge is sustained by social processes, and knowledge and social action go together". These four assumptions are discussed in further detail:

- Assumption 1: A Critical Stance Towards Taken-For-Granted Knowledge.
- Assumption 2: Historical and Cultural Specificity.
- Assumption 3: Knowledge is Sustained by Social Processes.
- Assumption 4: Knowledge and Social Action Go Together.

Assumption 1: A Critical Stance Towards Taken-For-Granted Knowledge

The first assumption of social constructionism is founded on "a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge" (Burr, 1995, p.2). Social constructionists direct a critical approach towards "taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world" (Burr, 1995, p.2). This notion invites all to be critical of our world observations and challenge the perception that conventional knowledge is based on an "objective, unbiased observation of the world" (Burr, 1995, p.2). Social constructionism acknowledges that more than one way exists to understand a concept; none of these understandings is considered the absolute truth (Burr, 2015).

Burr (1995) discusses the example of gender. This example is further present within this study; therefore, our observations and understanding of the world suggest two categories of humans—men and women (Burr, 1995). This is a global category, and the distinction has provided importance in society (Burr, 1995); however, social constructionism advocates that we question whether this is a "reflection of naturally occurring distinct types of human being" (Burr, 1995, p.2). Social constructionism, therefore, opposes the assumptions that "the nature

of the world can be revealed by observation and that what exists is what we perceive to exist" (Burr, 1995, p.2). It teaches caution and suspicion of assumptions about how the world appears and questions the importance of the distinction (Burr, 1995). This approach contests the current understanding of the world—an objective perspective (Burr, 2015). It is, therefore, in opposition to "positivism and empiricism in traditional science" (Burr, 1995, p.2).

Assumption 2: Historical and Cultural Specificity

The second assumption of social constructionism that Burr (1995, p.3) discusses is how we naturally understand the world and the concepts that we use "are historically and culturally specific". How social reality is constructed by culture is identified, and its implications for human experience are explored (Willig, 2008). Knowledge is a product of the circumstances in a specific time period (Burr, 1995; Burr, 2015). Our ways of understanding also depend on the social and economic arrangements prevalent within a culture at a particular time (Burr, 1995). Knowledge generated is, therefore, not driven by empirical fact but depends on assumptions and values specific to culturally and historically situated communities (Gergen, 2014). All social interactions lead to an understanding of social phenomena, becoming embedded in society (Burr, 2015). Social construction is "an account of knowledge in which all assertions about what is the case are traced to negotiated agreements among people" (Gergen, 2014, p.1772). Social phenomena are provided structure and meaning based on the culture where we live and the societal conditions of the time, and, therefore, we should not assume "that *our* ways of understanding are necessarily any better than other ways" (Burr, 1995, p.3).

Research from a social constructionist perspective is aimed at identifying ways of constructing social reality within a culture and exploring the conditions of their use (Willig, 2008). Through this process, the implications for human experience and social practice can

be traced (Willig, 2008). This search for meaning allows a greater understanding of the world, as we do not assume there is one universal truth (Burr, 2015). All forms of knowledge are historically and culturally bound (Burr, 1995). You are born into a world where the categories used by the people in your culture already exist, and are then acquired by more people and reproduced by more within that culture (Burr, 1995). An example of this, as mentioned in the first assumption, is the social and historical construction of gender, creating categories that society abides by. Provided the context of this study, we could, for example, consider the ways where gender roles have been historically and culturally structured as men are portrayed as masculine and, therefore, dominant, and women as feminine and, therefore, weak (Shefer et al., 2015).

Assumption 3: Knowledge is Sustained by Social Processes

The third assumption of social constructionism explores how people construct their knowledge of the world and, therefore, hold communal ways of understanding it (Burr, 1995). Through a person's daily interactions in social life, their versions of knowledge become constructed (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism focuses on how human experiences and perceptions are influenced historically, culturally, and linguistically (Willig, 2008).

Social interactions and language help to construct knowledge (Burr, 1995). This theoretical framework challenges the underlying assumptions of mainstream psychology and focuses on the importance of language and how it constructs people and events (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism observes the world as produced and constructed through language and representation, as meaning is perceived as a social artefact and not an inherent truth about our reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Burr, 2015). Social constructionism challenges how psychology understands how language works as it can express meaning for persons and, therefore, inform social interactions (Diaz-Leon, 2015). Language is not perceived as a neutral apparatus merely communicating facts; instead, it is perceived as a source that

constructs reality (Willig, 2008). Language and discourse relay the social meaning that society derives from to make sense of the world. As discourses are perceived as constructions that relay meaning, they dictate how we relate to others and understand the world, constructing our understanding of people in a social context (Burr, 2015).

Discourses are broadly predominant ways of representing people and things, functioning to construct and maintain an understanding of them in society (Burr, 2015); therefore, what we accept as our way of understanding the world is a "product of social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other" (Burr, 1995, p.3). Our cultural ideas or meanings inform our position globally and how we relate to others; therefore, discourses shape our observations of the world, ourselves, and our actions (Frizelle, In Press).

In this study, the moralistic discourses form examples of how sexual innocence is maintained (Le Mat, 2017; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Sexual innocence is often depicted as morally appropriate, presenting an example of how language constructs knowledge. Discourses allow sharing of our experiences of the world and instruct us on how we relate to others and how we understand ourselves as people.

Assumption 4: Knowledge and Social Action Go Together

The fourth assumption discusses how knowledge and social action relate as the 'negotiated' understandings could assume various forms, and we can "therefore talk of numerous possible 'social constructions' of the world" (Burr, 1995, p.3). These various constructions elicit diverse actions from humans (Burr, 1995). The constructions of the world "sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others" (Burr, 1995, p.3). As people converse increasingly, the world gets constructed, and therefore, language is perceived as a form of social action (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism is, therefore, determined by social properties and not by natural or biological properties (Diaz-Leon, 2015). The social

conditions fluctuate as time, location, and the conditions within which people construct themselves change (Burr, 2015).

Humans are born into a society where language, customs, and norms have been constructed (Burr, 2015); therefore, individual functioning originates in a socially constructed world (Burr, 2015). How sexuality, gender and relationships are constructed and taught in the sexual health curriculum, for example, would directly influence an individual's behaviour. It is important to question 'how?' and 'why?' certain constructions of meaning ensued to understand the evolution of the meaning constructed (Burr, 2015). By questioning these constructions, we can understand how they arose, becoming objective descriptions of the world (Burr, 2015); however, a social constructionist believes an objective fact does not exist, as all knowledge is derived from observing the world with a particular perspective (Burr, 1995).

Social Constructionism and Gender

Based on the four assumptions and understandings of social constructionism provided by Burr (1995), the researcher discusses social constructionism in relation to gender. Social constructionism questions the psychoanalytic conflation of gender and sexuality while exploring the fundamental power dynamics that underlie them (Barker, 2014). Theorists, such as Judith Butler, challenge heteronormativity and deconstruct sexual identity categories (Barker, 2014; Gergen, 2014). Butler rejects the traditional sexual orientation and sexual identity categories to challenge the validity of heteronormative discourse (Barker, 2014). Butler questions the gender binary and heteronormative sex, gender, and sexuality scripts, which, therefore, challenges standard "gay, lesbian, and transgender theoretical perspectives" (Barker, 2014, p.1741). Social constructionists provide a new non-pathologising observation with a non-sexualising attitude towards the diversity of sexuality and gender (Barker, 2014).

Social constructionism observes gender as "performed in a range of settings and activities and in relation to other people" (Payne et al., 2008, p.176). Gender, therefore, becomes accountable as it occurs in the context of what is determined by others, while certain aspects of gendered identity are normalised (Payne et al., 2008). Gender is observed as something that is *done* and not simply as the biological features assigned at birth (Andermann, 2010; Payne et al., 2008). Butler (1990) contends that gender is not a result of biology, but the actions conforming to the cultural norms held in society and existing before a person's birth; therefore, as humans, we are born into a world of social norms constructing who we can be (Burr, 2015).

Women and men's identity, behaviour, and social expectations reflect what has been socially constructed as femininity and masculinity (Andermann, 2010). Masculinity is usually associated with power and dominance, and femininity as submissive and emotional. These gender roles are socially constructed and create social norms upheld in society (Burr, 2015; Payne et al., 2008).

> The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kind of 'identities' cannot 'exist'— that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not follow from sex or gender. (Butler, 1990, p.17)

If we acknowledge that certain gendered traits are socially constructed, we open the possibility for social change to be implemented (Diaz-Leon, 2015).

Written text and language construct gender and reinforce the normative observations associated with the discourse, usually implying the exclusion of non-normative genders (Burr, 2015; Payne et al., 2008). Gender, sexuality, and relationships are socially constructed according to normative observations; therefore, heterosexuality and monogamy are reinforced as normative through discourse (Andermann, 2010; Butler, 1990; Payne et al., 2008). Butler

explains how discourses are powerful forms of action as they construct gender (Frizelle, In Press). The dominant discourses are constructed according to the interests of the powerful, with the power to authorise and legitimise them (Burr, 2015). In society, the "white middle-class man" is considered "in power" and, therefore, influences the construction of discourses (Burr, 2015, p.224).

Butler (1990, p.22) explains how the "institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire". When a person assumes a position within these constructed discourses, they inevitably provide a specific perspective of the world (Burr, 2015). For example, when we claim to be women or men within the "discourse of gender" or when we claim to be homosexual or heterosexual within the "discourse of sexuality" (Burr, 2015).

Chapter Conclusion

Based on the foundations of the theoretical framework, the study employed social constructionism as the foundation to explore the discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships in *the curriculum*. Social constructionism invites us to be critical and challenge an objective truth (Frizelle et al., 2013; Ivanski & Kohut, 2017). Social constructionism allows the researcher to explore how historical and cultural influences constructed sexuality, gender, and relationships. This theoretical framework allows the researcher to elucidate the normative observations reinforced. The researcher can explore gender, sexuality, and relationship construction in the data.

Methodology

This section details the study's methodology. The study aimed to explore discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships in *the curriculum* in South Africa and how they are constructed in this curriculum. This section outlines the paradigm, research design, and methods to achieve the research objectives. The methods used to conduct the study, collect the data, and the steps to ensure credibility are included.

Paradigm and Design

Research Paradigm

The paradigm for this study is a social constructionist paradigm. The paradigm refers to the beliefs and values, providing the overarching framework for the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This paradigm attempts to understand the meaning of the world in which we live. This, therefore, aligns with the research aims, exploring the fundamental meaning of the discourses on gender, sexuality, and relationships. Researchers are concerned with identifying the social reality constructed in language as an important aspect of socially constructed knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2008).

A social constructionist paradigm allowed the researcher to clarify subjectively how meaning may be conveyed through discourse in *the curriculum* and to identify the recurring themes in the text (Creswell, 2013; Willig, 2008). A commitment to qualitative methods of study exists through this paradigm, where there is the opportunity for multiple meanings of experience to be explored (Barker, 2014).

As the study aimed to explore how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in *the curriculum*, the paradigm allowed the researcher to pursue the underlying meaning of the text and subjectively interpret the various ways meaning was conveyed. This paradigm and approach to understanding allowed the researcher to take a subjective approach to interpreting the meaning of the discourses. The social constructionist paradigm focuses on

words and their meaning—not reducible to numerical interpretation, therefore, exploring how social, cultural, and historical contexts may have shaped the discourses. The perspective emphasises society's active role in creating meaning and understanding; this allows the researcher to explore how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in the text analysed. The paradigm allows exploring the interest in meaning and is lenient with the researcher's subjectivity. This was important in this study, as the paradigm acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and, therefore, subject to various interpretations.

Research Design

The research design of this study is qualitative. Qualitative research uses words and written language as data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative research concerns capturing an aspect of the social world as we are interested in finding meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This design allows an in-depth exploration of *the curriculum* to understand the text (Henning, 2013). This form of research design attempts to understand contextual data to generate a rich description, illustrating a pattern within this data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative studies allow a researcher to acquire an understanding, using evidence to provide an argument about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Henning, 2013).

A qualitative design in this study gave the researcher the flexibility to interpret words and language, enabling a rich and detailed description of the discourses explored. The fundamental meaning of the text is qualitatively explored in this research. The qualitative design provided the platform for the researcher to acquire a deeper understanding of the discourses and, by engaging with the text, portray the underlying meaning. The research design is qualitative, and therefore, the data analysis presents a qualitative technique (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Sampling

Sampling in this study is purposive. This is a non-probability way of sampling where data are selected according to criteria relevant to the research question (Willig, 2008). A defined text was analysed—the CAPS Life Orientation Sexual Education curriculum for Grade 9 learners in South Africa as provided by the DBE (Clark-Carter, 2009). The data used in this study were selected and sourced based on the topic; therefore, sampling is purposive, as the data were selected intentionally.

Data Collection

Data in this study are text-based. *The curriculum* in South Africa was accessed through the DBE's website (DBE, 2021c). This is a single, online, comprehensive document applied across the country. It is implemented at government schools across South Africa and, therefore, taught to most Grade 9 learners. The researcher selected this document owing to its wide applicability and accessibility across South Africa, taught to most Grade 9 learners. By encompassing much of this demographic, the researcher explored the discourses resonating with several learners.

The DBE website provided the latest *curriculum* when the study commenced, making the data easily accessible (DBE, 2021a; DBE, 2021b). The 2021 *curriculum* version was used in this study. The DBE developed *the curriculum*, assisting educators in teaching SE within the CAPS Life Skills and Life Orientation curricula. *The curriculum* includes an educator's guide of SLPs and a learner's book, which also comprises SLPs. Both booklets were used in their entirety in the study (DBE, 2021a; DBE, 2021b). Relevant data were extracted through the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a critical thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the "process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" (Maguire & Delahunt,

2017, p.3352). This qualitative approach is founded on a qualitative research philosophy, emphasising researcher subjectivity as a resource, the importance of reflexivity, and the contextual nature of meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2018). A critical thematic analysis is primarily thematic, but also draws on discursive insights (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study combined a textual analysis and a critical thematic analysis.

A textual analysis allows researchers to collect information about how people make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). It is a data-collecting process allowing the researcher to understand how people in a particular society or culture make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world around them (McKee, 2003). A textual analysis presents the researcher's educated guess and interpretation of the given data (McKee, 2003).

In this study, the researcher analysed the data to explore the underlying discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships, providing an understanding of how the discourses may be interpreted and constructed. Texts are interpreted to understand how the readers may understand the text (McKee, 2003). Textual analysis scrutinises the wording to uncover the essential meanings, themes, and patterns, leading to a deeper understanding of the content of the text (McKee, 2003). Textual analysis aligns with the study aim to explore the discourses in *the curriculum* relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships while exploring how they are constructed.

Thematic analysis is a unique form of data analysis, as it is merely a method for analysing data, allowing for flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). Thematic analysis can answer extensive types of research questions and analyse various kinds of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). The thematic analysis in this research is used to develop a critical analysis which can identify the concepts and ideas underlying the meaning of *the curriculum* (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Owing to flexibility, critical thematic analysis can be informed by various theoretical frameworks, but is always

informed by theory, as the method is not tied to a particular theoretical perspective (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The flexibility of thematic analysis allows for examining patterns and underlying meaning of discourses without requiring adherence to a specific framework (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Here, a social constructionist theory informs the thematic analysis. The advantage of thematic analysis is flexibility around research questions and data collection methods; it is accessible to researchers with little research experience, and the results can be understood by a vast audience (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013). This was chosen for this study as it allowed for flexibility with the research questions while allowing the researcher the advantage to explore the text subjectively to determine the meaning of underlying discourses. The six steps involved in the data analysis process indicate the following:

1 familiarisation with the data

2 generating initial codes

3 searching for themes

4 reviewing the themes

5 defining and naming themes

6 producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)

The researcher familiarised herself with the process of thematic analysis and perused various sources before analysing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Terry et al., 2017). This enabled learning about the data analysis process and allowed the researcher to be comfortable with it before engaging in the data.

Analysing data began with the researcher looking for patterns of meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researcher needed to be immersed in the

data, enabling familiarity with the discourses present (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). As the researcher perused the data, first impressions were noted. During the perusal process, meanings and patterns within the data were actively observed, keeping in mind the discourses identified in the literature review. Therefore, *the curriculum* was read a few times in an active way. The immersion in the data allowed familiarity with the depth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Once the researcher was familiar with the data, the next step was to generate initial codes present in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher creates a set of initial codes that represent the meanings and patterns perceived in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Coding involves identifying parts of the data related to the research question and creating an expressive label for that part of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This allows the researcher to reduce the data into smaller portions to create meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The researcher used the discourses established in the literature review section as a lens through which the codes were established. The various discourses were colour-coded, as identified in the literature review. This was the analytical frame used to identify themes in the text. Assorted colours were used to highlight similar discourses throughout the data. The codes generated were sourced in the reviewed literature on sexual health, presenting the discourses emerging in this literature. Once the data were collected and coded, the researcher worked through the list of codes established. The researcher read through the data again and identified further interesting excerpts, then continued coding. Excerpts representing the same meaning applied the same code; new codes were added as regarded fit (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The third step involved searching for themes. The codes were organised into themes, capturing the important aspects of the data regarding the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). A theme is “a pattern that captures something significant or

interesting about the data and/or research question" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.3356). When themes are developed, the interpretative data analysis commences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theme creation involves identifying patterns in the codes collected to find the similarities and overlaps (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The data were organised into various themes. This was done by collating the codes with supporting excerpts. The excerpts associated with a particular code were united. This allowed the researcher to read all excerpts organised by code to gain a deeper understanding of the codes developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used visual representations to sort through the various codes and to search for themes. The codes were written in assorted colours; the researcher organised the assorted colours onto separate papers and created a thematic map. The researcher determined which codes have a relationship and how they could form themes. Some codes formed main themes, whereas others formed sub-themes. The researcher determined which initial codes could be discarded as they belonged nowhere.

All the excerpts were grouped into themes. The fourth step involved refining and reviewing the themes identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this phase, some themes may overlap and, therefore, need to be combined or separated (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). A theme is perceived as a core concept in the story that is being told about the data while uniting the observations made (Clarke & Braun, 2018). The theme surpasses describing the topic area; it is nuanced and complex and says something meaningful about the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). During this stage, the research considered the validity of the individual themes regarding the data set to determine whether the themes fit in with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

There are two levels of themes, namely latent and semantic (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The latent level looks beyond what the text connotes and examines the underlying ideas, messages, and conceptualisations informing the surface meaning of the data (Maguire

& Delahunt, 2017). Using the thematic map, the researcher determined which themes needed to be grouped and noticed that some were subthemes. Data under each respective theme were reviewed and perused, enabling data collation under the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Various codes and themes emerged in the data; therefore, the researcher determined which themes could be combined and which lacked data to form a part of the study. As various themes emerged, the researcher subjectively decided which themes were most important to include in the study. This decision was based on the overlap of particular themes. When this stage ended, the various themes appeared to fit together and tell a story about the data and connected well to the literature review discourses.

The next step involved defining and naming the themes and analysing the overall story to determine if it meets the research objective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). A detailed analysis was then written for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step involves referring back to the data to extract discourses relevant to the theme. It was confirmed that each theme held adequate supportive and distinct data. The researcher identified the essence of each theme to determine the most important aspect with the most accurate explanation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher established some challenging themes, attempting to define the theme without complicating it. The researcher referred to the literature review to refresh on the discourses and content. Further research on the emerging themes and discourses was conducted. The researcher considered the information for the analysis by considering the new literature, the literature review, the coding, and emerging themes and furthermore engaged with the data to determine how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in *the curriculum*.

Last, when the themes were refined, the final analysis and write-up of the report were conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis should be a concise and coherent write-up that tells the story the data illustrates (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The

write-up consists of quotes supporting the information provided. The data analysis tells the story of the emerging discourses while providing a concise and coherent account of the story of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Evidence of the emerging themes was provided through the quotes from *the curriculum*. The most applicable and vivid examples were used to support the findings and themes. The researcher attempted to illustrate the exploration of the discourses through an argument regarding the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data extracts were analysed to determine the importance of the extracts and their relevance to the themes. Last, the researcher considered the theme order, ensuring coherent flow while conveying the correct response to the research question.

Ethical Considerations

Attributable to the text-based nature of this study, the ethical considerations for research differ from studies involving human participants. An ethical consideration for discursive studies is the researcher's own subjectivity that could be present in the data compiled. A critical thematic analysis is a subjective research process that may bring about the researchers' own histories, values, perspectives, and assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013); therefore, the researcher remained reflective and aware of the study's potential bias. The researcher is considered a research instrument, as they use their ability to understand, describe, and interpret the discourses to uncover meaning in *the curriculum* (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The researcher describes meaning through the data analysis. The boundaries between our experiences, observations, personal views and writing are not always separate and clear; therefore, awareness of ethical implications is required, as the process is subjective (Lapping, 2008). The researcher remains aware of the connection between human subjectivity and the data analysis and writing process (Lapping, 2008; Parker, 2005).

The study aimed to highlight the construction of gender, sexuality, and relationships in a *curriculum* aimed at learners. The researcher observed the meaning constructed in discourses and the recurrent themes in the literature while raising questions on how the discourses may be applied in sexual health education. The researcher, therefore, was aware of the potential to project a subjective interpretation of the language when analysing the meaning in the discourse (Hodges et al., 2008; Lapping, 2008; Willig, 2008). Trustworthiness, flexibility, and reflexivity ensured ethicality throughout this study. These concepts are discussed in more detail in the succeeding sections.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the methods of data collection and analysis was considered in the study. Trustworthiness is important, as the researcher needs to be aware of misrepresentation and aims to provide a credible and dependable representation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For research to be accepted as trustworthy, a researcher needs to demonstrate that the data analysis was conducted consistently and precisely by disclosing the method with adequate detail to determine credibility (Nowell et al., 2017).

The researcher thoroughly investigated the data analysis process and used various sources to ensure the correct process was followed. The methodology section of the study discloses and explains the processes in detail. With a thematic analysis method, the researcher is the instrument for analysing the coding, establishing themes, and decontextualising the data (Nowell et al., 2017). The ethical considerations and trustworthiness relate to the researcher as the instrument for analysis, as aforementioned.

The researcher considered normative and non-normative discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships. This ensured that discourses opposing the norm and those confined within the norms were examined (Gill, 2000). To ensure trustworthiness, earlier works related to this topic were consulted to build on their insights (Gill, 2000). By providing

this information, the reader can acquire a deeper understanding of the discourses of gender, sexuality, and relationships in the data. Language is unavoidably constructed and constructive; therefore, it does not undermine the data analysis in this research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Gill, 2000). The researcher provides thick descriptions of the findings enabling those who may want to transfer them to their own site to judge their transferability (Nowell et al., 2017). Overall, the researcher considered the trustworthiness of thematic analysis when analysing the data.

As thematic analysis requires flexibility, the researcher remained aware that this could lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence. This is considered a disadvantage of thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017); however, consistency and cohesion can be applied by clearly stating a way of thinking; therefore, the information produced in the study should interconnect (Nowell et al., 2017). The theoretical framework and paradigm of the study provide a coherent foundation for the study's claims. The analysis process presents claims supported by evidence in the data and literature.

Reflexivity

A qualitative researcher must acknowledge the importance of self-awareness and reflexivity in their role in the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Parker, 2005). This is because a researcher becomes immersed in the research and needs to be aware of their subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Parker, 2005; Terry et al., 2017; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Researchers have their own perspectives formed through cultural, environmental, and other contextual influences (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011); therefore, reflexivity is important in qualitative research. Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research and refers to the “process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce and our role in producing that knowledge” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.46).

In this study, the researcher reflected on how personal assumptions can shape the knowledge produced and the interpretation of discourses. For example, the researcher's personal assumption of the importance of teaching learners about sexual pleasure and desire needed to be acknowledged as a personal perspective and opinion and not implicated and projected into the analysis process. Awareness of pre-conceived assumptions that may influence collecting, analysing, and interpreting data upholds the value of trustworthiness in the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The process of reflexivity is important to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. The researcher remained self-aware of the role expected throughout the process and continually attempted to reflect and remain open to diverse perspectives. During data engagement, the researcher continuously reminded herself to acknowledge her own potential biases and perspectives. For example, the researcher had an ongoing dialogue with herself about her personal influences and values that strongly feel that the Christian ethos should not be implicated in the education space, particularly because of learners' different backgrounds, religions and cultures. The researcher acknowledges this and, therefore, remains transparent about her observations while maintaining the integrity of the thematic analysis process. The researcher recognised that she is not a neutral observer, as she is an active participant with her own background, values, and biases that could affect the research process. This was important to acknowledge to prevent distorting the research process.

The role of the researcher was to explore the discourses through the lens of the identified discourses in the literature review; therefore, she remained mindful of the discourses and conversed with herself to disregard her own opinions. The researcher continuously introspected as the data were read to understand how her values might influence the approach. For example, when the researcher read certain statements regarding abstinence and the feelings of shock and anger arose, she reflected on the reasons for these emotions.

The researcher aimed to minimise the potential for bias and distortion, enabling an accurate data representation. This ensured the study’s integrity.

Chapter Conclusion

This section describes the data collection methods of the study. It specifies the research paradigm and design, the data collection and analysis, and the ethical considerations of the study. The research methods were chosen in accordance with the study's aims to explore the discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships featured in the data analysed.

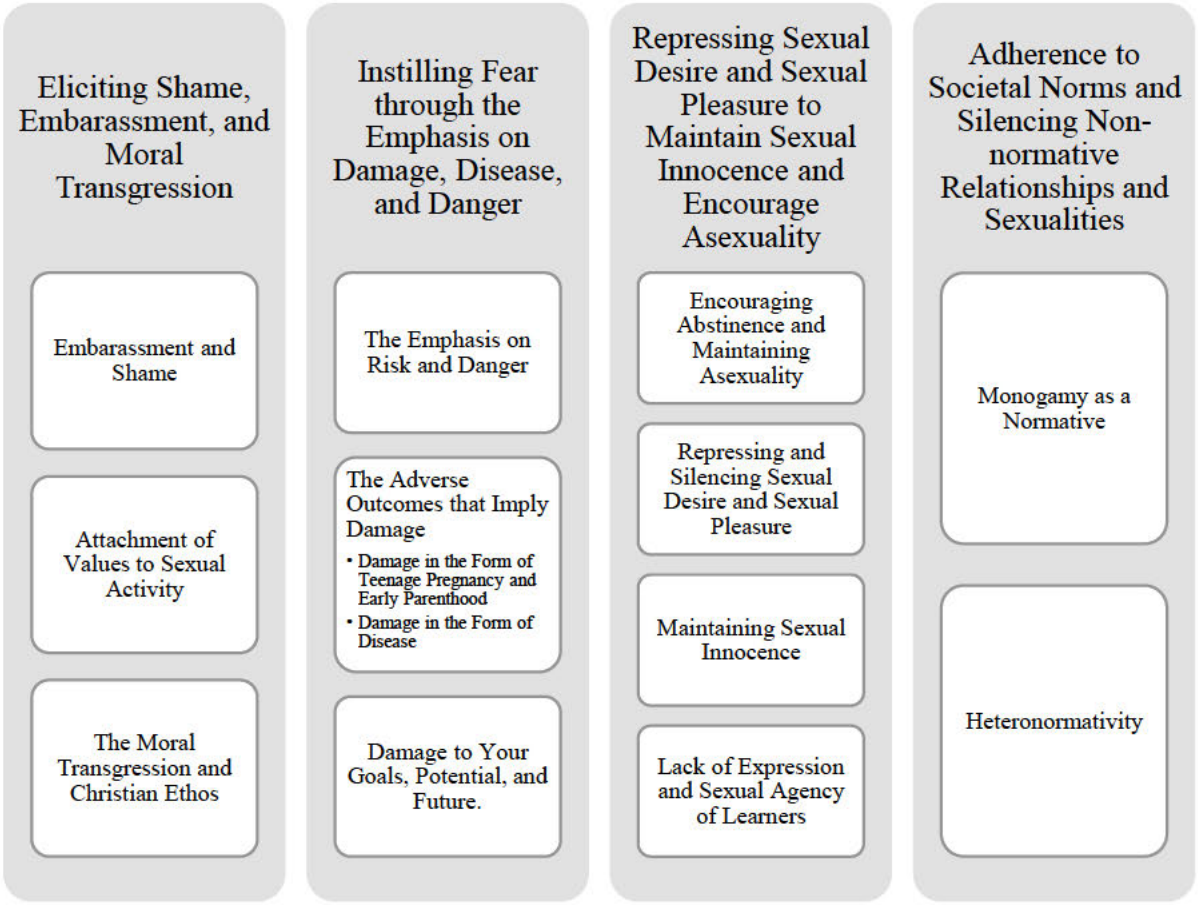
Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the emergent themes identified in the data, therefore, combining the findings and the discussion in one section. The discussion is at the study's core, presenting the answer to the research questions that had been guiding the research. The researcher discusses the themes emerging in the data. The emerging themes often overlap and appear within the data combined. The researcher attempted to split the themes while acknowledging the intersecting and overlapping data. It was, therefore, not always possible to describe an emergent theme without linking it to another theme.

The first theme: Theme 1: Eliciting Shame, Embarrassment, and Moral Transgression and is divided into the subsequent subthemes: Embarrassment and Shame, Attachment of Values to Sexual Activity, and The Moral Transgression and Christian Ethos. The second theme Theme 2: Instilling Fear through the Emphasis on Damage, Disease, and Danger is discussed in subthemes including: The Emphasis on Risk and Danger, The Adverse Outcomes that Imply Damage, are further divided into: Damage in the Form of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Parenthood and Damage in the Form of Disease**.** and lastly Damage to Your Goals, Potential, and Future. The third theme is Theme 3: Repressing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure to Maintain Sexual Innocence and Encourage Asexuality and is discussed through subthemes of: Encouraging Abstinence and Maintaining Asexuality, Repressing and Silencing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure, Maintaining Sexual Innocence and Lack of Expression and Sexual Agency of Learners. The fourth theme is Theme 4: Adherence to Societal Norms and Silencing Non-Normative Relationships and Sexualities, divided into two subthemes, indicating: Monogamy As a Normative and Heteronormativity.

Figure 1

Emergent Themes



Theme 1: Eliciting Shame, Embarrassment, and Moral Transgression

The first theme considers the embarrassment and shame that teachers and learners experience, how values are attached to sexual activity, and the moral transgression implied through the Christian ethos. The current study finds that the subject of sexuality elicits shame and embarrassment while portraying sexual activity deviating from societal norms stipulated in *the curriculum* as a moral transgression. The theme is divided into the subsequent subthemes: "Embarrassment and Shame", "Attachment of Values to Sexual Activity", and "The Moral Transgression and Christian Ethos".

Embarrassment and Shame

The topic of sexuality appears to evoke feelings of shame and embarrassment for teachers and learners (Le Mat, 2017; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Wood & Rolleri, 2014; Young et al., 2019). *The curriculum* addresses the discomfort and embarrassment teachers may experience in the classroom (DBE, 2021a). The foreword of *the curriculum* acknowledges that "educators feel uncomfortable teaching sexuality education" (DBE, 2021a, p.3). Teachers are encouraged to "help your learners feel comfortable to talk about difficult and sometimes embarrassing topics" (DBE, 2021a, p.19). Similarly, the literature established that teachers lack confidence and the motivation to address SE for various reasons, including a feeling that some issues are controversial and sensitive (Le Mat, 2017; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Wood & Rolleri, 2014); however, the topics should not be embarrassing, and the discourse should not be attached to SE.

Rather than reinforcing embarrassment, Young et al. (2019) acknowledge that teaching SE may provoke emotions, such as shame, and an appropriate space to acknowledge this without reinforcing it is important. Smith and Harrison (2013) investigated teachers' attitudes towards sex education, exploring how these attitudes affect school-based HIV prevention and sex education. They established that teachers expressed judgemental attitudes towards young people's sexuality, specifically towards pregnant students, as the behaviour of the young women was perceived as irresponsible (Smith & Harrison, 2013).

Literature explored how learners may be shamed in the classroom for transgressing societal ideals; for example, by shaming a young female for her pregnancy (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Young et al., 2019). According to Smith and Harrison (2013, p.75), teachers reported: "they discouraged attendance of pregnant students because pregnancy was shameful". This is an example of the shame and embarrassment that young learners experience, as their actions may be observed as contrary to societal norms. By pre-emptively

acknowledging and reinforcing shame and embarrassment, *the curriculum* perpetuates the negative associations regarding the topic; therefore, the discomfort of a teacher is crucial as it changes the attitude where the sexual education content is conveyed; this is specified in the SLPs in the South African curriculum. A further example in *the curriculum* where shame is attached to sexual activity is when learners are requested to:

> Emphasise that if they think they are going to be sexually active, whether they are a girl or boy, carrying a condom does not mean that they are "easy" or a "slut" or a "player". It means that they are mature and concerned about their health. They must not let the ignorance and sexist comments of others prevent them from taking care of their health. (DBE, 2021a, p.95)

This example illustrates how shame is attached to engaging in sexual activity, and acknowledging the underlying shame that learners may endure is important to avoid perpetuating the shame. Young women's sexual and romantic behaviour was often equated to immorality and rebellion, as they were often encouraged to engage in more appropriate behaviour (Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Smith & Harrison, 2013). The literature agrees with the shame that is clearly underlying the discourses in *the curriculum*. Embarrassment and shame appear to underly certain examples, activities, and statements in *the curriculum.*

Emotions, such as shame and embarrassment, are attached to sexual education through specific behaviours associated with sexual activity. *The curriculum* denotes that learners may be "embarrassed to go to a chemist or supermarket and buy a condom, but you are smart enough and have assertiveness and communication skills to get past embarrassment" (DBE, 2021b, p.34). Another statement in the lesson plans is: "a person may not use condoms because they are too embarrassed to go to the clinic to fetch condoms" (DBE, 2021a, p.112). One barrier to condom use, as expressed in *the curriculum,* is that a learner may be "embarrassed to buy or be seen getting condoms" (DBE, 2021a, p.113). A

factor leading to negative behaviours is that a learner may be "embarrassed to be seen at the clinic" (DBE, 2021a, p.59). These statements imply embarrassment attached to purchasing a condom and being seen collecting condoms. It further implies that if you feel embarrassed and unable to purchase condoms, you are not smart or assertive enough to overcome this embarrassment. Shoveller and Johnson (2006) similarly established that self-esteem has been attached to risky sexual behaviour; it is assumed that those with higher self-esteem will, for example, remain abstinent or use condoms. This theme draws attention to the embarrassment and shame attached to persons of a particular age purchasing contraception and the shame behind the behaviour.

Attachment of Values to Sexual Activity

This subtheme illustrates how *the curriculum* analysed in this study attaches certain values and virtues to sexual activity. Learners are taught that "before you have sex, think about your personal values related to sex" and are further encouraged to "remind yourself of your values and goals" (DBE, 2021b, p.34). The fundamental implication of statements like these reminds learners to consider their values, goals, and future before engaging in sexual activity. This is a heavy burden to place on a learner and conveys a message that engaging in sexual activity may be contrary to their personal values and damaging to their goals.

In an activity where learners had to write a letter to their future selves, one sentence includes: "I will use good judgment about whom I show love and affection" (DBE, 2021b, p.15). This attaches virtues and values of love and affection to sexual activity. This removes autonomy from a learner who may make a choice to engage in sexual activity purely for sexual pleasure. Mayeza and Vincent (2019) discuss the perpetuated moralistic approach to SE, which learners feel polices their sexuality. Romantic relationships and sexual activity are common among young learners; however, instead of focusing on positive aspects of intimacy, the focus of the *curriculum* foregrounds problems and discourages learners from sexual

activity (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). This is illustrated in the examples in this subtheme where learners are told to use good judgement, their values and are intimidated into decisions within the bounds of what is taught and perceived as societally acceptable. Smith and Harrison (2013) established that the sexual behaviour and romantic relationships of young persons were discouraged and stigmatised, as it was perceived as problematic and potentially undermining learning. This subtheme draws attention to the virtue of love, affection, and romance attached to sexual activity, implying that learners must be in committed, romantic relationships to engage in sexual activity and if they engage in sexual acts without this, they are contradicting good judgement. *The curriculum* dictates to learners when they should engage in a romantic and sexual relationship and at what point within that relationship they should engage in sexual activity. The implication of damage to a learner's future, goals, and potential is further discussed in the theme below.

The Moral Transgression and Christian Ethos

This subtheme emerges in *the curriculum*, imposing certain moral transgressions on learners if they engage in sexual behaviours considered beyond societal norms for their age. Despite stating that "learners come from different cultural and religious backgrounds, and will interpret the discussion on SE issues against those backgrounds", *the curriculum* includes various discourses, suggesting that learners may engage in shameful behaviour (DBE, 2021a, p.24). Moralistic discourses were identified and discussed in the literature review. One approach to SE is instilling moral values (Le Mat, 2017). The discourses were contradictory to the intended purpose of the *curriculum* as learners are made to feel that sex outside of marriage is "sinful" (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). Literature established that "Christian and moralistic views on sex and sexuality" are maintained by some teachers who may encourage learners to remain abstinent (Young et al., 2019, p.487).

Chappell (2016, p.407) discusses how SE used to be "governed by customary Zulu practices and rules", which prohibited pre-marital penetrative sex; however, the introduction of Christianity has changed cultural practices and influenced the manner and content of what is taught in SE spaces. Responsible sexuality is founded on moral decision-making and often underpinned by religious values, establishing right from wrong while perpetuating childhood innocence (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Young et al., 2019). The findings by Young et al. (2019) are contrary to the intended purpose of *the curriculum*, which attempts to keep religious and moralistic perspectives out of the text. One reason learners may avoid visiting the clinic and enquiring about contraception—as described in *the curriculum*—is the fear of disapproval from a pastor (DBE, 2021a). The lesson suggests the following strategies that learners could use to counter this: "choose to abstain from sex rather than risk the disapproval of your pastor or engage in unprotected sex"; "change churches to one with a pastor who is more sympathetic to your situation"; "get a supportive parent or another adult that you trust to go with you to discuss the issue with your pastor" (DBE, 2021a, p.202). These examples imply that a pastor has the right to be informed about the decisions a young learner makes in their sexual lives, providing power to that pastor. This takes away from a learner's sexual agency, as discussed in Theme 3 below.

Similar to this example in the text, Young et al. (2019) established that people may feel the need to atone when they were made to feel shame for certain sexual activities. Teachers reinforce the societal norms that dictate engaging in sexual activity is immoral, encouraging learners to abstain from sex until marriage (Hodes & Gittings, 2019). From the examples in *the curriculum*, supported by literature, it carries an "immorality" discourse that seems to have Christian roots. It ultimately condemns learners for engaging in sexual activity, presenting the impression that they would have morally transgressed beyond what is societally acceptable.

Theme 2: Instilling Fear through the Emphasis on Damage, Disease, and Danger

The second theme considers how fear is instilled in learners by focusing on the negative consequences of sexual activity. *The curriculum* in South Africa is explicitly committed to preventing and managing HIV and STIs. It ensures that learners are equipped to decrease "risky sexual behaviour" (DBE, 2021a, p.3). Literature confirms this and finds that the focus on negative consequences and the messages about abstinence, sexual delay and risk are reinforced, ultimately instils fear in learners and prompting them to delay engaging in sexual activity (Francis & DePalma, 2014; Frizelle et al., 2013; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Smith & Harrison, 2013; Wood & Rolleri, 2014).

Upon exploration of *the curriculum*, fear is instilled through the emphasis on damage, disease, and danger. *The curriculum* employs scare tactics and focuses on the negative consequences of sexual activity. "Theme 2: Instilling Fear through the Emphasis on Damage, Disease, and Danger" discussed in subthemes, including: "The Emphasis on Risk and Danger:, "The Adverse Outcomes that Imply Damage" which is further discussed in "Damage in the Form of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Parenthood" and "Damage in the Form of Disease**.**" and the last subtheme discussed is "Damage to Your Goals, Potential, and Future".

The Emphasis on Risk and Danger

This subtheme illustrates how the text instils fear in learners by emphasising the dangers and risks involved in engaging in sexual activity; the consequences are extensively discussed in the discourse of risk and danger in the literature review (Frizelle et al., 2013; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Literature confirms the emphasis on the risks associated with sexual activity (Francis

& DePalma, 2014; Wood & Rolleri, 2014). Learners must conduct an activity to assess their risk of "unhealthy sexual behaviour" (DBE, 2021a, p.76). *The curriculum* explains:

> Risk factors can increase the chance of developing a problem. They can be related to how a person behaves or to the environmental conditions that a person is exposed to, unhealthy sexual behaviour, sexual actions, or activities that have harmful results. Let your learners do the following activity in pairs, on risk factors, and rate themselves out of 10 to evaluate how risky the specific factor is in their own lives after the discussion. (DBE, 2021a, p.76)

Learners are directed to evaluate their own risk based on these listed factors: Individual factors, including "low self-esteem; needing to fit in with peers; negative peer group behaviour; no dreams or vision for the future; depression; being in a romantic relationship; and involved in drinking, drugs and smoking"; family factors, including "poor communication between parents and children; no advice from adults; difficulties in the family; parents not supervising their children; family not being supportive and parents taking part in risk behaviours" and environmental factors, including: "negative school environment; poor neighbourhood; and negative relationships with adults in the community, such as educators" (DBE, 2021a, p.76) Learners then determine if they are "high risk, average risk, or risk-free" based on how these factors apply to them (DBE, 2021a, p.76). Social constructionism explores how meaning is deduced from language and how language creates meaning. The factors described in this activity for a learner to determine their level of "risk" attach a negative association to sexual activity and scare learners away from engaging in sexual activity. *The curriculum* describes risks, such as "HIV and other infections and early and unintended pregnancy" (DBE, 2021a, p.10). The implication is that if learners experience some of these "risk factors", they are convinced they can be exposed to unhealthy sexual

behaviours that could lead to harmful results. The risk related to sexual behaviour is fore fronted, and the consequences are emphasised throughout *the curriculum*.

The Adverse Outcomes that Imply Damage

The subtheme of considers the consequences of engaging in sexual activity observed in society as damaging to a learner. As mentioned above, the risk involved in engaging in sexual activity is continually reiterated throughout *the curriculum* as learners are perceived as at risk for negative consequences, which include pregnancy and disease (DBE, 2021a). The foreword of *the curriculum* states: "high rates of learner pregnancy and HIV infection indicate that there has been no change in the behaviour of learners" (DBE, 2021a, p.3). The aim of *the curriculum* and the basis of sexual health education is to ensure that "learners, educators, officials and parents are informed and equipped to decrease risky sexual behaviour and gender-based violence (GBV) among young people" (DBE, 2021a, p.3). The background and context of the SLPs emphasise the "HIV prevalence" and describe HIV and AIDS as "one of the greatest challenges to the health and well-being of young people in South Africa" (DBE, 2021b, p.7). The background emphasises the statistics associated with pregnancies and HIV among youth in South Africa to illustrate the need to educate learners to make "healthy" decisions regarding their sexual activity (DBE, 2021b, p.7). Literature confirms that *the curriculum* focuses on HIV prevention and reducing unwanted pregnancy (Gacoin, 2016; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015; Smith & Harrison, 2013). Research established that scare tactics are used to shock, frighten, and scare learners away from sexual activity, therefore, focusing on the negative consequences of STIs, HIV, and pregnancy (Hodes & Gittings, 2019). Comprehensive and effective sexual health education is necessary in South Africa; however, when clarifying the meaning of the discourses in the text from a social constructionism perspective, the underlying interpretation can be harmful.

There is a clear focus on avoiding disease owing to the detriment of the consequences on a learner's life. *The curriculum* accentuates avoiding disease, remarking that learners "avoid pregnancy and STIs – especially HIV– so that these things do not get in the way of you achieving the dreams and goals you have for your adult lives, or damaging your health" (DBE, 2021b, p.84). The words used imply detriment to a learner's health and future. The text denotes that "if you do choose to have sex, USE A CONDOM EVERY TIME, to prevent pregnancy and the spread of HIV and other STIs" (DBE, 2021b, p.84). It encourages learners to "identify the unique benefits of choosing to use condoms, especially their effectiveness at preventing pregnancy as well as STIs and HIV transmission" (DBE, 2021b, p.33).

In an activity, learners are required to write a letter to their future selves and include three learnt behaviours. They are provided with sentences to complete their letter. These sentences include: "I will always be aware that the rates of HIV in South Africa are of epidemic proportions" and "I will believe that I can acquire HIV and STIs or that I can be a part of a teenage pregnancy" (DBE, 2021b, p.16). These examples illustrate how the wording is structured in the text and how it stresses the negative consequences of sexual activity, attempting to deter learners from engaging in sexual activity. Teachers are directed to:

> Express your wish that your learners avoid pregnancy and STIs – especially HIV – so that these things do not get in the way of them achieving the dreams and goals that they have for their adult lives, or cause damage their health. Be cautious in the way you address this as some of your learners might be HIV-positive, have/have had an STI or be pregnant or have made someone pregnant. (DBE, 2021a, p.186)

This statement contradicts research establishing that *the curriculum* framework does not overtly specify the topics of discussion and the teaching strategies (Wood & Rolleri, 2014). This example of a statement in *the curriculum* seems noticeably clear about how a teacher should express their own wish for learners to avoid pregnancy, STIs, and HIV. Research

confirms that *the curriculum* aims to delay sexual debut and increase condom use among learners (Smith & Harrison, 2013). CSE acknowledges that learners are or will be sexually active and stresses the need to teach about STIs and HIV through a focus on contraception (Francis & DePalma, 2014).

The construction of these discourses implies negative consequences of expressing sexual agency and sexuality as young persons. The consequences of pregnancy, STIs, and HIV are constructed in a damaging and disastrous manner that negatively affect a leaners life in the long-term. The approach to sexual education focuses solely on emphasising the negative consequences and instilling fear in learners, discouraging them from engaging in sexual activity and depriving them of education on positive aspects of sexual activity and relationships. By emphasising the risks, potential dangers, and negative outcomes associated with sexual activity, leaners develop a skewed perception, portraying sexual activity as inherently harmful or dangerous. The damage implied is further discussed separately, as teenage pregnancy and early parenthood, and disease.

Damage in the Form of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Parenthood. One risk and negative outcome interpreted as "damage" and emphasised in *the curriculum* is the possibility of pregnancy and, therefore, early parenthood for learners. A lesson in *the curriculum* focuses exclusively on parenthood (DBE, 2021a; DBE, 2021b). The lesson title is "Are you ready for parenthood?" (DBE, 2021a, p.147; DBE, 2021b, p.60). The implications of this title alone could imply that sexual activity inevitably results in parenthood and is merely a scare tactic to steer learners away from engaging in sexual activity. It leads a person to question themselves about the consequences of sexual activity and implies that if you want to engage in sexual activity, you need to be ready for parenthood. *The curriculum* states that "teen pregnancy is common in South Africa and can interfere with the ability of young people to achieve their goals" (DBE, 2021a, p.11). It reiterates that:

> The rate of teen pregnancy in South Africa has become a major challenge because learner pregnancy does not only affect completion of schooling for individuals, in particular the girl learners, but whole families and communities within which schools and educational institutions function. (DBE, 2021a, p.12)

The explanation of teenage pregnancy in South Africa is framed in a way that the negative outcome has ripple effects not only detrimental to the person but to their family and community. The discourse carries considerable weight and places a heavy burden on a learner. One activity requires the teachers to "explain to your learners that there are many ways in which parenthood can affect a teenager's life" and "that there are many ways in which a teenager's life would change if he/she became a parent" (DBE, 2021a, p.149). Throughout the lesson plans, the wording "risk of teenage pregnancy" is used (DBE, 2021b, p.21). This language attaches negative connotations to sexual activity and implies a danger to engaging in this activity. The teachings of *the curriculum* correlate with research as

"unwanted teenage pregnancy" is perceived as a negative consequence of sexual activity and is considered a social problem (Shoveller & Johnson, 2006).

As teenage pregnancy is considered a "social problem", the "risk-taking behaviour" that learners engage in is perceived as behaviour that requires modification (Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). The lessons in *the curriculum* are, therefore, according to the social issues in the South African context; however, if the discourses are further explored, pregnancy and parenthood can be understood as disastrous and damaging for the learner and society. The research established that sexuality is stigmatised, and schools respond punitively instead of representing positive sexuality (Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). This punitive approach is further indicated in *the curriculum* as lessons require teachers to "emphasise to your learners that it is also possible that a couple can get pregnant the VERY FIRST time they have unprotected sex" and to "emphasise risk factors leading to unhealthy sexual behaviour" (DBE, 2021a, p.71). Using capital letters in the text places a massive emphasis and employs scare tactics to instil fear in learners.

The lesson requires teachers to remind learners that "becoming pregnant is the product of choices about behaviours" and to "point out to them that they can choose behaviours that increase their chances of becoming pregnant, or they can choose behaviours that decrease their chances of becoming pregnant" (DBE, 2021a, p.72). When encouraging learners to engage in "safer sex", the text emphasises the negative consequences and continually reminds learners of the chances of sexual activity resulting in pregnancy. From the extracts from *the curriculum* provided in this paragraph, pregnancy and parenthood for learners are portrayed as negative consequences of sexual activity that could be problematic and damaging to them. *The curriculum* consistently emphasises the negative consequences of sexual activity, parenthood, and pregnancy and frames them as undesirable outcomes that could influence a learner's perception of engaging in sexual activity.

Damage in the Form of Disease. One risk and negative outcome portrayed as "damage" and emphasised in *the curriculum* is the possibility of disease in the form of HIV and STIs. The emphasis on condom use and prevention of HIV and STIs aligns with the high transmission rate within South Africa (Cele et al., 2021). Adolescent girls are a priority population needing HIV prevention (Holmes et al., 2020). Owing to this prevalence, *the curriculum* focuses on reducing the transmission rate in young persons. The theme of damage and disease reflected in *the curriculum* confirms some discourses discussed in the literature review (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019).

In the literature review, the negative consequences of HIV and STIs are at the forefront of sexual health lessons (Gacoin, 2016; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). This correlates with one of the six core messages of the entire *curriculum*, which remarks that "if you are having sex, get tested for HIV and other STIs regularly" (DBE, 2021b, p.9). This core message is presented throughout *the curriculum*. Examples of this emphasis in the text include: "anyone who is sexually active is at risk of acquiring STIs and/or HIV", "people who have STIs, including HIV, often show no signs of being infected", and "condoms are the ONLY contraceptive method that ALSO prevents getting and spreading STIs and HIV" (DBE, 2021a, p.88; DBE, 2021b, p.41). The text states that "anyone who has had sex is potentially at risk. Thus, if they are sexually active, the ONLY way to protect themselves is to use condoms correctly and consistently, EVERY TIME they have oral, vaginal or anal sex" (DBE, 2021a, p.92). There is obvious importance placed on learners preventing HIV and STIs. These negative outcomes of sexual activity are portrayed as devastating consequences, extremely damaging to a learner, and instilling fear; therefore, the learners will not want to engage in sexual activity.

Contrary to the tactics in the South African curriculum, Holmes et al. (2020) established that HIV prevention should be less about a young woman's vulnerabilities and

focus on strengthening the relationship dynamics of a person to create a healthy relationship environment. Similarly, Shai et al. (2010) established that less conflict in a relationship and greater trust are perceived as a measure of a good relationship where condom use is more likely. Despite the suggestion to focus on creating a healthy intimate relationship and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, *the curriculum* focuses on educating learners on preventing adverse outcomes. *The curriculum* places significant importance on preventing HIV and STIs, portraying these negative outcomes as highly damaging while instilling fear to discourage learners from engaging in sexual activity.

The curriculum emphasises the risk of engaging in sexual activity outside of a monogamous relationship and warns learners that despite being in a monogamous relationship, a partner could have sex outside the relationship and put them at risk (DBE, 2021a). The focus is cautionary. Monogamy is also discussed in "Theme 4: Adherence to Societal Norms and Silencing Non-Normative Relationships and Sexualities"; however, it is discussed under the subtheme of "Damage in the Form of Disease." as the spread of the disease outside of a monogamous relationship is depicted in *the curriculum*.

When describing examples of why a person may choose monogamy, the reasons include "less risk of contracting or transmitting HIV and less risk of contracting or transmitting other STIs" (DBE, 2021a, p.123). The lesson on "one partner at a time" assesses the advantages and disadvantages of concurrent sexual partners by "taking into consideration the increased risk for STIs and transmission of HIV" (DBE, 2021b, p.45). There is an activity in the lesson depicting the spread of STIs and HIV in a community when people engage in concurrent sexual relationships, emphasising that the "community who maintain abstinence or monogamy are not exposed to infection because they are not connected to any of the 'sexual chains' that are infected" (DBE, 2021b, p.46). Conversely, research established that marriage is not a "safe haven" and, therefore, monogamous relationships are not immune to

the spread of HIV and STIs (Cele et al., 2021, p.2). The number of new infections is higher among married and cohabitating couples (Cele et al., 2021); however, Shai et al. (2010) established that monogamy and harmonious relationships play a positive role in enabling women to use condoms and, therefore, reduce their risk of HIV transmission. Inconsistent condom use was higher among women with "lower gender equity in relationships with a male partner" (Shai et al., 2010, p.1379); therefore, research demonstrates that condom use is less about monogamy and more about the level of trust and conflict within the relationship (Holmes et al., 2020; Shai et al., 2010). The data emphasise the transmission of diseases in non-monogamous relationships, aiming to discourage learners from participating in sexual activity outside the boundaries of monogamous relationships.

Damage to Your Goals, Potential, and Future

This subtheme depicts how sexual activity is negatively associated with the learners' future goals and potential and is regarded as damaging to them. *The curriculum* teaches learners to evaluate their sexual behaviours by considering whether the behaviours will hinder their goals and align with their aspirations (DBE, 2021a; DBE, 2021b).

The curriculum commences with a lesson about "setting goals and reaching your potential" (DBE, 2021b, p.11). The entire lesson focuses on how a learner can review their sexual behaviours to support them in accomplishing their goals or "get in the way of them" (DBE, 2021b, p.11). The lesson requires teachers to explain to learners that they will begin the Grade 9 sexual health unit by "looking at their goals in life and looking at how their choice of behaviours in relation to their health – especially around sex – can either help them to achieve their goals or get in the way of those goals" (DBE, 2021a, p.52). The implication of this lesson presents the learner with two alternatives: that engaging in sexual activity will facilitate or impede the achievement of their goals. This raises the question: Why must it be exclusively one or the other? The lesson provides learners with these two options, implicating

them as exclusive options. The lesson states that “making commitment to positive and healthy behaviours is a key to achieving your goals” (DBE, 2021a, p.51; DBE, 2021b, p.11). The lesson connects positive sexual behaviours, achievement of goals, and dependence on the future. These discourses have implications from a social constructionist perspective; the lesson suggests that engaging in sexual behaviours and deviating from *the curriculum* guidelines may have detrimental consequences for the individual’s future.

The research agrees with this damage that could incur. Le Mat (2017) established that teachers advise learners to exercise control and abstain from sexual activity until they have completed their education to avoid distractions that may impede academic success and potentially influence their future family. This is depicted in the lesson as it remarks that “negative behaviours can also get in the way of us accomplishing our goals” and the “choices that we make regarding our sexual behaviour can have an impact on our ability to accomplish important short and long-term goals” (DBE, 2021b, p.13).

A question in *the curriculum* at a later stage directs: “How are your choices regarding sexual behaviours affecting your ability to achieve your goals?” (DBE, 2021b, p.94). The question implies that the learner’s choices are already affecting achieving their goals and, therefore, their future. Learners must ask themselves, “How are your choices regarding sexual behaviours affecting your ability to achieve your goals?” (DBE, 2021b, p.94). The statement establishes a correlation between an individual’s sexual behaviour and their ability to attain their goals, emphasising the influence of decision-making on success and the potential influence of sexual choices on life objectives.

The curriculum instils apprehension by linking a learner’s choice to engage in sexual activity with their prospects and achieving their goals (DBE, 2021a; DBE, 2021b). It further specifies that unhealthy and negative behaviours will damage their goals. *The curriculum* remarks that “there are also factors or influences that hinder or inhibit the BEHAVIOUR or lead

to other, negative unhealthy behaviours, which in turn become AN OBSTACLE TO ACHIEVING THE GOAL" (DBE, 2021b, p.14). This point is significantly prominent owing to the use of capital letters, emphasising the hindrance that sexual activity may be to a learner's goals. One of the key themes in the lesson is "preventing HIV, other STIs and teenage pregnancy can help you to achieve your goals" (DBE, 2021a, p.51; DBE, 2021b, p.11); however, the implication of these discourses implies that if a learner engaged in sexual activity, and become pregnant (despite possibly using protection as taught further on in their *curriculum*), it would influence achieving their goals. This influence attributes a discourse of damage to the learner.

Further in the lesson teaching learners about "safer sex: using condoms", one of the key points expressed for teachers to make learners aware of is: "the skill of using a condom is something you need to know BEFORE having sex, but you should still abstain from sex until you have achieved your other goals and are truly READY" (DBE, 2021a, p.88). The wording attaches abstinence to achieving goals, implying that a learner would be unsuccessful in achieving their goals if they engage in sexual intercourse before attempting their goals. The text has an extremely adverse connotation.

An activity in the syllabus requires teachers to "identify the space where your learners should write something reminding their future self why, today, they think it is important to avoid HIV, other STIs and teenage pregnancy" (DBE, 2021a, p.56). *The curriculum* mandates teachers to "express your wish that your learners will avoid pregnancy and STIs – especially HIV – so that they do not get in the way of them achieving their dreams and goals for their adult lives, or harm their health" (DBE, 2021a, p.111). This is a personal appeal. In the final lesson of *the curriculum*, one of the key points further emphasises, "avoiding HIV and AIDS, STIs and teenage pregnancy can help you to achieve your goals" (DBE, 2021b,

p.92). The lesson applies scare tactics to instil fear in the learners to prevent them from engaging in certain sexual activities.

The curriculum attaches success and accomplishment of goals to sexual engagement. It implies that engaging in sexual activity will lead to the adverse consequence of not achieving their goals; therefore, their future will be undesirably affected and damaged. The discourse of damage is extensively discussed in the aforementioned literature review and the themes sections. The literature agrees with the implication that young persons will incur damage by engaging in sexual activity by opposing the stipulated guidelines in *the curriculum* (Frizelle et al., 2013; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015; Shefer et al., 2015; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). The theme draws attention to the emphasis on scare tactics in *the curriculum*, linking learners' sexual activity with their future and goals, suggesting that unhealthy sexual behaviours will impede their progress in life.

Theme 3: Repressing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure to Maintain Sexual Innocence and Encourage Asexuality

As explored in the literature review (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Frizelle et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2013; Slovin, 2016), the discourse of asexuality, sexual innocence, and sexual desire is present in SE. Abstinence is strongly encouraged and emphasised to prevent the spread of diseases and unwanted pregnancy (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). This maintains asexuality and sexual innocence. *The curriculum* further focuses on educating learners on the negative consequences of sexual activity, as extensively discussed in the second theme. This represses and silences sexual desire and pleasure. The theme of "Theme 3: Repressing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure to Maintain Sexual Innocence and Encourage Asexuality" is discussed through subthemes of "Encouraging Abstinence and Maintaining Asexuality", "Repressing and Silencing Sexual

Desire and Sexual Pleasure", "Maintaining Sexual Innocence", and "Lack of Expression and Sexual Agency of Learners".

Encouraging Abstinence and Maintaining Asexuality

This subtheme considers how abstinence is strongly suggested in *the curriculum,* promoting and advising asexuality among learners, as analysed in this study. One of the six core messages in *the curriculum* is that "the **safest** choice is **not** to have sex" (DBE, 2021a, p.19; DBE, 2021b, p.9). This core message is conveyed throughout *the curriculum* and emphasised in several ways. The foreword of *the curriculum* remarks that "the Department of Basic Education strongly advocates abstinence among young people" and "as a first defence against teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, learners are encouraged to delay engaging in sexual activities" (DBE, 2021a, p.3). Abstinence is encouraged as learners are told to "choose to abstain from sex rather than risk the disapproval of your pastor or engage in unprotected sex" (DBE, 2021a, p.202). The choice of learners implies a heavy burden; the disapproval of a pastor is a scare tactic eliciting shame while creating the impression that rejecting abstinence is a moral transgression.

The aim of *the curriculum* is clear and focuses on the consequences of sexual activity. It strongly encourages abstinence to prevent learners from engaging in behaviours that could lead to negative consequences. Young women are taught that they have the responsibility to abstain from sexual activity to avoid transgressing societal ideals and enduring shame (Young et al., 2019). The core message of *the curriculum* are in accordance with the findings of the literature review (Le Mat, 2017; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Education on abstinence works on the assumption that learners will not be sexually active until marriage, therefore remaining a method of education enforced in the South African curriculum (Francis & DePalma, 2014).

Contrary to research findings suggesting insufficient data to support abstinence-only education, abstinence is still strongly encouraged (Francis & DePalma, 2014; Greslé-Favier,

2010). The research findings advise that comprehensive sexual education be considered, such as in South African sexual education (Francis & DePalma, 2014). Abstinence is taught as the best and safest choice for learners to avoid the negative consequences of sexual activity, discussed in the theme "instilling fear through emphasis on damage, disease, and danger".

Abstinence is a repeated message, reiterated throughout *the curriculum*. In the contraception lesson, abstinence is reiterated, remarking, "the SAFEST choice is not to have sex. Abstinence is the only 100% effective method for preventing pregnancy" (DBE, 2021b, p.21). The lessons further reiterate the core message before every lesson and then encourage abstinence as it remarks, "abstinence is the only 100% effective way to avoid STIs, HIV and teenage pregnancy" (DBE, 2021a, p.88; DBE, 2021b, p.33; DBE, 2021b, p.41). From the number of times this is referenced, the point is reiterated.

The curriculum emphasises that abstinence is the only "guaranteed" way to avoid consequences that could damage the learner (DBE, 2021a, p.111); therefore, to prevent learners from engaging in sexual activity and warn them about the consequences, abstinence is put at the forefront. It is conducted by placing the statements in bold writing and capital letters. The undertone of some statements in *the curriculum* promotes fear-instilled abstinence. Statements such as:

> Having unprotected sex is likely to result in pregnancy; 9 out of 10 fertile adults will become pregnant as a result of unprotected sex. The SAFEST choice is NOT to have sex. Abstinence is the only 100% effective method for preventing pregnancy. If you choose to have sex, using contraception correctly can greatly reduce the chances of a pregnancy occurring. (DBE, 2021a, p.70)

Starting the sentence with "if" still implies choosing abstinence, and sexual activity is not something in which to engage. This is reiterated, as teachers are encouraged to "remind your learners that abstinence is the only 100% sure way to prevent pregnancy, HIV and STIs, so

the SAFEST choice is NOT to have sex" (DBE, 2021a, p.71). This is also shown in the lesson on condom use, which remarks that "the skill of using a condom is something you need to know BEFORE having sex, but you should still abstain from sex until you have achieved your other goals and are truly READY" (DBE, 2021a, p.88). Again, this creates fear and encourages abstinence.

The fear of disease is central to *the curriculum* and is combined with abstinence to erase the notion of sexual pleasure (Greslé-Favier, 2010). In an exercise where learners must write a letter to their future selves and select from various "healthy, positive behaviours", the list includes statements, such as "I will make the SAFEST choice and NOT have sex" (DBE, 2021b, p.16). The implication of such a statement leads learners to feel that engaging in sexual activity is not a safe choice, therefore, making this choice a dangerous one and encouraging abstinence. A further exercise in *the curriculum* requires learners to list "things that would help me to accomplish my goals or behaviours" and states the example of "abstaining from sex until I finish school" (DBE, 2021a, p.59). These attach the meaning that abstaining from sexual activity while at school is a way to accomplish goals and prevent damage to your future.

As discussed in the literature review, abstinence is encouraged in SE to prevent STIs and pregnancy (Greslé-Favier, 2010; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). From the examples provided by the text, significant importance is placed on abstinence being a safe choice, a healthy sexual behaviour, and the correct choice for learners of a certain age as it further intimidates learners to make this choice.

Repressing and Silencing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure

The second subtheme explores how sexual desire and pleasure have been repressed and silenced in *the curriculum*. The current study explores how *the curriculum* frames sexual desire and pleasure adversely and is predominantly silent on the topic. In an activity

explaining the development stages at different times of a learner's lifespan, and therefore the maturity of a person, one characteristic stated for the developmental age of a Grade 9 learner is the physical characteristic of "increased likelihood of acting on sexual desires" (DBE, 2021a, p.22). This characteristic is framed adversely as if acting on one's desires is harmful and damaging. This initial framing of acting on one's desires conveys a negative perception to learners that sexual desires are unfavourable.

Further, *the curriculum* denotes that "you must not have sex until you are older or feel that you are ready to become parents. In fact, this is true for all people, regardless of age" (DBE, 2021a, p.152). This statement illustrates that sex is all about parenthood and not pleasure. Similar to this finding, Bhana et al. (2019) established that the expression of young female desire is merely negotiated in the context of shame. In the lessons about having "one partner at a time", learners are provided reasons a person may have multiple concurrent sexual partners, including "men's and women's sexual desire is beyond their control" and "men and women need sexual variety and multiple partners" (DBE, 2021a, p.124). The phrasing of these reasons conveys unfavourable implications, implying sexual desire as negative—something a person cannot control; however, it is not expressed to suggest that having sexual desire is a positive aspect. It suggests that pursuing sexual diversity is likewise deemed negative. In the arguments against the reasons for having multiple, concurrent sexual partners, the text remarks that "both men and women can control their sexual desire. Most men and women do" and "other men or women can provide more pleasurable sex than a main partner can" (DBE, 2021a, p.124). Once again, the implication is that sexual desire needs to be controlled and not acted on.

Sexual relationships are portrayed as a distraction and, therefore, not advised throughout *the curriculum*. In an exercise about "things that would get in the way of accomplishing my goal or behaviours", one example is, "If I had sex with my

boyfriend/girlfriend, it would distract me" (DBE, 2021a, p.59). This statement implies that a romantic relationship, intimacy, and sexual activity are a distraction and hinder accomplishing goals. They are framed negatively. Teachers are required to:

> Remind your learners that before the need for a condom ever arises, they need to reflect on their personal values and goals and not let peer pressure or the "heat of the moment" pressure them in to having (unprotected) sex that might have negative consequences later. (DBE, 2021a, p.94)

This statement briefly acknowledges the concept of "heat of the moment" without providing further explanation or exploration, silencing the desires learners may experience while implying that experiencing pleasure and desire is negative. Similarly, research established that teachers reinforce the norm that young persons' sexual and romantic behaviours are immoral and can distract in the school environment (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Le Mat, 2017). Learners feel that the negative content is their only understanding of sexual activity and owing to the silence on these topics in *the curriculum*, they turn to other sources, such as pornography, to learn about pleasure and the expression of intimacy (Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Hodes & Gittings, 2019). Learners are encouraged to avoid romantic relationships and the emotions of pleasure associated with relationships to avoid distraction.

Sexual pleasure and desire are silenced in *the curriculum*. The literature confirms a silence in *the curriculum* on sexual desire (Bhana et al., 2019; Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Young et al., 2019). The study findings indicate that the only mention of positive sexual pleasure in *the curriculum* is through the explanation of lubricants. The exercise connotes that teachers should:

> Explain that some men like to put a drop or two of lubricant on the inside of the condom to increase pleasure and sensation. Also explain that lubrication can be used on the

> outside of the condom; one or both partners may prefer the sensation of sex with lubricant applied this way. (DBE, 2021a, p.97)

A further example where pleasure is mentioned for males is through the explanation of condom use. Teachers are requested to "explain that female condoms are just as effective as male condoms (if used correctly and consistently) and also have some advantages over male condoms, such as not reducing the male partner's sexual stimulation" (DBE, 2021a, p.98). One myth discussed in an activity is that wearing a condom "takes away the pleasure from sex – like eating a sweet with the paper on" (DBE, 2021a, p.99). Sexual pleasure is only discussed when encouraging contraception, aiming to encourage positive sexual behaviours to avoid negative consequences.

Similarly, Young et al. (2019) established that, when feminine desire is discussed, it is considered socially acceptable while reproducing a narrative of silencing sexual pleasure. Young et al. (2019) further emphasise how feminine sexuality and desire are silenced and denied in the school curricula. No positive education or messages exist regarding desire and pleasure. Roien et al. (2022, p.75) reveal that discourses on "pleasure and erogeneity" are side-lined in their analysed curriculum. *The curriculum* restricts the inclusion of sex-positive material, and if it occurs, it is frequently succeeded by content that emphasises the challenges and risks (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Roien et al., 2022).

As established in *the curriculum* analysed in this research project, the mention of sexual pleasure is presented through discourses of rationality without embracing experiences of sensuality, emotions, desire, and pleasure (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Roien et al., 2022). *The curriculum* does not refer to erogenous zones, sexual techniques, masturbation, orgasms, pleasure, and desire in any positive light. The silence on these topics corresponds to literature (Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Roien et al., 2022). This theme connects

to the theme of embarrassment and shame, as through the silencing of sexual pleasure, shame is amplified (Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Young et al., 2019).

Maintaining Sexual Innocence

This subtheme considers how *the curriculum* encourages the delay of sexual activity to preserve the sexual innocence of young persons. The lessons preserve sexual innocence by emphasising the age of a person and their sexual maturity through statements, such as "The age of first sex matters. The earlier a young person has sex, the greater their risk of HIV infection and unintended pregnancy" (DBE, 2021a, p.11). *The curriculum* states that:

> With greater awareness, Life Orientation and positive peer support, learners are more likely to be able to can delay sexual debut, resist unwanted sexual advances, and protect themselves from pregnancy and STIs if and when they chose to be sexually active. These lessons aim to decrease risky sexual behaviour among learners and to support them to make good decisions in relation to their sexual health. (DBE, 2021a, p.12)

The aim, therefore, encourages delaying sexual activity and the self-control to resist sexual advances. There is no mention of pleasure in the statement; the implication is that sexual activity needs to be avoided to protect oneself from the negative consequences that could arise. As explored in the literature review, the innocence of the youth seems preserved as *the curriculum* attempts to desexualise children (Bhana et al., 2019; Carboni & Bhana, 2019; Frizelle et al., 2013; Slovin, 2016). This is further supported by literature as Chappell (2016, p.405) outlines how sexual communication by parents and caregivers is dominated by "sexual secrecy and constructs of innocence". *The curriculum* perpetuates sexual innocence by remaining silent on sexual pleasure. The theme emphasises how the discourses preserve the sexual innocence of learners through the lessons.

Lack of Expression and Sexual Agency of Learners

This subtheme considers the lack of autonomy learners are afforded to regard their own sexual behaviour. By repressing sexual desire and pleasure to maintain sexual innocence and asexuality, *the curriculum* lacks the possibility of expression and free agency of learners. *The curriculum* describes the values and attitudes of the SLPs as follows:

> Designed to increase knowledge as well as to change and promote healthy behaviour. In order for learners to build their confidence and ability to make healthy decisions and act on them, it is important that knowledge is acquired together with positive values, attitudes and Life Orientation. On a personal level, your learners will be challenged to make positive life choices. (DBE, 2021a, p.14)

This initial message is not conveyed throughout *the curriculum*. Chappell (2016) established that despite attempting to recognise learners as autonomous, the discourses establish mechanisms of self-control through which individuals can govern their sexual behaviours; however, to remain aligned with the sexual truths they are taught. This eliminates their free agency and expression. Smith and Harrison (2013) established that the curriculum emphasises self-efficacy to encourage learners to delay their sexual debut; therefore, a stipulation is attached to self-efficacy in that it can be conducted only particular. In an activity *the curriculum* requires teachers to:

> Remind your learners that they wrote a letter to themselves at the start of this unit. Explain that in this activity they are going to read the letter they wrote to themselves and complete a similar letter to their parent(s) or the other adult(s) that they trust. (DBE, 2021a, p.203)

This insinuates that a learner owes an explanation to an adult or another person. If they write a letter explaining their sexual choices, why is it something that needs to be shared with another person? This removes the learners' right to free sexual agency. Contrary to this

activity, teachers are directed to "remind your learners that they learned about sexual consent during the last class and that all individuals have a right to decide, at any time, what they do and do not want to do sexually with their own bodies" (DBE, 2021a, p.175). In this lesson, more freedom is provided to learners. Why is liberty provided to a learner regarding consent but not sexual pleasure and reasons for engaging in sexual activity? Another example where free agency is implied:

> Every person has the right to control what happens to his or her body sexually. We exercise this right through the power to grant, and withdraw, sexual consent. You have the RIGHT to say NO to sex in ANY situation. (DBE, 2021b, p.74)

Once again, learners may only have a say over their sexual agency regarding the potential danger that may ensue. The focus on disease prevention has inevitably failed to allow young learners to articulate their own sexual agency (Bhana et al., 2019). Despite the attempt to provide learners free agency and encourage autonomy, *the curriculum*'s fundamental discourses and messages declare otherwise. Ezer et al. (2019b) established a necessity to explore the experiences of young learners to update the SE content to meet the varied needs of young learners. Contrary to the initial aim of *the curriculum*, sexual agency lacks afforded to learners. Their sexual autonomy is restricted to education on the negative consequences of sexual activity without information on sexual pleasure and desire.

Theme 4: Adherence to Societal Norms and Silencing Non-Normative Relationships and Sexualities

The current study finds that *the curriculum* adheres to the norms of society and remains focused on normative sexualities and relationships despite occasionally attempting to be inclusive. Monogamy and heteronormativity are prominent in *the curriculum*. This is owing to societal norms and cultural values endorsing monogamy and heterosexuality as the traditional and accepted forms of intimate and sexual relationships (Francis, 2019; Heckert,

2010; Shefer & Ngabaza, 2015). Alternative and non-normative sexualities, genders, and relationships are silenced within *the curriculum* or barely mentioned. Non-normative sexualities, genders and relationships may not be mentioned owing to stigma, discrimination, and an absence of apparent guidelines about this inclusivity (Bhana, 2014; Khau, 2012; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Slovin, 2016). The theme of "adherence to societal norms and silencing non-normative" is divided into two subthemes, namely "monogamy as a normative" and "heteronormativity".

Monogamy As a Normative

This subtheme explores how monogamy has been represented and depicted as the norm. *The curriculum* significantly emphasises monogamy as a relationship type and as a predominant and preferred model for learners to pursue in their sexual relationships. *The curriculum* dedicates a lesson to explain the importance of having "one partner at a time" (DBE, 2021a, p.116). It appears to be in line with universal support for marital monogamy (Amoateng & Heaton, 2012).

Monogamy has been defined as having one partner and is often used when a person is married and faithful to another individual (Carter & Perkeybile, 2018). Monogamy is a "long-term exclusive or committed relationship between two partners" (Haupert et al., 2017, p.425). When a person engages in a monogamous relationship, it traditionally means they remain monogamous sexually and emotionally. Monogamy is recognised as the norm and has been accepted as a natural fact (Heckert, 2010; Henrich et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2021).

This notion further developed through heterosexuality, recognised as natural and the predominant sexual orientation (Heckert, 2010). Monogamy is tied to patriarchal religion and compulsory heterosexuality and is legally enforced (Heckert, 2010; Henrich et al., 2012); however, it is contradictory to anthropological records, which remark that several human societies permitted men to have more than one wife (Henrich et al., 2012). Despite the change

from anthropological records, it is still recognised as the norm in most societies and seems to filter through as the norm within *the curriculum* analysed in this study.

The curriculum describes the difference between serial monogamy and concurrent sexual partners. It defines serial monogamy as "a succession of short monogamous relationships" and concurrent sexual partners as "having sex with more than one person, where there is an overlap between the sexual encounters with the different partners" (DBE, 2021a, p.122; DBE, 2021b, p.47). The lesson plan indicates that teachers should:

> Explain that individuals who do have sex must decide whether they will practice serial monogamy, i.e., choosing to have sex with only one partner at a time, or have concurrent sexual encounters with multiple partners, with overlaps between the different partners. (DBE, 2021a, p.122)

This discourse implies that learners have these two options only when engaging in sexual activity. Monogamy has been assumed to be normative for humans despite evidence of the normative nature of polygamy in various societies throughout history (Henrich et al., 2012; Kenyon et al., 2012). Learners are not further educated about other relationship types and are limited through these lesson plans.

A silence exists in *the curriculum* on other relationship types. *The curriculum* mentions "polygamy" in one paragraph and remarks that "in some cultures, polygamy is the norm" (DBE, 2021a, p.122). It further explains how polygamy can be "safe" in specific circumstances and how a person might engage in a polygamous relationship to prevent disease (DBE, 2021a, p.122); however, *the curriculum* is silent on other relationship types—other than the two sentences, it does not elaborate on polygamy.

Several individuals choose to engage in consensual, non-monogamous relationships, where partners openly agree to the possibility of other sexual or romantic relationships (Wood et al., 2021). In several African cultures, sexual relationships are likely to be arranged

concurrently (Amoateng & Heaton, 2012; Kenyon et al., 2012). The literature explains that polygamy remains more widely acceptable in southern Africa than in other parts of the world (Kenyon et al., 2012). This increases the interconnectedness of the sexual networks amongst people in a community (Kenyon et al., 2012). Despite this widely acceptable relationship type still present in African cultures and communities, *the curriculum* is silent on polygamy while encouraging monogamy.

One lesson within *the curriculum* focuses on the reasons for choosing monogamy. Learners are provided an activity to complete while responding to these questions: "Why young women choose to be faithful to one partner? Why do young men choose to be faithful to one partner? Why young women choose to have multiple partners, and why young men choose to have multiple partners?" (DBE, 2021a, p.123). The lesson further provides examples why a young person might be monogamous. These reasons include, but are not limited to:

> Less risk of contracting or transmitting HIV; less risk of contracting or transmitting other STIs; less risk of unintended pregnancy; greater love for a partner; greater trust in a partner; better communication about importance of keeping to set goals and staying protected; easier logistics (may live together or easily negotiate time together). (DBE, 2021a, p.123)

This activity uses the word "faithful" and implies that having more than one partner and being in a non-monogamous relationship may make a person unfaithful. This immediately creates a negative connotation for a non-monogamous relationship. The word "faithful" suggests that a learner should choose to be monogamous, as it is the right thing to do, and having multiple partners is not advised. This is further emphasised as *the curriculum* explains why a young learner may choose monogamy while emphasising the risks associated with the choice of non-monogamy. Using the words "faithful", "greater love", and "greater trust"

attach values to a monogamous relationship and suggest that a non-monogamous choice does not support these values. It further implies that "trust" and "love" are virtues attached to engaging in sex.

The lesson plan indicates reasons young people might present for having multiple partners and the counterarguments. Teachers are encouraged to discuss these with the learners, steering them towards monogamous relationships (DBE, 2021a). The reasons for having multiple concurrent sexual partners are listed as: "men's and women's sexual desire is beyond their control; men and women need sexual variety and multiple partners; men and women lose sexual desire with the same partner over time; and multiple partners can meet different needs" (DBE, 2021a, p.124). The text additionally remarks that the reason for having multiple concurrent sexual partners is that "multiple partners can be available at different times" (DBE, 2021a, p.124). The arguments against the reasons for having multiple, concurrent sexual partners are expressed as follows:

> Both men and women can control their sexual desire. Most men and women do. They can learn to avoid situations that might make it harder to be in control (e.g., drinking too much). It is possible to try out different things sexually and have variety with a faithful partner. If faithful partners communicate their needs to each other and care about each other, they can better meet each other needs. (DBE, 2021a, p.124)

The curriculum lists the arguments against the reasons for having multiple, concurrent sexual partners as follows:

> If faithful partners care about each other, they can strive to be together more often. Other men or women can provide more pleasurable sex than a main partner can. Having multiple partners makes you feel more "manly" or increases your sense of worth and self-esteem. People drink and then just act on their desires. An individual can acquire more material things if s/he has multiple partners. If faithful partners communicate their

> desires and likes and dislikes to each other and want to please each other, they can have more pleasurable sex. (DBE, 2021a, p.124)

The aforementioned reasons for having multiple concurrent partners are negative. The reasons listed for having more than one partner imply that a person lacks control or loses interest in their partner. There is no discussion, for example, around a person choosing a different relationship type or engaging in casual sex with multiple persons for pleasure. A person may engage in a non-monogamous relationship to explore their sexuality or to fulfil other needs; however, this is not the implication of the discourses within *the curriculum* (Wood et al., 2021). The quality of faithfulness has once again been attached to engaging in sexual activity, attaching negative implications for sexual activity outside of a monogamous relationship.

Monogamy is encouraged by emphasising faithfulness as a virtue to prevent the spread of disease within a community. *The curriculum* states that one of the core messages that it reinforces is for learners to "stay faithful to one partner at a time to protect yourself, your partner and your community" (DBE, 2021b, p.9). The "one partner at a time" lesson emphasises faithfulness and loyalty to one partner at a time to prevent disease risk (DBE, 2021a, p.118). It remarks that "a person who has sex outside an otherwise monogamous relationship is exposing his/her partner to the risk of STIs from the additional person and anyone in the additional person's 'sexual chain'" (DBE, 2021a p.118).

There is an emphasis on the risk involved in engaging in a non-monogamous relationship, which implies that having sex with more than one person will inevitably result in the spread of STIs, and the community will, therefore, be infected. The text remarks that "long-term, mutually monogamous relationships greatly reduce the risk of HIV acquisition" and that a monogamous relationship will keep a person safe from disease (DBE, 2021a, p.118). The lesson, therefore, accentuates the risk of having sex outside a monogamous

relationship. Kenyon et al. (2012) similarly established that having multiple partners increases the spread of HIV. This discourse attaches the risk of danger and disease to exploring a relationship that may be non-monogamous. This scare tactic was further discussed in the theme of "instilling fear through the emphasis on damage, disease and danger".

As a social constructionist theoretical approach was used, the researcher focused on deducing meaning from the language used within *the curriculum* and how monogamy is framed within the text. *The curriculum* emphasises having one partner at a time. It is silent on non-monogamous relationships, minimising non-monogamous relationships. It emphasises the societal norm of monogamous relationships despite the presence of non-monogamous relationship types within the African cultures in South Africa. The discourses refer to faithfulness while discussing monogamy and attaching positive virtues and values to monogamy; therefore, negative emphasis is on non-monogamy.

Heteronormativity

This subtheme considers the emphasis on heteronormativity and the silencing of non-normative sexualities. A literature review revealed a heteronormative discourse in various sexual health curricula, also present within the South African curriculum (Ezer et al., 2019b; Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015).

The focus on biological explanations related to sexual activity is consistently heteronormative. As indicated in the literature review, most terms used within the sexual health curriculum to explain sexual activity are heterosexual and refer to the negative consequences of sexual activity in heterosexual penetrative practices (Francis, 2019; Surette, 2019). An example of this in the data is included in the lesson where learners are taught about safer sex; the lesson directs learners to "identify choices you can make that will decrease the chances that you, or your female partners – if you are male – will become pregnant once you

choose to become sexually active" (DBE, 2021b, p.21). This example uses the biological explanations of sexual activity and pregnancy being a consequence of male and female sexual intercourse, eliciting a heteronormative discourse. The lessons are consistently biological; through the social constructionist lens, these explanations lean towards heteronormativity as a societal norm.

Heteronormativity is implied throughout the text, illustrated in this paragraph. *The curriculum* discusses sexual consent in a lesson (DBE, 2021b). It uses scenarios depicting real-life situations where consent is elicited. In all three scenarios in *the curriculum*, only males and females in a heterosexual relationship are used. This is depicted as follows:

> Beruti (17) has been going out with Ben (19) for about six months. Ben has told Beruti several times that he really wants to have sex with her, but only if she wants to. Beruti is unsure about having sex. She believes that other young women her age have sex with their boyfriends. She is worried that Ben will leave her if she does not, although Ben has never threatened to do so. The next time they are intimate, they have sex. (DBE, 2021b, p.70)

The scenarios only discuss sexual consent in heteronormative terms and, therefore, silence non-normative sexualities. A further scenario depicts a heterosexual relationship by maintaining "you have a friend of the opposite sex…" (DBE, 2021b, p.71). Same-sex couples are not used as examples within the data. The silence on non-normative sexualities misaligns with the law of South Africa that progressed to recognise same-sex marriages (McCormick, 2015). Correspondingly, the literature established that curricula across the globe are too heteronormative, focusing on heterosexual intercourse and examples (Ezer et al., 2019b; Roien et al., 2022). An omission of gender and sexuality-diverse content within curricula exists and, therefore, the normalisation of heterosexuality (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). These

examples in the data allude to a lack of recognition of diversity and non-normative sexualities and relationships.

Non-normative sexualities are silenced within *the curriculum*. This is in accordance with the observation in South African society that "gayness and the concomitant intimate partnerships and households are abnormal and un-African" (Adeagbo, 2018, p.166). In an assessment of *the curriculum*, the question directs: "What is the probability that a heterosexual couple will become pregnant during a year of unprotected sex?" (DBE, 2021b, p.23); therefore, there is a specific mention of heterosexual couples. The text is further silent on non-normative sexualities, and specifically homosexuality, as it does not discuss sexual activity between a same-sex couple throughout *the curriculum*. It is silent when discussing protective measures when engaging in sexual activity. One could assume that you might not need to use protection when engaging in same-sex sexual activity. The only hint towards the inclusion of non-normative sexualities is where the lesson requires a teacher to explain condom use during sexual activity and denotes "use your hand to represent a mouth, vagina or anus and briefly mime the penis model involved in sexual activity, keeping the model on the demonstration table" (DBE, 2021a, p.97). This explanation and potential mention of non-normative sexuality depend on whether the teacher includes this demonstration in their classroom. The data correlate with the findings in the literature review as learners are deprived of the opportunity to gain a full education, including other sexualities (Bhana, 2014; Khau, 2012; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Msibi, 2019). Bockting et al. (2005) discuss the lack of prevention education targeting the transgender community in the USA. This has similarities to *the curriculum* analysed, as there is no discussion about transgender sexuality in the data. Non-normative sexualities are, therefore, established to be silenced within *the curriculum* and educational spaces (Bhana, 2014; Ezer et al., 2019b; Msibi, 2019; Ullman, 2017).

The curriculum is contradictory, as it does not mention non-normative sexualities but remarks that diversity is to be respected. The South African Constitution prevents discrimination against non-normative sexualities and remarks that diversity should be respected (Adeagbo, 2018). *The curriculum* states that "these SLPs and the LO CAPS recognise that not all learners (or educators) will be heterosexual or identify with their assigned gender identity. The needs of all learners must be respected throughout all lessons" (DBE, 2021b, p.19); however, the only hint towards non-normative sexuality is when *the curriculum* remarks, "I will support women and other groups who have been subject to discrimination" (DBE, 2021b, p.96). Using the word "other" insinuates that non-normative sexuality is a type of deviance and, therefore, is framed in ways that account for difference (McCormick, 2015). The discourse implies that non-normative sexualities are sexualities that require tolerance owing to being different (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Roien et al., 2022). Despite their constitutional rights, homosexual persons are part of a stigmatised group that encounters discrimination (Adeagbo, 2018). Despite the aim to include diversity, the absence of mentioning non-normative sexualities disaffirms the aim of the sexual health education *curriculum*.

Despite the mention of diversity and the aim for inclusion, the discourses within *the curriculum* remain heteronormative. Lessons are structured in heterosexual terms, and the examples used in the SLPs use heterosexual couples. Non-normative sexualities are silenced as there is a lack of content surrounding non-normative sexualities within *the curriculum*. There is a lack of content within the text about non-normative sexualities, aligning with the findings in the literature review.

Chapter Conclusion

The sexual education *curriculum* has apparent messages about youth sexuality and sexual behaviour. As the aim of sexual health education in South Africa is to minimise risk

and the spread of disease (DBE, 2021b), scare tactics and fear are instilled through various lessons, using languages and fundamental discourses. The emphasis on the negative consequences of sexual behaviour is on the social and health challenges encountered in South Africa. The focus on educating learners on social and health issues is congruent with South Africa's socioeconomic concerns.

Concerning the aforementioned interrelated factors, the researcher observes that despite attempting to create and promote a supportive, collaborative learning environment to engage with sexual health at an age-appropriate level, the underlying discourses of *the curriculum* imply otherwise. The fundamental implication is fear-driven and restricts learners to content within the confines of societal norms. One method to deter learners from participating in sexual behaviour is by evoking shame and embarrassment. This is, therefore, rooted in their apprehension of transgressing societal moral boundaries and deviating from the promoted Christian ethos.

The curriculum adheres to societal norms by promoting monogamy and heteronormativity. Non-normative relationships and sexualities are silenced and not mentioned. This seems according to what society considers the "norm", and gender, sexuality, and relationships appear to be constructed according to normative standards. Adhering to the normative is an easier choice than engaging in debates in the classroom concerning non-normative and potential negative involvement from parents, legal guardians, and community members.

Fear is further instilled in the lessons with an emphasis on the danger and damage that can result from sexual behaviour, as negative consequences of engaging in sexual acts are put at the forefront of education. Through these lessons, sexual desire and pleasure are inevitably repressed and therefore, sexual innocence and asexuality are maintained and encouraged. Once again, it seems to result from the DBE attempting to combat the high rates of learner

pregnancy and HIV infection. Sexual communication by parents and caregivers is dominated by secrecy and is discussed within the confines of innocence (Chappell, 2016).

Teachers are, therefore, wary of deviating from societal standards as they fear being perceived as corrupting learners' innocence and contradicting what is taught at home (Khau, 2012). If teachers stray from the prescribed material and discuss, for example, sexual pleasure and desire silenced in *the curriculum*, they could be perceived as promoting sexual behaviour and engagement (Khau, 2012). The SE lesson plans provide explicit guidelines for teachers to adhere to within the classroom. Teachers' proficiency in effectively facilitating these lessons is a topic for further investigation as they must navigate explicit instructions in their lesson plans, parental involvement, societal norms, community values, and requests from learners in the classroom.

Summary and Conclusion

This section concludes the study by discussing the recommendations and ways to progress. The study's strengths and limitations are included.

Recommendations and a Way Forward

Based on the findings and previous research, various recommendations and ways forward for SE are indicated and improvement is required in the CSE in South Africa. Previous studies explored several ways forward (Holmes et al., 2020; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Shai et al., 2010; Smith & Harrison, 2013; Young et al., 2019). Recommendations include providing teachers with more training, focusing on the positive aspects of SE, and not simply reinforcing the negative consequences with scare tactics. This includes age-appropriate information on sexual desire and pleasure while considering revising the CSE *curriculum* to be more inclusive of non-normative genders, sexualities, and relationships.

One recommendation is adequate teacher training, increasing their competency to teach SE. Smith and Harrison (2013) suggest that teacher training interventions in SE should evaluate teachers' attitudes and perspectives regarding adolescent sexuality. They suggest that teachers' knowledge of HIV/AIDS and sexuality should be assessed to determine their competency in teaching the subject; only qualified teachers should be assigned to teach SE (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Smith & Harrison, 2013; Young et al., 2019). Teachers are vital in conveying the content of *the curriculum.* Upon analysing the discourses in *the curriculum*, it is clear they are often told what to say and do in the SLPs. Teachers have their own backgrounds, values, and perspectives, yet they are the "adults of authority in the school setting" (Smith & Harrison, 2013, p.78); therefore, they have the power to convey a message regardless of whether their values may oppose or reflect societal norms. Teachers' self-efficacy must be enhanced to improve their confidence, empowering

them to impart the SE (Mturi & Bechuke, 2019; Smith & Harrison, 2013). Alternatively, Mturi and Bechuke (2019) suggest inviting external professionals to present talks to learners and teach learners more inclusively.

As this study has indicated, fear is instilled through the emphasis on damage, disease, and danger. The CSE should address the "varied life experiences and sexuality" of learners and youth by not only focusing on the negative consequences of sexual activity but also on "healthy sexuality as a normal part of life" (Smith & Harrison, 2013, p.78). Smith and Harrison (2013) propose that if learners observe themselves as sexual beings, they may be more likely to engage in healthy and protective sexual behaviours. Further studies confirm that learners have the right to age-appropriate SE and acknowledge that they are sexual beings (Ezer et al., 2019b; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Shefer et al., 2015). This acknowledgement allows space for learners to be educated about sexual desire and pleasure (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). Learners have the right to be comprehensively educated about gender and sexuality diversity, empowering them with a better understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Shefer et al., 2015). This empowerment should then lead to the expression and sexual agency of adolescents. Learners should be taught that there is more to sexual activity than reproduction while allowing them to recognise themselves as sexual beings who can experience sexual desire and pleasure. Such proceedings might eliminate emotions of shame and embarrassment while allowing space for more open dialogues between learners, adults, and teachers.

It might benefit learners to be taught about healthy relationships and aspects of a relationship, such as communication, trust, and respect. Ezer et al. (2019b, p.598) conducted a study in Australia, where respondents indicated a need for more content on "social, emotional and relationship aspects of sexuality". By focusing on the social, emotional, and

relational aspects of a relationship or partnership, learners develop skills to engage in positive sexual behaviours. For example, *the curriculum* mentions partners conversing about using condoms in the lesson on "safer sex: using condoms" (DBE, 2021a, p.94). This example is one of the limited examples that encourages positive behaviour, such as communication, between two people who might engage in sexual activity. Holmes et al. (2020) established that developing open engagement and a strong relationship dynamic with a partner provides support when navigating prevention practices with the partner. Shai et al. (2010) established that less conflict in a relationship and higher levels of trust lead women to feel they have gender equity in a relationship; therefore, women feel they will be more likely to converse about condom use with a sexual partner. Healthy communication patterns are important when navigating sexual activity with a person (Holmes et al., 2020; Shai et al., 2010). A viable way forward would be to be more inclusive in teaching learners about healthy interpersonal skills, such as communication, respect, and trust, to allow learners to use these tools when engaging in sexual activity.

Based on the study findings, the CSE requires more diverse information, inclusive of non-normative genders, sexualities, and relationships. Mturi and Bechuke (2019) suggest that the DBE revise the current CSE and reconsider the design of SE in schools to be more effective. The current study agrees that the content of the CSE needs to be revised to enable the execution of the content adequately provided to learners. As illustrated in this study, the aim of the CSE dis-aligns with the construction of the discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships. The CSE needs to provide non-judgemental, accurate strategies and information to empower learners to make responsible decisions, while excluding eliciting shame and embarrassment and using scare tactics (Ezer et al., 2019b; Smith & Harrison, 2013).

Strengths and Limitations

The potential limitations of this study were that the data analysis process involved interpretation and subjective judgement from the researcher. Despite adherence to ethical considerations and reflexivity, different researchers may elicit diverse themes from the same data. The identified themes were also limited to the discourses in the literature review, as these were used as a lens through which the researcher explored *the curriculum*. Limited generalisability of the findings exists owing to the subjective nature of the study and data analysis process.

As the study explored the discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and relationships, it provided an understanding of the underlying meanings of the discourses in *the curriculum*. This illustrates how people may interpret and understand *the curriculum* distinctly. The intention of the CSE may not always be conveyed correctly. This study allows policymakers and teachers involved in developing and executing SE to know the various meanings people may derive from the content. This awareness is important to establish progress, more inclusive of non-normative genders, sexualities, and relationships, and to develop a more inclusive and comprehensive CSE.

Conclusion

This study explored gender, sexuality, and relationship discourses active in *the curriculum*. The study explored how gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed in *the curriculum* and the underlying meaning of these identified discourses. The following themes emerged from the critical thematic analysis: Theme 1: Eliciting Shame, Embarrassment, and Moral Transgression. The theme is divided into the subsequent subthemes: Embarrassment and Shame, Attachment of Values to Sexual Activity, and The Moral Transgression and Christian Ethos. Theme 2: Instilling Fear through the Emphasis on Damage, Disease, and Danger which is discussed in subthemes including: The Emphasis on

Risk and Danger, The Adverse Outcomes that Imply Damage, Damage in the Form of Teenage Pregnancy and Early Parenthood and Damage in the Form of Disease**.** and Damage to Your Goals, Potential, and Future. Theme 3: Repressing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure to Maintain Sexual Innocence and Encourage Asexuality is discussed through subthemes of: Encouraging Abstinence and Maintaining Asexuality, Repressing and Silencing Sexual Desire and Sexual Pleasure, Maintaining Sexual Innocence, and Lack of Expression and Sexual Agency of Learners. Theme 4: Adherence to Societal Norms and Silencing Non-Normative Relationships and Sexualities, divided into two subthemes, indicating: Monogamy As a Normative and Heteronormativity.

This study revealed a potential for improvement in *the curriculum*. Given the importance of SE in society, the study provides an understanding of the underlying discourses present in *the curriculum*. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for a more inclusive and comprehensive CSE.

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Appendices

Ethical Clearance Letter

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

30 September 2021

Miss Julia Michaelides (221095261)
School Of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear Miss Julia Michaelides,

Original application number: 00013828
Project title: A critical thematic analysis of discourses of gender, sexuality and relationships at play in the South African grade 9 Sexual Education Life Orientation curriculum.

Exemption from Ethics Review

In response to your application received on 10 Sept 2021 , your school has indicated that the protocol has been granted EXEMPTION FROM ETHICS REVIEW.

Any alteration/s to the exempted research protocol, e.g., Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment/modification prior to its implementation. The original exemption number must be cited.

For any changes that could result in potential risk, an ethics application including the proposed amendments must be submitted to the relevant UKZN Research Ethics Committee. The original exemption number must be cited.

In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE:
Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Prof Johannes John-Langba
Academic Leader Research
School Of Applied Human Sc

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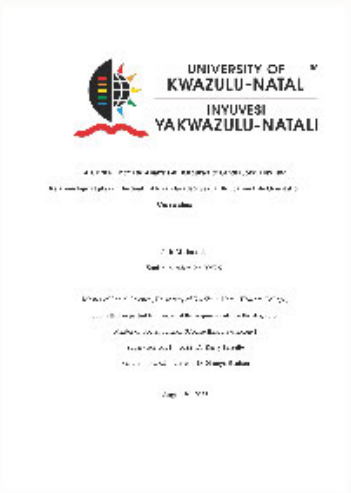

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