

# Teachers' professional identities in the context of school-based sexuality education in Uganda—a qualitative study

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## Abstract

School-based sexuality education makes teachers important gatekeepers of students' access to information about sexual and reproductive health and rights. The school setting has the potential to reach large numbers of students. However, teachers' professional identities may go beyond, differ from or even conflict with the qualities required of sexuality educators. To gain a better understanding of the role of professional identity in the delivery of school-based sexuality education, this study used cultural schema theory to study teachers' professional identities, and how these motivate them to provide sexuality education. In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 sexuality education teachers at secondary schools in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Sexuality education lessons were observed to validate the findings from the interviews. Results identified five cultural schemas of professional identity: (i) upholder of ethics and regulations; (ii) authority figure; (iii) counsellor and guide; (iv) role model; and (v) guardian. The study concludes that teachers' cultural schemas of professional identity motivate them to adhere to moral discourses of abstinence and sexual innocence. To support teachers in taking more comprehensive approaches to sexuality education, it is important that they receive adequate teacher training and support from

the Ugandan government, the school administration and the wider community.

## Introduction

In Uganda, teachers play an important role in the delivery of school-based sexuality education. In 2018, the Ugandan government launched a 'National Sexuality Education Framework'. Under this framework, sexuality education is expected to cover a range of topics, including sexual development, gender and relationships. However, because the framework is based on religious and cultural values of morality and virginity, it mainly promotes sexual abstinence, and, in accordance with Ugandan law, does not support sexual diversity [1]. When teachers provide school-based sexuality education, they become important gatekeepers of students' access to information about sexual and reproductive health. In Uganda, students have identified teachers as one of their main sources of information about sexual and reproductive health and rights [2]. In addition, UNESCO regards in-curricular school-based sexuality education provided by teachers as the most cost-effective, sustainable intervention for reaching large numbers of young people [3, 4].

However, teachers may face a number of barriers when teaching sexuality education that reduce the quality of the education provided. Some of these barriers are well known, such as institutional challenges related to large class size, lack of time and

teacher turnover; sociocultural and religious values and beliefs; and a perceived lack of support from the school administration and community members [5–14].

A less-explored barrier that teachers may encounter when teaching sexuality education is related to their professional identity [15]. Professional identity is ‘a complex and dynamic equilibrium where professional self-image is balanced with a variety of roles teachers feel that they have to play’ [16]. Within a particular school and community context, teachers may develop understandings of, and adjust their behaviour to, what it means to be a teacher, and how a teacher is supposed to provide sexuality education [17–19]. Teachers may develop special cultural schemas, or scripts, that prescribe ‘the appropriate [...] social roles they play, [...] and the sequence of actions and causal relations that apply’ [19]. These schemas may be the result of different sources of cultural knowledge, such as general cultural schemas in society; teachers’ reconstructed past experiences; teachers’ colleagues at school; and teachers’ education and training [20].

Research conducted in South Africa has shown that teachers often have to play several different roles when providing sexuality education, including that of a parent, a friend, a counsellor and a social worker [11, 21]. Teachers may feel uncomfortable about taking on these roles. They may, for example, believe that these roles are not part of their teaching responsibilities, or that they lack the training to counsel students. Furthermore, some teachers might believe that providing sexuality education undermines classroom discipline if, for instance, they try to create a friendly class environment needed for providing sexuality education. According to Ahmed et al. [6], many teachers think that providing sexuality education is immoral, and worry that discussing sex in the classroom will cause them to lose the respect of their students. The findings of these studies suggest that teachers’ professional identities may go beyond, differ from or even conflict with the qualities required of sexuality educators, as identified by UNESCO, such as ‘personal comfort discussing sexuality; ability to communicate with students; and

skill in the use of participatory learning methodologies’ [4].

Providing sexuality education is an affective and emotional undertaking in which teachers actively construct the information they share with students [17, 18, 22, 23]. Teachers may implicitly or explicitly focus on or avoid parts of the curriculum, and they might challenge or reproduce knowledge, such as hegemonic discourses on gender, virginity and heteronormativity [17, 21, 24]. Teachers may shape their professional identities based on such ideological discourses in schools, and they might need to use agency to resist or challenge such discourses when providing sexuality education [17, 18, 21].

This study aims to gain a better understanding of teachers’ professional identities in the context of providing school-based sexuality education in Uganda, and of how these identities motivate teachers to provide school-based sexuality education.

### Theoretical framework

Cognitive-anthropological cultural schema theory assumes that people have internal conceptual structures —so-called schemas— that allow them to identify objects and events. Schemas may include beliefs, perceptions and emotions [19, 25]. Cultural schema theory distinguishes between individual schemas and cultural schemas. A professional identity can be considered a cultural schema when its meaning is shared by a group of people, such as within the context of a school. At the same time, a professional identity can be specific to an individual, as the person’s cultural values and beliefs are mixed with their personal experiences and emotions [26, 27]. The theory assumes that schemas can act as goals that have motivational force because they are organized in a hierarchical way. For instance, teachers may be motivated to provide sexuality education because doing so is in line with their professional identity, and contributes to their own well-being [26, 28]. Thus, in this study, we use cultural schema theory in order to better understand the meaning of Ugandan teachers’ professional identities, and how these identities shape their reasoning for providing sexuality education.

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## Materials and Method

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### Participants and procedures

In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 sexuality education teachers from 16 secondary public ( $n = 7$ ) and private ( $n = 9$ ) schools in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and its surrounding districts Wakiso, Mukono and Butambala, between September and December 2011. The first teachers were recruited via three Ugandan non-governmental organizations that deliver sexuality education through extracurricular school clubs in secondary schools: two that aimed to deliver comprehensive sexuality education, and a third that provided faith-based abstinence-only education. Thereafter, a snowball technique and flyers in staff-rooms were used to recruit other teachers in the same or neighbouring schools. In most schools, two or three teachers volunteered to participate. The teachers were men ( $n = 18$ ) and women ( $n = 22$ ) aged 22–53 years who had different religious affiliations. Most of the participating teachers provided sexuality education as part of the curriculum, such as through the government's HIV prevention programme, PIASCY; or as part of biology or Christian religious education. Some of the teachers were providing sexuality education in extracurricular clubs or in their role as a school counsellor or warden. Some of the teachers had completed only a basic course on guidance and counselling as part of their teacher education; while others had received additional training, including training from non-governmental organizations on providing school-based HIV prevention or sexuality education, or from government workshops on teaching PIASCY (for more details, see [29]).

Based on the prior literature review, the semi-structured interview guide covered topics that were expected to be relevant for identifying schemas of providing sexuality education. However, the professional identities of teachers were inductively derived from the data, because the relevance of these identities for the provision of sexuality education was not anticipated. Inductive inferences made between interviews provided us with a better

understanding of this concept [30]. The in-depth interviews lasted 2:05 h on average. The interviews were conducted in English, as it is the official language of Uganda, and were digitally audio-recorded.

Sexuality education lessons were observed to validate the findings from the interviews. However, as these lessons were found to take place irregularly, 38 sexuality education lessons involving only 22 of the 40 participants were observed. The lesson observations lasted 1:13 h on average.

This research was approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology under file number SS 2626. The study also received ethical permission from the ethical clearance committee of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. After being informed about the content and aims of the study, the school administrations and participating teachers provided written informed consent for the study.

### Data analysis

The in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using MAXQDA version 10 software. Principles of grounded theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss, guided the analytical process, which had already started during data collection when the inductive inferences were being made. As grounded theory aims to build theory from data, this analytical approach was aligned with the inductive aim of the study to understand and further develop the concept of professional identity within the Ugandan context of providing sexuality education [31].

First, the data were coded using mainly inductive codes. Next, the analysis identified the content of the teachers' sexuality education messages, and the cultural schemas and personal experiences the teachers relied on to support their reasoning for teaching this content. The codes were then grouped, and the code families that were hypothesized to be related to cultural schemas of professional identity were identified. These codes were abstracted to five themes: (i) upholder of ethics and regulations; (ii) authority figure; (iii) counsellor and guide; (iv) role

model; and (v) guardian. The literature on cultural schema theory was then further examined in order to gain a better understanding of the findings, as the circular nature of the qualitative research cycle allowed [30, 32]. Consequently, code families were identified that were hypothesized to interact with the teachers' cultural schemas of professional identity: (i) the teachers' cultural schemas of the school setting or context; and (ii) their cultural schemas of students and their sexual citizenship. Finally, data from both the interviews and lesson observations were examined in order to understand how teachers used agency to navigate around cultural schemas of professional identity.

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## Results

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### Teacher as an 'upholder of ethics and regulations'

Most of the teachers shared the view that students need a good upbringing at home and at school. They argued that many parents are too busy or too shy to teach their children about sexuality, and that as traditional ways of teaching children about sexuality are disappearing, the need for teachers to provide sexuality education has increased: 'So you find that when they come to school, that is the only place where, if you can help them, at least give them the knowledge. [...] The need is there, they love it [...] they can really appreciate it' (Female, age 26).

Some of the participants had been assigned the task of providing sexuality education by their school administration, whereas others had initiated it themselves. Although all of the participants agreed that it is important for students to receive sexuality education, they did not all agree that it is a teacher's duty to provide it: 'Teacher's duty is to teach in class... and walk out. Most of the teachers know their jobs are to teach' (Female, age 40). Moreover, some participants said that they restrict their lessons to what is in the syllabus: 'I teach it because it is part of the [Christian religious education] syllabus. Otherwise, [...] I would not teach it' (Female, age 35).

The interviews indicated that the teachers tend to obey school administrators and to adhere quite

closely to the syllabus and school regulations. The teachers explained that government policies require the promotion of abstinence, and prohibit the promotion of condoms, including condom demonstrations, within schools. They reported that their school's regulations and syllabus are based on these policies, the school's religious affiliation, and socio-cultural beliefs about young people's sexuality. According to the teachers, schools strictly regulate students' conduct, expecting the students to be 'morally upright'. This means, for instance, that students are not allowed to have romantic or sexual relationships, carry condoms or attend school while pregnant. At the start of the term, boarding schools may examine girls for pregnancy and check students' property for illegal items, including condoms and other contraception.

The participants reported that as teachers, they feel obliged to teach students what is morally upright, to maintain the school's image, to obey the school's regulations, and to teach according to the syllabus, regardless of whether they personally agree with these regulations or lesson plans. The teachers said that following these rules is part of their professional 'code of conduct'—that is their ethics as a teacher. Some of these ethical guidelines are written policies, while others are unwritten cultural rules.

In explaining the importance of maintaining the school's image, one teacher said: 'If the school has discipline, then it is a marketing principle. If it doesn't have discipline, then you are condemned!' (Male, age 27). According to the teachers, a school that wants to protect its image is less likely to provide comprehensive sexuality education, because doing so could encourage the students to engage in 'immoral' behaviour, such as sexual activity.

Some of the teachers indicated that they want to be more open about sexuality in their sexuality education classes, but that they do not currently feel supported in doing so. Others said that they lack the knowledge and skills to provide sexuality education. In addition, some of the teachers reported that their ethics do not allow them to use obscene language, including words related to sexuality. For example, one teacher said she is worried that the students

would regard her as obscene for using such language:

Yes, there are times when they ask you something, when [...] you are ignorant about it, other times, you may be knowing... but you feel explaining it to them as a teacher, [...] it's like [...] you have gone against your professional code of conduct, other times you don't know the... the language, how to phrase it, such that it does not appear too obscene. (Female, age 35)

Moreover, some of the teachers said they are worried about losing their job because providing comprehensive sexuality education is against government and school policies.

Due to this feeling of vulnerability, most of the teachers reported that they prefer to stick to the contents of the syllabus. However, several of the teachers said they believe that the school syllabus does not provide the comprehensive sexuality education their students need. The teachers also have the option to provide sexuality education in extracurricular school clubs, and some of the teachers reported that they are able to discuss sexuality more freely in these school clubs. Although the teachers generally indicated that they want to adhere to the ethical guidelines for teachers, they also reported finding that some of these guidelines conflict. For instance, some of the teachers said they feel torn between providing students with complete and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and tailoring their teaching to the contents of the syllabus and school regulations.

### Teacher as an 'authority figure'

The teachers said they believe that their job provides them with respect, status and authority within the school: 'In schools, teachers are superior because they are the ones in authority, and the students have to respect authority. [...] The academic bit of it... lowers them [students] [...] and understand that this one must be [...] better than us' (Female, age 35). Several of the teachers said that they seek to maintain this authority over students by having clear

boundaries between 'us' (teachers) and 'them' (students)—although some also said they consider such boundaries deceptive:

So many of them [teachers]... have maintained that culture of... erm... keeping that distance... from the student. But I think it's also a deception really to, to begin thinking that you can keep these children young... and you know, innocent, and they should not speak anything! [...] They want to maintain that [...] hierarchy of respect. [...] Teachers are looked at as disciplinarians, they are very tough, they are very strict. [...] So one is just to command without any question, without any challenge. So you find that, eh, there is no relationship established. (Female, age 37)

It appears that this hierarchy is shaped by teachers' perceptions of students' levels of maturity, as determined not only by how old they are, but by their levels of physical and mental maturity, economic independence, academic attainment, morality, and sexual activity. Most of the teachers said they assume that students reach maturity at the age of 18, when they have finished secondary school; and that most of their students are sexually active at that age, but are sexually innocent while under age 18. They also said they believe that most of their students have never had sex, and that sexuality is a silenced topic in the students' lives. While most of the teachers acknowledged that some of their students are sexually active, as the following quote illustrates, they seemed to prefer to assume that their students know nothing about sex, because they feel uncomfortable with providing more comprehensive sexuality education:

Sometimes we live in denial, for example, [...] we can assume that... erm... a student is in Senior 1 and they know nothing about sex, we believe that these students are innocent [...]. So, we don't really go for it and talk to them in a... a more, in a serious way. [...] we just make hints. Yet it is serious [...] many of them are sexually active. [...] They need that information to, to... to back them

up [...]. But at school we tend to think that they are [...]. . . innocent. (Male, age 32)

Maintaining the hierarchy between teacher and student was important to many of the teachers interviewed: they wanted to be respected in society, but also they wanted students to have respectable older people in their lives who guide them and show them how to behave morally. Thus, how teachers understood their professional identity was interlinked with how they constructed their students. For instance, if the students are constructed as (sexually) innocent, a teacher can be the knowledgeable and experienced elder who gives them guidance.

Some of the teachers said they avoid discussing sexuality issues with students because they are afraid of losing the students' respect, and their authority. As the following quote shows, providing sexuality education can be seen as endangering a teacher's moral authority:

If you have to talk to a Form 1, huh? You have to be very careful about. . . what you say out because. . . behind there is integrity. Once somebody loses it as a teacher, then. . . you have virtually no control over this person. . . because you've lost the moral authority. [...]. So in a way we fight to maintain that integrity, to allow us chance to address them. . . on certain issues and earn their trust. . . (Male, age 30)

Some of the teachers reported consciously maintaining a clear boundary between themselves and their students, because they are afraid that friendly conversations with students could be misinterpreted, and lead to suspicions of inappropriate sexual relationships. In the quote below, a guidance counsellor reported feeling torn between his professional need to command respect as a teacher, and his desire to engage in sexual relationships with students—especially when he felt that students were openly flirting with him. He decided that if he were to engage in sexual relationships with students, it should be with students from other schools:

I made a resolution: never to have sex with anybody I teach. [...]. If I choose to [...]. then

I should do it in another school. [...] Once I stand before somebody, I always want to command respect before that. . . young girl [...]. I have sexual weaknesses, I should not expose them in the work place. That became my only guiding principle. But still, it did not help me because out there. . . I would still engage into sex relations with VARIOUS [with emphasis] other people, not necessarily those who were in school. (Male, age 31)

Some of the teachers reported using scare tactics to encourage abstinence when providing sexuality education, including teachers at boarding schools, as they are aware that using protection during sex is not an option because students are not allowed to have condoms:

So, in shorter perspective it works [using fear messages to make students abstain] because they are youngsters [...]. You like to scare them, [...] try to control them. [...] So what you do, [...] because you know they are not. . . having any protective tool [e.g. condoms], is to create a scare mood. (Male, age 27)

The use of such scare tactics and the drawing of clear boundaries between student and teacher seem to reflect an autocratic teaching style. The teachers said they found it difficult to help students feel safe in discussing issues of sexuality by putting themselves at the same level, because they believed that doing so would jeopardize their authority.

### **Teacher as a 'counsellor and guide'**

The teachers explained that childrearing is traditionally seen as a communal responsibility. Older community members are respected, and are supposed to guide young people into adulthood (for more information, see [29]). As teachers, the participants said they regard themselves as being among the older people in their students' lives, especially for students in boarding schools, who do not have their parents around. Accordingly, the teachers reported feeling that it is their role to make sure students are

behaving morally, to guide their conduct, and to create positive behaviour change:

My role basically is to form them. Hm? To help them change, behaviour change. That is my role. I do it in many ways. I talk to them. I've told you when we needed a reprimand, we do that... when it need counselling, we do that, we involve parents... [...] Because... you know, when you are dealing with discipline, changing somebody's behaviour is not simple. (Male, age 37)

Many of the teachers said they think that students need guidance from an older person, because students are minors who are not yet able to make their own decisions:

Those ones who are just becoming active, in sex matters, adolescence stage, is the most dangerous one. Because if the kid is not well guided, can land into many problems [...]. When you're guiding, you show them the bad, the problems, then you put them right. [...] You show them the proper ways [...] to live with this future. (Male, age 25)

Teachers may advise or counsel students, or they may discipline them to correct their behaviours. The teachers said they usually take a moral approach when providing guidance, and tell students which behaviours are considered right and wrong. Some also indicated that they take this moral approach when providing sexuality education. Only a few of the teachers reported taking a more facilitative approach in their teaching, such as the following teacher:

My role is to educate them the best that I can, and the choice is always theirs, [...] it's not me to be the moral soldier, you know? To guard them. [...] Luckily also my morals are a bit skewed up [chuckles], so it helps me... I, I loved wearing the miniskirts, so... it's hard for me to stand in class: 'Now, how do you dare dress like that!' [chuckles] [...] I don't take that moral high ground... (Female, age 29)

### Teacher as a 'role model'

The teachers said that they believe that to be able to advise their students, they have to be knowledgeable and experienced, and to act as a role model. As the following quote illustrates, teachers may be reluctant to share negative personal experiences with their students:

You know, if you shared your personal... experiences... the students maybe not like respect you or... there is a way they review you, and maybe they will say: 'Ah! If the teacher did it, I can also what... I can also do it'. But at the end of the day, really, we are not supposed to depict ourselves as if we are so holy... [...] We have also made mistakes as we grew up. (Female, age 37)

Some of the teachers said they feel bound to teach their students what is morally upright, even if they are not addressing the real issues the students are facing: 'As a teacher, you have to emphasise what is morally upright all the time. Even if, you yourself, you don't do it. To your students, you should give them a different scenario and a different picture' (Female, age 26).

### Teacher as a 'guardian'

The teachers said they believe that it is their role to protect students by controlling their sexual practices during school hours, whereas this is the parents' responsibility after school hours and during school holidays. While it appears that the teachers take this position in part because they want to protect the school's image and adhere to the school's regulations, it might also be related to their constructions of students—and especially female students—as vulnerable children in need of protection, and the fear that sexual activity will interfere with students' academic performance. The following quote illustrates how the perceived duty of having to control students' sexuality while they are in school encourages teachers to rely on restrictive, sex-discouraging and fear-based sexuality education messages that are intended to discourage students from engaging in sexual activity in the short term, but may hinder

the development of students' sexual agency in the long term:

Now, when, eh, I did give a talk to students how... they have a habit of standing in corners and then kissing and then, we call it coupling, boy and girl, huh? And I wanted to discourage them so I got... I talked about HPV, the cancer virus, and all that, and somehow I really scared them into thinking if you kiss, [...] you can get cancer and something like that! [chuckles] [...] [But] it's not fair to the students; we should not scare them into doing what we think is right. And another thing what I realised, after that talk, there could have been a change in the first week, but after, these kids are going to go back to their old ways, so... (Female, age 29)

### Using agency to navigate around cultural schemas of professional identity

In line with the interview findings, the teachers we observed in sexuality education lessons tended to use an autocratic teaching style, in which they adhered to their 'code of conduct', and took a moral approach when discussing the students' sexuality. However, in two instances, we observed teachers navigating around these sociocultural norms. During an in-curricular meeting, a teacher discussed masturbation, which the syllabus classifies as a sexual deviation. She used the presence of the European researcher [first author] to explain to the students that masturbation may be disapproved of in the Ugandan context, but accepted in other cultures. As such, she showed that masturbation as a practice is not intrinsically bad: 'Some communities support it, but [...] the Africans don't do what, support it. When you move to the [...] European nations, I think they support it [...] it depends on the morals and the culture of the different what, community' (Female, age 31).

The other instance took place in an extracurricular school meeting at a single-sex school. The female students wrote down questions and then discussed them as a group. This method enabled the

teacher to facilitate the discussion without fearing that she might jeopardize her authority. The following quote shows how she initiated an open, positive discussion about same-sex desires, while reading the question out loud: 'Is it so abnormal for a girl to have a crush on a fellow girl?' [...] Remember I had told you it is normal to have a crush on anyone these days. So do you want to respond?' (Female, age 53).

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## Discussion

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Our aim in this study was to gain a better understanding of teachers' professional identities in the context of school-based sexuality education in Uganda, and of how these identities motivate teachers to provide school-based sexuality education. Research conducted in South Africa showed that teachers often feel that they have to play the role of a parent, a friend, a counsellor and a social worker when providing sexuality education [11, 21]. Our findings support these results, and further show that in Uganda, teachers' cultural schemas of professional identity also consist of being an authority figure and an upholder of ethics and regulations. These findings are in line with earlier studies showing that teachers often see themselves as authority figures [23]; feel pressure to maintain discipline [11] and to serve as a role model for students [33]; and use an autocratic teaching style, which makes them feel they should be all-knowing and in control of their students [34].

Teachers' cultural schemas of students as innocent and vulnerable may reinforce their cultural schemas of their own professional identity as a guardian, a counsellor and a guide. This binary construction of teachers versus students is based on the assumption found in other studies as well that teachers are morally upright and children are innocent [5, 22, 35]. In line with research by Valentine [36, 37], the teachers in our study reported that they are held responsible for bringing up good, moral students and protecting them from risks by enforcing the school regulations. To fulfil their duty to control students' sexuality while they are in school, the



teachers tended to deliver restrictive, sex-discouraging and fear-based sexuality education messages.

Although the findings showed that the teachers' cultural schemas of professional identity motivated them to adhere to dominant moral discourses when providing sexuality education, ambivalence was also found, as some of the teachers acknowledged that their students are sexually active, and that there are sexual relationships between students and teachers. Some of the teachers said they believe that students need more comprehensive sexuality education, but that they are afraid to provide it because they are worried about losing their job if they do not adhere to the syllabus and school regulations. It appears that this feeling of vulnerability hindered the teachers from using their agency [17]. As we observed among the participants in the present study, previous studies have shown that same-sex-desiring teachers report feeling vulnerable and afraid of losing their job if their sexual identity is exposed. These teachers used their agency subtly to contribute to change without disclosing their sexual identity, such as by using inclusive language or by countering discrimination [33, 38].

Cultural schema theory describes several ways in which teachers internalize the conflict between adhering to their cultural schemas of professional identity and the perceived need for students to receive more comprehensive sexuality education [39]. It seems that most of the teachers in this study chose to pretend that their students are sexually innocent, and to reject the cultural schema of students as sexual agents. This mechanism enabled them to uphold their professional identity by teaching what is considered morally upright, without feeling conflicted that the information they are providing does not address the real issues their students are facing.

Teachers need agency to challenge rather than reinforce dominant discourses [18, 21]. In this study, some of the teachers did challenge the effectiveness of teaching abstinence only, observing that teachers who pretend that students are sexually innocent are in denial, or that they themselves do not take the moral high ground when providing sexuality education. Other teachers showed agency in navigating

around sociocultural norms by adopting a more learner-centred methodology in which they facilitated student discussions or showed how sexual practices are viewed differently in different cultures. This approach enabled them to avoid judging behaviours deemed unacceptable in the local culture.

While teachers can help students develop their sexual agency and promote their sexual and reproductive well-being, Uganda's restrictive school environment makes it difficult for teachers to play such a role. The current morality-based, abstinence-only 'National Sexuality Education Framework' directs the content of school-based sexuality education programmes and school regulations. Therefore, it is important to advocate for a national framework that is supportive of young people's sexual citizenship [40]. Moreover, to further encourage teachers to use their agency to develop more comprehensive approaches to sexuality education, it is important that they receive adequate teacher training and support from the school administration, and from the wider community.

Teacher training can help teachers adopt a more facilitative, learner-centred, participatory teaching style; and to address the dominant moral discourses that construct teachers' approaches to sexuality education [40]. For instance, teacher training could include sessions on self-reflection that challenge notions of 'childhood innocence' and the need for a moralistic, autocratic teaching style [5, 23, 35]. A supportive environment could be achieved through the integration of comprehensive sexuality education into broader interventions, such as the adoption of a 'whole-school approach' that includes the development of new school regulations that are supportive of students' sexual and reproductive health and rights. This approach involves not just the school, but parents, health organizations, and the wider community. These stakeholders are expected to work together to take ownership of the delivery of school-based sexuality education [41]. The introduction of such supportive regulations may alleviate teachers' feelings of vulnerability by reducing their fears of losing the respect of students, colleagues and parents when providing sexuality education.

Thus, the development of new regulations could lead to improvements in the delivery of sexuality education programmes.

### Study strengths and limitations

Our finding that professional identity is important in motivating teachers to provide sexuality education was not anticipated based on the prior literature review, but was inductively derived from the data collection process. Although professional identity came up indirectly in the initial interviews and was further explored in consecutive interviews, the topic could have been explored in more detail in the main data collection if it had been part of the interview guide from the start. This limitation was overcome in the validation study conducted in February 2013, during which the initial research participants were asked to reflect on the preliminary research findings, and a deeper understanding of the role of professional identity was obtained. Additional research is recommended to explore students' perspectives on teachers' professional identities, and the implications of these identities for the effective delivery of school-based sexuality education that is supportive of students' sexual citizenship.

### Conclusions

The aim of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the meaning of school-based sexuality education in Uganda by studying teachers' professional identities, and how these identities motivate them to provide school-based sexuality education. Five cultural schemas of professional identity were found: (i) upholder of ethics and regulations; (ii) authority figure; (iii) counsellor and guide; (iv) role model; and (v) guardian. We concluded that teachers' cultural schemas of professional identity motivated them to adhere to moral discourses of abstinence and sexual innocence. To support teachers in using more comprehensive approaches to sexuality education, it is important that they receive adequate teacher training and support from the school administration, and from the wider community. However, given that curricula

need to adhere to the restrictions imposed by the Ugandan 'National Sexuality Education Framework', teachers and school administrators in Uganda will continue to face challenges in delivering comprehensive sexuality education.

### Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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