Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania

van Reeuwijk, M.A.J.

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It is hard to talk about these issues with children. 

[Female guardian teacher of the primary school in rural Magu; about sexual education that she has to teach to her pupils]

### Sexual education and the Guardian programme

The boys and girls who participated in this research learned about sex mainly from their peers and sexual education lessons given as part of the science subject in school. The schools where we interviewed the children were also participating in the Guardian programme. This program was developed and tested by TANESA (Tanzanian Essential Strategies against AIDS) and was adopted by the Ministry of Education for the schools in Magu and by an NGO in Nyahali. In the Guardian programme one or two guardian teachers (mlezi) are elected by the pupils of the school who “have the task to train and provide health education and counseling services to pupils on issues they encounter in their daily life, especially problems related to sexual and reproductive health; to monitor and advice pupils on safe behaviour and practices” (TANESA Fact sheet Nr. 2, 2003). The students of these three schools were exposed to AIDS education and this became obvious through the dramas they performed. Every drama except the drama performed by the out of school youth in Jabali, included warnings for the consequences of unsafe sex. These dramas included one or more scenes where a teacher taught the children in class about HIV and AIDS. Although these children had access to a guardian teacher and were exposed to the sexual education lessons in their school curriculum, all the groups of children that participated in our research requested that we give them more information about HIV and AIDS. In particular, the students wanted additional information on male and female condoms and they asked for a ‘demonstration’. We decided to honor their request, despite the fact that the teachers requested at the beginning of our research that we not talk about condoms 60.

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60 Because of the children’s right to information and to the highest attainable standard of sexual health and because I believed many of them were sexually active or about to become sexually active in the near future, I decided not to honor the request of the teachers. For ethical considerations and justification see Chapter 2.
Conception of misconceptions

For the group of Standard 7 pupils of Nyahali, during my follow up visit in 2007 I decided to give a condom demonstration and to ask Hope, the young mother (21) who became pregnant in secondary to school (see previous chapter), to talk to this class about unwanted pregnancies. I was interested to see how her personal experience and openness would influence the transfer of information and how the boys and girls would respond to this. I decided to ask Hope because of her passionate declaration to me that she thought boys and girls should have more education on the use of condoms and the consequences of unsafe sex.

During Hope’s educational talk, my research assistant at that time, Christopher (early 20’s) who just finished secondary school, assisted her in answering some of the questions. Below is a transcription of a portion of this educational talk to illustrate where misconceptions come from and what kind of questions children raise if they have an opportunity to interact with the educator.

Hope’s educational talk

Hope: Back to our topic: you should not do sex when in primary school. I have another question for you: Are condoms the best protection against STD’s and unnecessary pregnancy?

Many: Yes!
Some: No!
Boy: A condom is not the best for protecting, because according to our science teacher, he told that in the condom there are small holes that can make HIV penetrate through and into the vagina.

Hope: So I need to know if you yourself believe this, that if this is so, why does it protect against pregnancy but not against HIV?

Boy: I disagree, it does not protect for 100% because that is what the science teacher has said (more children make agreeing sounds).

Second boy: If you say that a condom protects against HIV, why do so many people die with AIDS?

Hope: Do you have evidence that all these people were using condoms? And still died with HIV?

Boy: Yes! I learned from the radio station.

Hope: They did not say that they were using condoms. They are advising you to use because so many people are dying! I need to tell you that condoms will protect! I need to tell you the truth because today you are no longer children! You must always use a condom. Every time. If you wear a condom, when you remove the condom, you can see the fluid inside the condom. So why, if there are small holes, the fluid is still inside?

Second boy: There are small holes and HIV is smaller than the hole. Condoms cannot protect HIV but can protect from pregnancy [It seems they believe this is so because semen is bigger than HIV]
Hope: Where did you learn this?
Boy: From the science teacher. He did a research and found that condoms have holes compared to the HIV virus.

*Hope takes a condom and fills it with water to show it is impenetrable.*

Boy: You cannot compare water with the small holes in the condom; so I disagree with that example [*water particles are bigger than the presumed holes and bigger than the virus*].

Second boy: So you recommend us to have sex? To use condom? Or to stop anything?
Hope: It depends on your age. If you are convinced you need sex, you will have to use a condom.

Christopher: What do you think about water compared to sex fluid? If water cannot go through, sex fluid cannot pass either. Condoms protect, best is to use. The benefits of condoms, if you don’t use, you die! So my advice: best to use a condom. The science teacher said he did research?? Here in Tanzania there is no lab where you can see such a thing under a microscope, it’s too expensive! Also, before condoms are sold, they must have an agreement with the WHO, they have to give their permission to sell these condoms. So why does the teacher say that a condom is not safe?

Boy: When a condom bursts, so you can get HIV?
Hope: It’s not easy for a condom to burst. Maybe you are not wearing it correctly. Use it properly. But it is not easy for a condom to burst.

Chris: When wearing improperly then it can burst. That’s why you need to be careful and to follow the instructions on the package. Another reason why bursting is difficult: because of the *mazuta*; there is some oil on it.

Boy: What is the benefit of the dots on the condom? [*We accidentally had used a studded condom for the demonstration*]
Chris: It can provide stimulation to the girl when having sex.

(Student’s laugh)

Boy: Some people say that when you get circumcision it is more difficult to get HIV compared to those who are not circumcised. What are the reasons?
Hope: Not true, everyone can get HIV
Boy: It’s true!

Chris: It’s true when you get circumcised it is a little bit more difficult to get infected compared to uncircumcised. The reasons why is that the boy who is not circumcised has more skin and that skin is more easy to damage compared to the penis of a circumcised boy that skin has hardened and is less big and less easy to damage, so less prone to pass the virus. But it is better to use a condom anyway, whether you are circumcised or not.

Hope: So now I think you understand the importance of using a condom and how to use it.

Class: Yes!
Hope: Is there still someone who thinks that a condom does not protect against HIV?
Boys in class: Yes!!
Boy: I did not use a condom, but I’ve heard through the radio the importance of a condom, but mostly how it prevents pregnancy, not so much HIV. But I was late to use a condom [*he already had unsafe sex*].
The boys’ determined disbelief in the protective value of condoms was evident from their interaction with Hope and Christopher. It was impossible to convince them that condoms protected the user from HIV. Because the boys and girls claimed to have gotten this misinformation from the science teacher, who they obviously considered a trustworthy source of information, we confronted the teacher:

Me: When we spoke with the pupils of Standard 7 last week, we discovered that they firmly believe that condoms have little holes in them that are too small for semen to pass, but large enough for the HIV virus to go through. They told us this was taught to them by their science teacher. What is your opinion about this?
It’s true, condoms have small holes. Therefore they do not protect 100%. We learned this ourselves in a seminar with xxx (name of an international organization that runs AIDS awareness programs). And because they say that condoms do not protect 100%, people do not believe condoms anymore. And then you see that the pupils in the class will not agree with using a condom. But also in the science syllabus condoms are mentioned, but they do not talk in deep about this. They say it’s one of the ways to protect against HIV.
Me: I’m sorry but I find it difficult to believe that the people from xxx (name of the organization) would say condoms have holes. Who was giving those seminars?
It was done by volunteers who were recruited by xxx (name organization). It was the volunteers who were saying this.

It is disturbing to see how relatively easily miscommunication and misinformation can lead to a large group of people, and children in particular, not wanting to use condoms. The belief about holes in condoms might not be a sufficient reason to avoid their use. However, other perceptions and reasons for non-use such as reduction of pleasure, beliefs of side effects including infertility, difficulty or too expensive to purchase and symbolizing distrust, together with the holes in condoms idea might strengthen the aversion to using condoms. It is only when the children were allowed to interact and discuss the issues or when we asked for elaborate explanations of their decisions that we learned how their misconceptions arose. When Hope spoke to the children of Standard 7 she was asked to explain in detail how a condom prevents transmission and how it should be used:

You need a condom because during high speed sex the skin can tear and small lesions might occur through which the virus can be transferred. If you use a condom, these lesions do not happen and if they do, the condom separates the blood. It depends on the speed of the sex. When they have high speed you can get HIV from the skin cells and the blood. So with a condom you cannot damage the skin.
It appeared that Hope had put together various parts of condom information\(^{61}\) she had been given at educational talks she received from an NGO at her vocational training centre. When we prepared Hope for the session with the children this explanation had not come forward. Although her explanation was logical as lesions can occur and increase the risk of transmission, it ignored the fact that there is a possibility of HIV transmission through undamaged mucous membranes. Christopher had a similar idea about damaged surfaces as the causative factor of viral transmission and this was evident in his explanation of circumcision and the risk of HIV transmission. Christopher’s explanation was not incorrect but like Hope’s explanation it could have given the children the idea that transmission only occurs through damaged surfaces and that with careful, ‘slow’ sex no condom is required.

We learned during our research that boys and girls in the three schools know what HIV, AIDS and other STD’s are, and in general terms, how they are transmitted and how one can prevent this. However, the children were left with questions that we suspect are not addressed in the official sexual education they receive at school. This leads to confusion or to misconceptions. After Hope’s talk the children raised new questions:

- Many porn movies from Europe show people having sex without a condom. Why?
- People said that there is medicine that is increasing lifetime. How does it increase lifetime?
- Who should be taking responsibility to wear a condom? Girl or boy?
- Condoms are reducing pleasure. Why should we use it?
- Why are we told about condoms for girls, but can you not buy them in the shops?

But also:

- Can you become infertile because of masturbation?
- What do you advise me, can I have sex?

**Taboo and Guardian teachers**

Although the children are supposed to be able to discuss questions about sexual relations and risk with their guardian teachers, this did not seem to happen at the schools where we did our research. In anthropology this process of developing new ideas or uses from pre-existing ideas or uses is called **bricolage**.\(^{61}\)
research. We found that teachers and guardian teachers were strongly opposed to any sexual activity of their pupils and this resulted in the punishment of children who came to these teachers with questions or a request for help. According to the male guardian teacher in Nyahali the guardian teachers have three tasks:

First: They give advice to the pupils and listen to their problems. Second: To observe if the pupils break the rules. Third: To bring the pupil to the discipline committee if he or she has broken the rules.

The guardian teacher referred to rules that are written down on a piece of paper and are hanging on the wall of the teacher’s or headmaster’s office. One of these rules says: ‘it is forbidden to have sexual intercourse with primary school students’. Teachers interpret this rule as any behavior that might lead to sexual activity including courtship. After the guardian teacher’s initial explanation, he was eager to add that:

We would not kick the pupil out of school; he or she would just be whipped and maybe expelled for a period of time. And of course we would inform the parents of the pupil so that they could take appropriate action to discipline their child.

It should be mentioned that although corporal punishment is officially forbidden, it continues to be a common way of disciplining children and is part of normal everyday life at schools and many households in Tanzania. Children themselves approve of whipping as a way to punish bad behavior or mistakes. What they oppose is unfair or excessive corporal punishment or being hit, whipped or beaten in places other than the hands or buttocks. Students do not approach guardian teachers if they have questions, problems or are confused about the sexual information that is given to them in the school lessons because guardian teachers are so strongly against any sexual activity of pupils and punish them if they see any indication of sexual interest.

Me: Would you go to the guardian teacher if you have any questions or problems?

Juma in Nyahali: (laughs and shakes his head) … Hamma! [No!] You wouldn’t know what the results would be [whether he would get punished or whether the parents would be told].

Shilling in Magu town: No, students definitely don’t go there, because these teachers are too strict. They go to other students, like those who are close friends. But if your friend advises you wrong, you can end up in more trouble.
The guardians and other teachers were also of the opinion that openness about certain sexual issues should be restricted. The teacher responsible for sexual education in Nyahali said:

I am against sex education. The deeper you get into details, the more they want to have sex. They pay more attention in those lessons than at any other lesson. I have to tell them, but I would not give the details. And I separate the boys from the girls.

Many teachers shared this opinion. In the Nyahali school I was asked at the beginning of the research not to teach my informants sexual education and not to mention condoms: “you will encourage children to start having sex”.

Children complained about the teachers’ inhibition to speak more openly about sexual issues and reluctance to give more information. According to the students “Teachers do not explain in deep, only in overview”. Facts about conception and HIV/AIDS are given, but this is ‘one way traffic’ and children were scared to approach teachers with questions or problems, just as they were scared to talk about sexual issues with adults in general. This fear caused considerable problems for my research, as described in the methodological chapter. Girls who were involved in relationships especially did not want to participate in this research or chose to stop participation if they started to feel uncomfortable. According to the girls in Magu town:

Maybe they are scared that you may tell the teachers. But it’s not like that… we, we know you don’t have the intentions, you don’t have the intentions of telling a teacher. But them, they are thinking in their thoughts, they think, maybe if we tell them [my interpreter and me] they will tell the guardian teacher that we are doing these things.

The study by Mgalla et al. (1998) on the Guardian programme reports similar findings:

“… the views of the guardians are indicative of the conservative social context that prevails in the country. Most of the guardians and other teachers were opposed to any sexual activity on the part of pupils and had no problem with expelling pregnant school girls. […] … to most of them, giving advice on condoms was the same as encouraging a girl to be sexually active. […] They (the views and attitudes) might also explain why girls tended not to report certain problems more often, especially pregnancy, which the girls considered to be the single most important problem school girls had. […] Moreover, corporal punishment was often used, which might also have discouraged more extensive utilisation of guardians.” (p. 28)

The authors concluded: “These attitudes limit the potential of guardians to give information and advice on contraception and prevention of STDs and HIV” (p. 28). Our own findings illustrate that the taboo to discuss sexual issues with children and the idea that this might
encourage children to engage in sex seriously affects and limits the information that is taught to children in the three primary schools included in this research and likely elsewhere in Tanzania. Moreover, teachers can disseminate misinformation that the children think is reliable and truthful because of the authority of teachers. There can also be gaps left in the curriculum used in the school lessons that leads children to fill in these gaps with information from other sources or speculate about explanations. This has serious consequences for the children’s sexual behavior, especially in regard to their risk perception and use of contraceptives.

‘Bad’ teachers

Me: In case you could trust a teacher not to punish you and not to tell your parents, would you go to him or her if you had questions or problems?
Shilling: Maybe. It depends on the person. Whether he or she can be respected or not.

Shilling’s term ‘respected’ refers to the kind of behavior a teacher displays. In fact, what Shilling is saying is whether it is known or suspected that this person is having sexual relationships with fellow teachers or pupils. Sexual exploitation of schoolgirls is thought to be a common problem in educational institutions in Tanzania62 and one of the reasons the Guardian programme was developed: “to protect adolescent girls against sexual exploitation” and to make sexual abuse by teachers more difficult (Mgalla et al. 1998: 19). The presence of a guardian teacher should make it easier for girls to report harassment and sexual violence.

That sexual harassment of girls by male teachers is a common problem in schools in Tanzania as we discovered ourselves. All parents and caretakers we interviewed talked about their fear of ‘bad’ teachers. In personal interviews with children we were sometimes told about a teacher at the school who had a sexual relationship with a classmate or friend of the informant. But we never met girls who were involved with teachers themselves or who admitted involvement. When we asked the informants to ask their friend or classmate if she was willing to talk to us about her relationship with the teacher the informants reported that

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62 In the study performed by Mgalla et al. 37% of the 40 guardians in 40 schools in Magu and Mwanza districts suspected sexual relationships between male teaching staff and school girls and 19% said they had been informed about or discovered cases of sexual relationships between teachers and girls in their school (1998:24)
these girls were unwilling. Hearing about particular teachers from various independent
sources made us believe that the stories of these boys and girls were true even though they
were hard to prove. In the three schools where we did research we heard stories about girl
students involved with male teachers. This occurred even in the school in Magu town where
there was only one male teacher:

Within this school, it doesn't happen a lot, there's only one male teacher. But there are teachers
that come from training college and they come here for a trial, to gather experience; those are
the bad ones.
[FGD with girls in Magu town]

The girls in Magu town who said this could not tell us about a specific case or a schoolmate to
whom this had happened and the validity of this information could be doubted. In other
interviews the idea that such a story was gossip is less well founded. A girl in one of the
schools told us:

There are bad teachers in this school, I know because my friend told me she was approached
by one; the headmaster. But she refused. He is married and has children of the same age as we
are, how could she agree? The teacher was upset and punished her and made her jealous. She
didn’t report it to anyone because she is afraid to tell her parents, because they might not take
her serious or they will become angry. There is nothing we can do, the other teachers cannot
do anything about this either. In one case a girl told her parents and they went to the
headmaster and negotiated with him so that she could go to secondary school.
[Personal interview]

And another girl from the same school told us:

The headmaster and another teacher are bad. A girl told me that a teacher came to seduce her
and that she doesn't know what to say, if she should agree or refuse. Then others say that you
have to agree or else he will give you a hard time. If you refuse you are in a lot of trouble. You
will fail examinations. If you agree, you will graduate even if you behave badly. Teacher X
[name] is dating a girl in Standard 7. Standard 7 has a lot of extra classes [after normal school
hours], the girl knows she will have to stay until it's just the two of them. Then they go to the
office and have sex there.
[Personal interview]

We came to suspect the identity of this girl by listening to one of our tape recordings of a
group interview with the girls of this class (see methodological chapter). During this interview
girls told us stories about being approached. The girls in the group encouraged each other to
tell a story about being approached. What was not audible during class time, but what could

63 In one case I asked if an informant could ask her friend, who was unwilling to speak with us, to write her story
down for us with the promise that we would not try to find out who wrote it and would not show it to anyone
else. We often did essay writing exercises. But the girl refused any cooperation whatsoever.
be heard later on the tape was one girl in the back whispering to another: “I can’t tell my story, he will beat me up!” This was followed by her friend saying: “Teacher [name] is not going to beat you up, he’s not here, he won’t know”. Then the girl said: “Don’t say his name!”

In Kijiji school in rural Magu, Charlie thought there were teachers who were after schoolgirls. You can tell if the teacher sends you to a girl, that it is about love and not about something the girl did wrong in class or homework. You can see them taking a girl on the side.

Charlie’s schoolmate, 12-year-old Mayega said that some teachers give the impression that they are interested in a schoolgirl by calling over a favorite student to push their bicycles when they are walking home. But Mayega thought that the girls did not necessarily dislike it:

From what I see, it seems like the girls like it. Girls who live in a small town, they watch a lot of TV, they want to experience, try out. So if a teacher comes and asks, she says yes. Also because they have jobs and might be able to help out.

According to the informants there is not always pressure or force involved in these teacher–schoolgirl relationships. In those cases, the children say that the girl is looking for a profitable sexual relationship and therefore seeking someone with a job. It was said that to some girls, a teacher is not different from a shopkeeper. Informants referred to these girls with: “she has already grown up” (see Chapter Four). In other reports it was made clear to us that teachers do make use of their position to put pressure on girls. They do this by rewarding agreement to have sex with high marks, special attention, less punishment or a guarantee of passing exams while refusal is punished with the opposite. The general opinion of those who discussed the involvement of teachers with schoolgirls was that those teachers were ‘bad’ and should be punished. These boys and girls complained that teachers can get away with such behavior, because “it is hard for a pupil to take action on a teacher”. I asked if they could not tell the guardian teacher or other female teachers. They said that the female teachers already knew but did not do anything about it: “They know, but it’s a secret”. This too, turned out to be true.

When we returned to our research locations a year after the main research period, there was a new guardian teacher assigned in one of the schools. When I introduced myself to this new guardian teacher and explained about our research she was very interested. At one point she spontaneously mentioned that the headmaster of the school was having sex with his pupils. Shocked by this sudden openness I invited her for dinner later that week, away from the
school and the village. During the dinner we spoke more about the sexual relationships of the headmaster:

**Interview guardian teacher**

*Last week you mentioned that the headmaster is involved in sexual relationships with some of his pupils…*

I am a guardian teacher. Many girls approached me to report that the headmaster was approaching them.

*What did you do?*

Because it is the headmaster, I cannot warn him, I am afraid to warn him. I tell the pupils to talk about this issue at home with the parents. Then the mother could come to school and warn the headmaster. Most teachers are afraid of the headmaster because he can fire you.

*Did any of the parents ever come to school to warn the headmaster?*

The mother of this girl told the girl that she should tell the headmaster to stop or otherwise she would come to school herself. So this is what the girl told the headmaster. But he punished her for refusing and reporting.

*You mentioned the headmaster has two girls…?*

One is in Standard 6 and one is in Standard 7. When the one from Standard 7 passes examinations he has left the other one and then he chooses a new one in Standard 6.

*What kind of girls does the headmaster choose?*

He chooses big girls [*mature*], who are from a poor family background and are not very smart, who don't have a lot of confidence [*so those who have less power to refuse*].

*And there is nothing you can do?*

It's not only losing your job, you sacrifice your whole life - everything you have depends on that job. If you report this to court they might only warn him and nothing else happens.

*Are you the only one who knows about the sexual relationships the headmaster has with school pupils, or are there other teachers who know?*

All the teachers know! He even approaches female teachers! But he has a wife!

**What do the female teachers do?**

Some of them agree, some refuse, it depends.

**On what?**

He gives you an office; he gives you the best things if you agree. They agree because of what he has to offer. Some are afraid that they get transferred to a far away village. Or that he will send a bad report to the ministry of education about you.

*You said all the teachers know. Do you think that students know who is having a relationship with the headmaster?*

The students know who the headmaster is involved with. Some boys challenge the girl: “why do you take this teacher?!”
They bully her?
No, the girl will be popular in class, everybody wants to be her friend because than they can profit also – get less punishment, more freedom.

When I asked her why she decided to mention the headmaster’s involvement with girls to me, she said: “I am a good Christian. What this man is doing, is wrong. There is nothing I can do about it, but maybe if you write it down, people may become aware of what is happening in schools and then something can be done about it.” She herself suggested that the best solution might be to make sure all headmasters in Tanzania are female so that abuse and harassment of male teachers can be reported to someone who has more power than these men. I asked her permission to pass on her information to the NGO responsible for the Guardian programme her school and she agreed (see Chapter 2). The NGO is currently addressing the issue and contemplating how to lower the threshold that obviously exists for guardian teachers to directly inform the NGO.

Concluding remarks

The taboo in Tanzania that exists among teachers and adults in general, about the discussion of sexual issues with children limits the information and affects the quality of the information that is given to school children. As the examples in this chapter have demonstrated, unanswered questions, confusion or plain misinformation lead to speculations and misconceptions. This has serious consequences for risk perception and contraceptive use of primary school children and their current and future sexual behavior and health. The majority of guardian teachers in the schools where we did research had conservative views about children and sexual activity, which caused the children to refrain from approaching the teachers with questions or problems. Interventions like sexual education programs in primary schools are an important way of reaching large numbers of children. However, conservative views and teaching methods pose serious challenges and limitations on the implementation and effect of such interventions and unless closely monitored, may add to the conception of misconceptions and negative attitudes towards condoms. Furthermore, sexual education programs do not address the gender and power issues that seriously limit children’s ability to apply their knowledge and use condoms.
Although the Guardian programme has proven to be of some success in regard to targeting the sexual abuse and harassment of schoolgirls by teachers (Mgalla et al. 1998), the story of the guardian teacher sheds light on the difficulty and personal risk that is involved in reporting a headmaster or other teacher with authority. Feedback on such issues to the Ministry of Education, the sponsoring NGO, or perhaps an independent ombudsman, without the risk of losing a job or other repercussions is of utmost importance. Unfortunately sexual abuse by teachers will continue to be difficult to prove if children fear to report it, are not taken seriously or if the chance of conviction is small. Teachers have the ability to offer girls they want to have sex with favors, which may cause some schoolgirls to actively seek a relationship with a teacher, or the teacher may offer bribes to their parents. All of these actions complicate reporting. The findings from this research support findings from other research (Mgalla et al. 1998; Plummer et al. 2007) and perceptions of parents and caretakers that a sexual relationship between teachers and schoolgirls is indeed a major problem in schools in northwest Tanzania.