Sex Education in Nigeria: When Knowledge Conflicts with Cultural Values

Jude Mukoro*

Department of Educational Sciences, University of Leuven, Belgium
*Corresponding author: jumukoro@outlook.com

Abstract  Sex education consists of the two main elements of knowledge and value, since both aspects are fundamental to a good sex education [1]. This position resonates with that of Halstead and Reiss in their affirmation that sex education is a "value-laden activity" [2]. In an ideal case scenario, the knowledge and values which form the basis of sex education ought to be in harmony, and also support and complement each other instead of expressing contradictory positions. In other words, proven scientific facts and cultural practices that are communicated in sex education ought to be in sync with each other in order to prevent a disorganised or confusing sex education. Yet in reality, this is often not the case. This article engages with the problems which ensue when friction or disharmony between knowledge and values in sex education exist. An important aspect of this article is to demonstrate the distinction between facts and values, particularly when this occurs in sex education in the Nigerian context. Thereafter, several possible models of confronting these problems are analysed in order to discover their strengths and weaknesses. On this basis, conflict-aware sex education is advanced as a much better model of sex education in the light of these problems.

Keywords: sexuality education in Nigeria, knowledge and values in sexuality education; conflict-aware sexuality education


1. Introduction

Sex education, both in Nigeria and other parts of the world, provides a clear picture of the possible polarisation or conflict of knowledge and values in education. An attentive following of the discourse on sex education in Nigeria, (and by extension in most parts of the world) both at the academic level and the socio-political sphere, indicates that sex education, in itself, is situated within this conflict. This conflict constantly bombards and impacts it. Sex education appears to a child as being commanded simultaneously by both parents expressing dissimilar demands. One shouts “Respect knowledge!” and the other cries “Respect values!” One shouts “Follow the tunes of modern knowledge!” and the other shouts “We shall allow nothing to steal our culture from us!” In contrast, we see an entire variety of debates on sex education whose contents and approach are constantly set in between the conflicts or opposition of facts and cultural beliefs or practices. Consequently, in this opposition, sex education is often the collateral damage. To some extent, it can be claimed that a substantial number of debates relating to sex education, such as how to teach sex, as well as why, when, where and by whom sex education is taught to children, (particularly what to teach) can be recast in the tussle or friction between knowledge and culture. The continued practice of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria and other African countries is a good example of the gap between knowledge and culture.

A large stream of medical and scientific research has characterised “Female Genital Mutilation”, commonly referred to “Circumcision” in Nigeria as “a harmful practice involving the removal or alteration of parts of the female genitalia for non-therapeutic reasons” [3]. This has been recognised as an unhealthy practice, because infections from unsterilised cutting materials are often transmitted. Additionally, the unhealthy environments in which this practice is performed and the sometimes non-expert practitioners who coordinate these practices, increases the risk of those who undergo this practice being infected [4]. Yet this persists as a strong cultural practice supported by non-scientific arguments. One such argument is the belief that Female Genital Mutilation, by reducing the pleasure experienced by women during sexual intercourse, will in turn reduce promiscuity in women. According to Aji et al, research has proven otherwise, since “the reduced sexual pleasure associated with female genital mutilation could lead them into having multiple sex partners with the hope that sexual satisfaction will be achieved with one of them” [5].

In July 2016, the media was flooded with a story of a Malawian man who was paid to have sex with girls and women at different stages of their lives, from the beginning of puberty to widowhood, as a kind of ritual cleansing. The twist to this story is that the man is HIV positive and the girls are persuaded to continue this practice on the grounds of culture [6]. A simple reaction to this story is to dismiss it as a case of ignorance and superstition on the part of the Malawian tribe. However,
there is more to this than just superstition and ignorance. There is a force at play here, sustaining this practice, despite the known reasonable grounds that should engineer the discontinuation of such practice. This cultural force is a common value system shared by a community. This cultural force has the ability to continue to manifest itself as the preferred or default path of a society, even when new scientific discoveries expose their illogicality and sometimes their risks.

It is often difficult to see this distinction between what can be called knowledge on the one hand and what can be seen as values. This is because, in most cases, they are intertwined. The next section will try to expand on this distinction because it is fundamental for this discourse.

2. Knowledge and Values in Sex Education in Nigeria

The distinction made between knowledge and value in this article is a more in-depth fundamental one. This distinction may not be easily noticeable because knowledge and value are often intertwined. This is because what is considered to be knowledge is often culturally valuable. Additionally, what is valuable or culturally shared or preferred, is, to some extent, a kind of knowledge. Nevertheless, the distinction between knowledge and value in sex education is very real and no less consequential. For example, consider the European Expert Group on Sexuality Education's definition of sex education as an education that: aims to develop and strengthen the ability of children and young people to make conscious, satisfying, healthy and respectful choices regarding relationships, sexuality and emotional and physical health. Sex education does not encourage children and young people to have sex [7].

This definition of sex education combines elements of knowledge and value in almost every aspect. While the words "conscious", "healthy", "emotional and physical health" sketch realities that science has been able to articulate and, to some extent, normatively describe, the case is different for other words like "satisfying", and "choices". These words indicate some sort of preference rather than some kind of objective knowledge or standard that can be definitely assessed. Therefore, the above definition of sex education, read in a certain light, suggests that it aims to develop both intellectual and cultural competence regarding sex and sexuality in children and young people.

The concept of preference is an easier way to illustrate this distinction between knowledge and value. Preferences are expressed through preferred actions and practices and in a community, honoured and sustained cultural practices are often referred to as "culture" and "tradition". They often defended with the use of myths as in the case of Female Genital Mutilation as seen in the previous section. However, what is referred to as knowledge in this article is considerably different. This has to be factual and align with known best practices rather than with preferred practices. It does not appeal to the authority of untested myths or tradition and regards only evidence is its watchword. For example, consider nutrition. The fact that an individual prefers a certain diet does not necessarily entail that the same diet is healthy or even scientifically proven to be a healthy diet. Although it may have been shown to be unhealthy and dangerous for consumption, it is a diet that is sustained. From diet to educational policy, decisions and choices are not always based on knowledge or scientifically-endorsed practices but are sometimes the direct product of personal preference, based on various cultural values. These cultural values could be personal as well as communitarian.

The value aspect of sexuality encompasses areas that cannot be simply exhausted by scientific knowledge or facts. These areas are already culturally charged. For example, “issues of self-esteem, body image, healthy relationships, sexual orientation, sexual identity, gender, and confident decision making” [8]. These cultural or value-charged areas of sexuality are often omitted from sex education in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Despite this, education on the above aspects of sexuality can “help to increase confidence, foster inclusive and affirming attitudes of others, and provide a broader understanding of sexuality” [8].

It is helpful to realise that a comprehensive education on aspects of sexuality, such as body image or sexual identity, cannot be divorced from culture because these aspects of sexuality are culturally embedded. Even when a scientific approach is taken towards the exploration of some cultural realities around sex, such as rape and domestic violence, it is helpful to recognise their cultural embeddedness. It is also helpful to realise that culture and cultural institutions continue to impact sexuality. Additionally, many studies have demonstrated that religion has a significant influence on people’s sexuality [9]. Peers, family, societal mentors, celebrities, mass media, gender norms and various other socio-cultural institutions are all influencers of sexual conduct among young people [10]. In combination, these “can influence how individuals gain knowledge about sexual issues” [11]. Additionally, cultural stereotypes and narratives continue to influence and define how men and women view their bodies [12]. These narratives and stereotypes, even when they are expressed through pornography and media, continue to shape “adolescents’ sexual attitudes and sexual self-image” [12].

Sexuality is not only defined by what is known or scientifically/medically endorsed. It is also defined by perceptions and attitude towards what is known to be safer sex. According to Ndidi, having “negative perceptions and attitudes towards safer sex” increases the likelihood of engaging in unsafe sex [10]. This finding thwarts arguments that the adoption of safer sex by the young is mainly due to objectively measured economic status. It shows youths from low socioeconomic background would adopt safer sexual practices, even in poor conditions of life, if their internalised, self-reinforced standards and social norms are channelled towards “safer sexual behaviours” [10].

Furthermore, a study conducted by Oshi, Nakalema & Oshi shows that sex education in itself can be hindered by cultural values, even when scientific facts align in its defence. According to scholars, teachers “do not teach and are not willing to teach sex education because cultural and social norms forbid the open discussion of sex, particularly with young children. They indicated that fear of persecution by the parents and guardians of their
students, expulsion from their churches, losing their jobs and social ostracisation were constraints. However, they admitted that their students could possibly become infected with HIV through sexual intercourse” [13]. This means that although teachers recognise the benefits of sex education, at least from a scientific viewpoint, they are hindered from giving it to students by cultural constraints. Similar constraints are suffered by parents. Even when they recognise the importance of sharing knowledge of safe sex practices and other issues on sexuality with their children, parents find themselves not ‘culturally prepared’ to give sex education to them. This condition is aggravated by a kind of cultural conservatism among a significant portion of Nigerians that often expresses itself as an antagonistic poise towards any kind of world view or knowledge sharing that appear to oppose ‘tradition’ and could potentially distort it [14]. An example of such tradition is the culture of silence regarding sexuality. This culture frowns at any discussion of sex in a public place, either between adults or between adults and young ones. It is a culture that prefers sex to be a private matter, rather than to be discussed outside the boundaries of privacy.

Despite the culture of silence surrounding sexuality in Nigeria, there are well-documented cases of sexual activity among youths and adolescents. These activities sometimes extend beyond the typical sexual practices, familiar to most adults, to even include both “group sex and same-gender sex”, as well as sexual practices among very young teenagers [15]. Aji et al note that “studies from several parts of the country have reported a high level of sexual activity among unmarried adolescents of both sexes with a progressively decreasing age of debut, risky sexual practices, including unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners. Girls, most often, bear the consequences of early sexual activity in unwanted pregnancies, teenage births and abortions, often by quacks. Sexually transmitted diseases occur in both sexes and when inadequately treated, result in chronic reproductive tract infections and infertility” [5].

Therefore, in a context where sexual values are based on incorrect information or ignorance, especially in very conservative cultural contexts such as Nigeria, how should sex education be conducted? Some may be quick to suggest that sex education sets itself as a remedy to correct such values. While this path is noteworthy, it is at best problematic and also it is impossible in very traditional societies where people are prepared to literally kill others in defence of their values, which include the culture of silence regarding sexuality. It can only result in a fierce pedagogical battle between factual education and highly sensitive values, where the main casualty could even be sex education itself. The following sections explore three lesser problematic options. They are value-dominant sexuality education, knowledge-dominant sexuality education, and conciliatory sexuality education.

3. Knowledge-Dominant Sexuality Education

Whenever the terms “facts”, “scientific data”, “best practices”, “information” and “competence” are used in relation to sex education, the knowledge aspect of sex education is being invoked. Usually, in this context, knowledge is based on scientific and medical arguments. This kind of sex education that “relies on the authority of facts that cannot be refuted, and appear to lie outside of context. Additionally, they have the advantage of discourses on science, health, choice, and efficacy” [16]. This kind of sex education would argue against the privilege of culture or cultural sensitivity in sex education. Preferably, the rationalist poise of affirming the supremacy of reason and evidence-based information is assumed.

A major weakness in the knowledge-dominant sex education is the pretension to value neutrality. This is the concept that its findings and conclusions are not defined by any cultural values but by scientific truths and objective evidence. Perhaps one of the best rejoinders to this kind of thinking is offered by M.C. Dillon when he affirms that “the objectivity of science cannot be constituted as value neutrality. In the scientific study of sexuality, issues of morality cannot be deliberately ignored although the traditional language of morality will have to be radically revised. Genuine sexual literacy demands that sexuality be rewritten, reinscribed on the corpus mundi. This is the task of the sex critic: the task of remaking the world as a genuine work of art makes the world. It is the task of poiesis: the creative use of letters, not the proliferation of unauthentic discourse that perpetuates the problem by cloaking it with mere talk” [17].

The scientific study of sexuality cannot be value neutral because sexuality as the object of study is already immersed in cultural values. Sexuality, is certainly not, switch-on-off definite scientific reality. It is intertwined with deep socio-cultural structures. Additionally, sexuality is not an autonomous faculty as often construed, peer pressure, cultural orientations, gender conditioning, or even financial burdens which exert their influence on sexuality [18]. This is why the scientific study of sexuality usually aims to shape values, such as attempting to define ‘good’ sexual practices. Consequently, the highest neutrality a scientific stance to sexuality can claim to possess is not value neutrality but rather a prioritisation of some values over others. In reality this is implemented by the medicalisation or the transformation of sex education to sexual health education, where safer sex practices are taught or prioritised over other issues of sexuality.

For McKee, Watson & Dore, “safe-sex knowledge” does not immediately translate to safer sex practices and reduction of STDs. On this basis, they argued for a “culture-centred approach” which “reaches a target population first in order to understand their perspective on the issues” [19]. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and engage culture if sex education is to be effective. This can be done by “finding out the various sources young people use to discover different kinds of information on sexuality, and how those sources and kinds of information interact with each other” [19]. The argument made here is that sex education cannot transform a culture it does not understand. Without a proper study of the prevailing culture in the context in which they operate, sex educationists cannot know if they should or they can counter a culture. Sometimes, the culture itself can provide resources with which to argue for and promote
better sex practices. It is more helpful to use these resources than to create new ones and be concerned with ways to make them intelligible to the particular cultural context.

Studies have demonstrated significant constraints in behavioural change, despite contrary information and best practices. For example, socio-economic and cultural factors such as the financial needs of young girls and financial pressure on their parents resulting in proper parental and responsibility is jeopardised. As there is a dire need of money, peer pressure makes it very difficult to resist “teenage pregnancy, abortion and early marriage” [20]. We now know that when sex education is considered, no matter what is the agenda, a solely scientific approach may fail to deliver results. If the agenda is positive behavioural change, cultural aspects that feed the negative behaviours have to be encountered. Sex educators need to be aware that scientific knowledge alone cannot be entrusted with positive change in sexual practices because frequently “scientific information does not articulate with everyday practice” [19].

If the agenda is more about health awareness, sex educators need to be able to communicate their message through the aid of culture, particularly by using the correct language so that they do not result in incurring unnecessary resistance. Throughout history, scientists have often found themselves burnt up in the stakes of culture, not because they professed lies, but because their approach to the communication of truth often resulted in a disrespectful engagement with culture.

One of the main reasons why a knowledge-dominant approach to sexuality is often preferred is that it appears to be a better remedy against errors and incorrect assumptions. In contrast, it is important to recall that science, like culture, is not error proof, neither is it a perfect system of knowledge, but it is also a system that sometimes generates approximations and assumptions. Certain tenets regarded as scientific truths in one generation have, in another generation, been proven to be incorrect or incomplete positions or assessment of realities. Perhaps, a remark for those who argue for the dominance of knowledge/scientific/medical frameworks in sex education is the fact that knowledge or scientific concepts do not appropriate themselves. They are appropriated by cultural beings in different ways, with different cultural modalities and motivations. I refuse to name their position as knowledge or scientific sexuality education because of the inescapability of culture, even in purely scientific settings. The realistic height that could be attained there is the advantage of knowledge regarding the marginalisation of values or culture.

4. Value-Dominant Sexuality Education

Values are principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour; enduring beliefs about what is worthwhile; ideals for which one strives; broad standards by which particular beliefs and actions are judged to be good, right, desirable or worthy of respect [2].

School-based sex education provides a formal approach to socialising young people into behaviour reflecting the sexual norms and values of the most influential groups in a given society [21].

Whenever the terms “values”, “cultures”, “modesty”, “consent” and “respect”, are used with regard to sex education, the value aspect of sex education is being referenced. Cultural arguments such as religion and liberalism mainly appeal to the positions that are espoused. A value-dominant sex education is mainly undergirded by cultural narratives on sex and sexuality. Within this context, cultural narratives define the normative sexuality and delineate the forbidden layers of sexuality, since it is often in the value-cultural axis that the boundaries between those with mainstream and minority sexualities are defined. These boundaries are not merely theoretical but are of great consequence for children and youth. According to Roffman, “sexual minority youths are known to be at a greater risk of a variety of social, emotional, physical, and educational hardships” [22]. The awareness of the great cultural powers may at least help us to engage culture towards a more humane treatment of sexual minorities since “in many school communities, these behaviours are not even acknowledged, let alone addressed” [22].

There are many good aspects to a value-dominant sex education. One such aspect is that it highlights the importance of value to sex education. For Halstead and Reiss, without values “sexual fulfilment” may be measured “in terms of quantifiable experiences rather than in terms of fundamental and mutual human enrichment” [2]. The logic of this is that the saltiness or goodness of sexuality is sustained and salvaged by values.

A good aspect to a value dominant sex education is that it provides more opportunities for education to engage with culture proactively. The pedagogical poise here is not a dismissal of all things cultural in the pursuit of knowledge or transmission of findings. It is rather an attentiveness to the cultural that allows an engagement with issues of sexuality which lies outside the border of science or where science cannot exhaustively explore or illuminate such as gender roles, gender socialisation and expectation on sexuality. An example of this proactive engagement with culture is staying sensitive to cultural patterns that engender sexual practices or behaviour among young people and either promoting or demoting their influence through the lessons that are offered. One example of this cultural pattern in Nigerian societies is the preferred treatment “for the male child and to accord him certain privileges often to the exclusion of the female child. This leaves the female with little or no education and at a low socio-economic stratum with sex as the only bargaining tool” [5]. Another such cultural pattern applies in contexts where males see “sexual activity as central to their identity as males, while for a significant number of others, abstinence is a marker of proper manliness” [23]. The fact that high sexual activity could either be construed as manliness or the lack of unmanliness in different cultural contexts suggests that the cultural terrain is very pluralistic. This is why a proactive engagement of sex education with culture cannot afford to present a single message to everyone and in every sexual educational setting [23].

A weak aspect to a value-based sex education is that it can be embroiled in the scuffle between different value
systems. One such aspect is the liberal value system with the main premise that "sexually anything goes as long as it is in private, between consenting adults, and harms no one else" [24]. This could lead to a kind of relativism, without room for checks and balances or even firm personal moral standpoints. Values are usually plural and oppose each other. Therefore, a value-dominant approach towards sexuality has to grapple with the plurality of cultural values regarding sex and sexuality in the creation and execution of its sex education curriculum.

5. Conciliatory Sexuality Education

Several sex educationists have advocated the broadening of sex education beyond mere medical/scientific or cultural boundaries. According to Lamb, sex education is not just only concerned with medical subjects such as "anatomy, reproduction, disease or pregnancy prevention" [25]. For Lamb, sex education also has to a "include gender role socialisation with regard to interpersonal behaviour, the role and construction of physical pleasure in our lives, aspects of sexual deviance and a focus on fantasy as well as sexual behaviour" [25]. This conciliatory stance towards the divide between science and culture in sex education is often the diplomatic choice in most conservative societies such as Nigeria. This is the main approach applied by experts in the development of the Family Life/HIV Education Curriculum in Nigeria (the official sex education curriculum in Nigerian schools). This is because in their bid to avoid controversy and respect the cultural norms of some Nigerians, topics such as the use of condoms were omitted from the curriculum [26].

A conciliatory sexuality education has some good aspects. The recognition of the importance of both facts and culture occupies the chief position in sex education. When this recognition applies, sex education is not blinded by the extremes of culturalism and scientism. Culturalism is simply an over prioritisation of culture to the extent of that is affirmed as being the only way of knowing and being, while scientism is also an over prioritisation of science (evidence, logic, and verified information) to the extent that science is the only way of knowing and being. Both extremes universalise either culture or science and attempt to exclude the other.

However, a seamless reconciliation of facts and culture is only a version of sexuality that is sometimes different from life experience. A conciliatory sexuality education offers a reconciled version of sexuality such that aspects of realities are edited or presented in a way in which possible areas of conflict are omitted or explained away. Areas of conflict, however primordial they may be to the proper formation of students' sexuality are omitted. This is an approach that follows a major principle, extending to there being no conflict. The weakness of this approach is that areas of conflict are omitted.

Consider, for example, the study of abortion in a sexuality education class. It is possible to edit this study in the classroom so that areas of conflict are omitted. Abortion, in the Nigerian context, can simply be presented by the teacher as a harmful practice from a medical/scientific standpoint, and a bad practice from a cultural standpoint (especially in a culture where children are regarded as gifts from God, who must be accepted and nurtured no matter what the circumstances). This position, when shared by the teacher, can be applauded as a seamless reconciliation of both the scientific and cultural aspects of sexuality. Yet, this seamless reconciliation is its major weakness. This is because it does not prepare the students to tackle or confront circumstances where conflict is the dominant situation. It does not prepare students to make good decisions when they become pregnant from rape and they are left with precarious alternatives such as not opposing a culture that forbids abortion while still remaining true to that same culture which forbids rape and illegitimate children. It does not provide tools for students to navigate occasions where abortion is recommended from a medical standpoint because the pregnancy has been discovered to be a threat to the mother’s life.

6. Conflict-awared Sexuality Education

Sexuality is not solely a scientific/medical matter. Neither is it solely a cultural construction. It is a living reality that is highly problematised by conflicting information, varying ideological and value standpoints and different lived experiences. It is considerably more realistic to assume that there will always be differences, tensions, and conflicts in matters of sexuality. The acceptance of the perpetuity of difference in sexuality frees us from what I call a tension of coherence. A tension of coherence is the subtle pressure to present a coherent body of facts or information to students or learners. This is the subtle pressure to simplify and moderate degrees of difference so that lessons can easily be understood and students can progress without difficulty.

It is a noble intention of the sex educationist to be clearly understood and to present a message void of complexity. However, this noble intention, if not regulated, can stand in the way of preparing students to face the real world and tackle its complexity. At best, it can only prepare students to deal with an imagined world, much more simplified than its real form by a ‘compassionate’ teacher or educationist. The sex educationist has to be able to transcend the pressure to protect children from conflicts, especially the possible conflicts between facts and culture that smear sexuality.

Conflict-awared sex education is principally a commitment not to disregard conflict and complexity in sex education and, if need be, to highlight it. We cannot protect children and young adults from the conflicts of life and sexuality. We cannot tell them it is simple by giving them simple rules to deal with very simple circumstances. The concept of conflict should be present in a good sex education, in order to prepare students for how they will deal with conflict when they face it. It should clearly communicate to students that in the real world, some conflicts might not be easily resolved or even resolved at all, also that there will be tensions which could stubbornly linger, refusing and outstaying any attempts to suppress them. Therefore, a good sex education should prepare students for a world of conflicting sexualities, and the best way to do that is a conflict-awared sex education.
Conflict-aware sex education aims at developing in students the ability to appropriate knowledge, information, and positions properly, be they cultural or scientific, in real life situations. Perhaps, it is more important that the accumulation of scientific and cultural knowledge on sexuality is the ability to appropriate what is learned by real life situations. Therefore, how is the competence of appropriating what is learned in real life developed by conflict-aware sex education? Foremost, it is important to demonstrate that the aim of conflict-aware sexuality education is not to give a comprehensive coverage of all possible cases of conflict between facts and values in sexuality, neither to give conciliatory advice. This is not really possible, particularly in a classroom setting where time is limited in the learning process. Firstly, it proceeds by case studies which highlight the existence of conflict in any choice or decision, related to sexuality. Secondly, it demonstrates the plurality of available options in the case of conflict. Thirdly, it analyses thoroughly the number of possible options. Fourthly, it enables the making of a decision as to the course of action to be taken or the ability to follow one of the viable options as presented by the case study. This decision will determine the extent to which side of the spectrum of knowledge and culture will be prioritised. Fifthly, and most importantly, the ability to be self-critical of this decision, being aware of the inherent limitations of the choice that is made and being aware that there is a weak angle or a limitation to any choice.

Another good reason why conflict-aware sex education should be adopted is that, in addition to overcoming the polarities of culturalism and scientism, it also transcends the extremes of conservatism and liberalism. Why is this a good thing? It enables the assumption of each of these forms, when necessary, without becoming trapped by them. This allows the particularity of each situation to be well accepted rather than the prioritising of a few general principles. Additionally, it is because an extreme position is usually associated with a war-like stance towards the other extreme. It is usually blind to the spectrum of realities that connect areas that would otherwise be dismissed as antagonistic to each other. The resultant attitude from this awareness can only be a reduction of extreme and antagonistic reactions to different and increased levels of tolerance towards others with different sex cultures or differing scientific outlooks on sexuality.

Conflict-aware sex education can provide creative avenues for the discourse of sexuality in schools and public places where very conservative societies uphold the culture of silence regarding sexuality. Even in societies that seem to be very critical of sex education, there are helpful openings to proceed if we search carefully enough. Conflict-aware sex education can proceed from both cultural and scientific openings in discussion of sexuality in the classroom settings. For example, rather than espousing or promoting a particular outlook on sexuality, a conflict-aware sex education is able to present a particular outlook on sexuality independently and dissect that outlook to reveal the underlying conflicts it holds.

Consider for a moment the case-study of Female Genital Mutilation that is referred to earlier. For a conflict-aware sexuality educationist, the most important matter is not to resolve the cultural and scientific polarities around the issue of Female Genital Mutilation, but rather to expose them. The intention of exposing the conflicts around this issue is to highlight the fact that no matter what justification we hold for our sexual choices and decisions, there will be some kind of conflict around those choices and decisions. We can do better than to dismiss those who disagree with us as being ignorant and ill-informed. We can also do better than to see their mode of learning and justification, whether scientific or cultural, as being weak and unsatisfactory. We can, instead, choose to listen to the concerns of those in the opposing camps and see how we can best respond to their concerns. We can choose to acknowledge the conflicts around our positions and welcome the opportunities for self-reflection and critical engagements that these conflicts present.

7. Conclusion

Sexuality is one of the most complex aspects of humanity. Perhaps one of the major challenges that continues to confront sex educationists is how to proceed with the design of a curriculum or with the teaching of sex education in contexts where the facts they possess conflict with the values or cultural norms of the educational settings within which they must operate. This article demonstrates the reality and likelihood of this conflict. Thereafter several possible models of dealing with conflict are explored and compared in order to analyse their strengths and weaknesses with the intention of finding a greatly improved model that could be helpful to sex educationists. Sex educationists should not stultify or silence the conflicts between scientific facts and cultural positions on sexuality. They should, instead, reflect them and consequently prepare students to deal with and live with these conflicts, for they will always be there.

References


