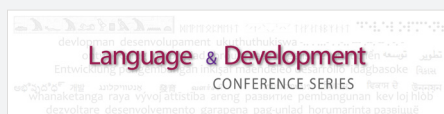


# Sustainable development and sexuality education: does the language inhibit youth in Mauritius?

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# Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between language of instruction and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) with the introduction of a sexuality education programme in all secondary schools in the Republic of Mauritius. In 2017, the Ministry of Education unexpectedly adopted the sexuality education programme of Catholic secondary schools as a national programme for state and private secondary schools<sup>1</sup> after it had been taught in Catholic secondary schools for three years. This programme is called *Education à l’Affectivité et La Sexualité*<sup>2</sup> (EAS) and was first introduced in 2014 by the Service Diocésain de l’Education Catholique (SeDEC) in 17 Catholic colleges on the island. The programme lays emphasis on affectivity, sexuality and relationship. Lower secondary students (Grades 7-9) study this programme during the ‘Life Skills’ teaching period once a week for 35 minutes. The prescribed textbook for the programme is called *Au Mystère de la Vie*<sup>3</sup> (Institut Cardinal Jean Margéot, 2017). The programme and the textbook, written in French, are based on the sexuality education curriculum of the organisation Centre de Liaison des Equipes de Recherche sur l’Amour et la Famille (CLER) based in France.

At the time when the Honourable Minister of Education, Mrs Leela Devi-Dookun Luchmun, informed SeDEC that it was going to introduce the Catholic programme in all schools, to some, this decision looked very much like a political move underpinned by ethnic politics. It came two years before General Elections that were

held in 2019 and it is a common feature in local politics to secure votes by targeting specific groups. In fact, the Catholic programme was an opportunity for the Ministry of Education to refute criticisms levelled at the inaction of the government to tackle problems of teenage pregnancy. This decision took some local observers aback because previous programmes on sexuality introduced by the Ministry of Education had met with strong opposition from non-Christian religious groups that claimed that sexuality programmes elaborated by the Ministry of Education were not respectful of their respective traditional values and were therefore inappropriate for young people. Therefore, by taking this decision to introduce a sexuality education programme underpinned by Catholic doctrine on sexuality in all schools, there were fears of some negative reactions. This did not happen. It might be because of the credibility and good repute of Catholic schools, in spite of being a minority religion, which has prompted government to adopt the catholic sexuality programme.

However, the problem remains about the use of French for teaching the EAS programme. When it was first presented to teachers of public schools, most of them seemed to expect that the programme would be in English. In fact, the use of French instead of English or Kreol Morisien to teach sexuality education looks like an incongruence because English is the official medium of instruction and Kreol is the main vernacular of more than 80 per cent of the population.

<sup>1</sup> Secondary education comprises 69 public schools known as ‘state secondary schools’ (SSS), which are owned by government and run by the Ministry of Education, and 101 private secondary schools. The latter consist of three broad categories, namely (i) 17 catholic secondary schools (ii) 61 private own schools, which are both grants-aided, and (iii) private fee -paying schools. The Private Secondary Education Authority (PSEA) is the regulatory body for all non-public schools. Catholic schools represent a key stakeholder and partner for policymakers on educational matters.

<sup>2</sup> My English translation: Education to Affectivity and Sexuality

<sup>3</sup> My English Translation: Mystery of Life

Curriculum developers and those in charge of teacher training at SeDEC put forward two reasons for not opting for English or Kreol. The first reason was that if sexuality education was delivered in English, there would be greater levels of difficulty of comprehension in terms of language and content among the students and it would be more of a formal class (for example, a biology class) than one where students might feel free to put questions. Therefore, French was chosen because it is easier for developing understanding, as students are more fluent in French than English. Second, it could have been viewed as vulgar if sexuality education was taught in Kreol Morisien as this language has only 'des gros mots' (foul language) when speaking of sexuality and not the 'bons mots' ('good words') that French language possesses. It was this that determined the use of French

would ensure better communication, a good level of comprehension and put both the teacher and the student at ease when speaking about such a delicate subject.

My main line of argument in this paper is that sexuality education is a key enabler for social and economic sustainable development. It gives young people the tools they need to have healthy lives and relationships (UN Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, 5). It could be estimated the choice for French is well motivated, but the reality is that it is not the language in which the majority of the Mauritian students speak of their sexuality. Owing to this reality, I conclude that the principle of mother tongue-based education should prevail and that the sexuality programme must be reviewed in the future and be conducted in Kreol Morisien.

## Ethnicity and language of instruction

The Republic of Mauritius lies in the southwest of the Indian Ocean. It comprises the main island, Mauritius, and its inhabited dependents, Rodrigues, Agalega and St Brandon as well as a number of outlying smaller islands. Mainland Mauritius has a total land area of 2,040km<sup>2</sup>. The total population of the Republic, including the islands of Rodrigues and Agalega, stands at 1,265,475 (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Young people between 10 and 24 years of age represent 27 per cent of the population. After successive periods of colonisation namely Dutch (1638–58; 1664–1710), French (1710–1810) and British (1810–1968), Mauritius gained independence in 1968 and became a Republic in 1992. It is a member of both the Commonwealth and the Francophonie. It has a written constitution which guarantees 'freedom of conscience, expression of assembly and

association and freedom to establish schools (Mauritius National Assembly, 2016:para.3a) The First Schedule to the Constitution (Mauritius National Assembly, 2016) established four-fold categorisation of the Mauritian population: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian and General Population. The composition of the population as a result of the colonial past has given rise to a multilingual society.

The Statistics Mauritius Report (2011) on languages spoken at home reveal that more people now speak Kreol language (86.5 per cent). In fact, out of every ten Mauritians, eight reported that they spoke only 'Creole' at home in 2011 as compared to seven in 2000. Only 3.6 per cent declared that they speak French at home. English is the official medium of instruction in education while it is the home language of only

0.4 per cent of speakers. This shows the linguistic divide between home and school. In fact, class explanations are mainly conducted in Kreol or French. From 1967 to 2010, the country has known several periods of intensified public advocacy campaigns for the official recognition of Kreol language in education by different activists. As a result, since 2012, Kreol Morisien has been introduced as an additional optional

language in primary education on a par with Asian and Arabic languages<sup>4</sup> (Harmon, 2018; 2017) following claims of linguistic and cultural rights of the Afro-Kreol Identity Affirmation movement (Ibid.). The following section will demonstrate that the choice of French or Kreol in sexuality education programmes might be an inhibiting factor for Mauritian youth if the question is not well considered or planned.

# The rationale for sexuality education

According to the World Health Organisation Fact sheet (2018), around 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years of age and 2.5 million girls under 16 years give birth annually, especially in developing regions such as several parts of Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In the case of Mauritius, the 2014 Contraceptive Prevalence Survey (Ministry of Health & Quality of Life, 2016) indicates that 12.1 per cent and 29.5 per cent of female adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years old in Mauritius and Rodrigues respectively were either already mothers or pregnant with a first child in the year 2014.

The Sex Education programme is delivered in primary and secondary schools by Action Familiale (AF) and the Mauritius Family Planning Welfare Association (MFPWA), which have different approaches to sex education. The MFPWA focuses more on reproductive health, contraceptives, prevention and the management of HIV and AIDS, and has been influential in national sex education programmes, whereas AF lays emphasis on natural family planning and management of an individual's sexuality. While in Catholic-faith schools, AF's approach is much appreciated by all parents, irrespective of their faith, the teaching of sex education in public schools has been criticised by some parents and

unions (Karghoo, 5 Plus Dimanche<sup>5</sup>). In 2008, the National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy and Action Plan for 2009–15 was adopted and it states that 'there is lack of accurate information and life skills-based education being provided to adolescents through institutions such as the family, the educational system and the community in general' (Ministry of Health & Quality of Life, 2008:15).

In 2010, the then Minister of Education, the Honourable Bunwaree, stated that at the secondary level, sex education would be integrated but this time across the curriculum, particularly in subjects like Health and Physical Education, Integrated Science and Biology. New curricular materials were being developed to incorporate a substantial element of sex education as from entry in the first year of secondary including issues related to communicable diseases like sexually transmitted infections. Components of sex education were integrated in the Teacher Training Programme conducted by the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), which is in charge of teacher training at national level. In reply to a Parliamentary Question on sex education by the then Honourable Member of Parliament Mrs

<sup>4</sup> These languages are officially classified into two groups, namely (i) Asian comprising Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Urdu, Telegu and Modern Chinese, and (ii) Arabic. They are strong ethnic markers associated with respective ethnic groups.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.5plus.mu/node/12772>

Arianne Navarre-Marie, the former Minister of Education, Honourable Bunwaree replied that 'given the sensitive nature of the subject [as perceived in some quarters], the Ministry believes it would be proper to set up a National Advisory Committee that would have a wide membership to monitor the implementation of the Programme in a holistic manner' (Bunwaree, 2010). By 2015, the new Minister of Education, Honourable Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, brought a major reform in education with the Nine-year Basic Continuous Education (NCF). In terms of subjects, the NCF recommends sexuality education at both primary and secondary levels as a cross-curricular area, which is defined as follows:

*Cross-curricular areas enrich the curriculum without overloading it and reinforce the learning areas to consolidate the social, personal, physical and cognitive development of ALL learners. Under the overarching principle of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the key areas cutting across all subject disciplines include Life Skills, Intercultural Education and Sexuality Education. (Mauritius Institute of Education, 2015:30)*

In 2016, the Ministry of Education took cognisance of a sex education programme, which was elaborated for secondary schools by the MIE. The programme covered six themes: sexual relations, values, culture, physical development, sexual behaviour and reproductive health. The MIE proposed that Biology or Home Economics teachers would deliver the sex education programme. Several stakeholders in education expressed dissatisfaction towards the programme and the Minister finally turned to SeDEC for its programme. This dissatisfaction was further enhanced when the Annual Report of the Ombudperson for Children Office (2017–18:253) recommended a more holistic approach to sexuality education.

In fact, there are several debates about the type of education to be given when it comes to talk about sexuality with youth who are still at school and distinction is also made about the age bracket. The literature in this field presents the subject as a taboo (Mohamed and Mutalip, 2012), a programme underpinned by religious world views (Reiss, 1998; Halstead, 1997) and of

major concern for youth development (Allen, 2005). Abu and Akerele (2006:43) sum up the different perspectives on sex education by making a clear distinction between 'sex' and 'sexuality' as follows: 'sex is something you do, and sexuality is who you are'. So, in this paper, I use the term 'sexuality education' instead of 'sex education' as the former refers to the place of sex in the life of a person and its function in the development of young people who are still in their secondary school years, whereas 'sex education' limits itself to the biological or physiological dimension of sexuality. The UNESCO report (2017) outlines the different aspects that need to be taken when elaborating a programme for sexuality education:

*There is an increasing body of evidence underpinning arguments about the need for a curriculum in sexuality education programmes and their effectiveness in terms of improving knowledge and some reported behaviours. However, there is less clarity about how to implement these programmes and how to scale them up in diverse contexts. To achieve the goals mentioned above, good quality sexuality education needs to be delivered at scale on a sustained basis. It needs to become institutionalised within national systems of education. (UNESCO, 2015:14)*

The report points out the importance of taking into account 'diverse contexts' when elaborating and implementing any sexuality education programme. It also states that it should be delivered 'on a sustained basis' and become 'institutionalised within national education systems' (UNESCO, 2015:14). Even if we may have strong reservations that the EAS programme is in French and not in Kreol, it is certainly in a good position to become a national programme for sexuality education as the programme enters its fourth year of elaboration in 2020. The new textbooks *Au Mystère de la Vie* for Grade 10 and Grade 11 were launched on 28 October 2020.

# Educating for Affectivity and Sexuality

The 'Education à l'Affectivité et la Sexualité' (EAS) programme was introduced in 2014 in 17 Catholic secondary schools. Curriculum development, textbooks and teacher training were conducted with the assistance of trainers from the French organisation Centre de Liaison des Équipes de Recherche sur l'amour et la famille (CLER) whose vision of sexuality is close to the Catholic doctrine. This organisation was founded in 1962, re-grouping several associations in different regions of France that were working on natural family planning. Since then, the CLER has also been involved in sexuality education for youth at school level with trainers known as éducateurs à la vie (Educators to life). Its programme is called éducation affective, relationnelle et sexuelle (education to affectivity, relationship and sexuality) based on the notion of human love and sexuality. The Mauritian programme comprises a Teacher Guide called Parler Affectivité et Sexualité aux Jeunes<sup>6</sup> (PASA) plus the students' textbooks for Grades 7, 8 and 9. Each grade has a central theme namely Le Contrat/The contract (Grade 7), Mieux se connaître soi-même/le commencement de mon histoire/Knowing myself better/the beginning of my story (Grade 8) and L'estime de soi, Aimer à l'adolescence/Self-esteem, to love during adolescence (Grade 9).

I have analysed the theme for Grade 7, which is Le Contrat (The Contract) and the six lessons that are on the programme for this age group (12 years old). These lessons are fundamental in sexuality education for adolescents. Le Contrat (aims at making the student understand that he or she gives himself or herself certain rules related to trust and confidentiality, respect for others and becoming a responsible person when following the EAS programme. The six lessons are as follows:

**Lesson 1:** Qui suis-je (Who am I?). This lesson leads the student to reflect on the conditions for a decision to be good for oneself and others. The student is invited to examine 'my drive and feelings', 'my drive, feelings and reason' and 'my feelings only' in sequence.

**Lesson 2:** La sexualité, c'est quoi? (What is sexuality?). This lesson lets the student understand that sexuality is about the sexual organs, that men and women are different but complementary, and that there is sexual attraction between boys and girls.

**Lesson 3:** Anatomie et Physiologie – Homme et Femme (Anatomy and Physiology – Man and Woman). This lesson introduces the student to spermatozoon, the ovum and human fertilisation. They learn that men and women are fertile from the age of puberty until the end of their lives and discover that the spermatozoon determines the sex of the child.

**Lesson 4:** La puberté (Puberty). This lesson lets the student understand that the brain stimulates human sexual organs; that hormones cause changes in the physical growth of boys and girls and that all boys and girls live the hormonal changes in the same way.

**Lesson 5:** Le VIH/SIDA (HIV-AIDS). This lesson lets the student discover that HIV-AIDS can be transmitted in the following situations: sexual intercourse, mother to the foetus and sharing of syringes. The students also learn that the best ways for prevention against HIV-AIDS are to use condoms, contraceptive pills, abstinence and being faithful to each other in a couple.

**Lesson 6:** La Famille (The Family). This lesson lets the student realise that there is harmony in a family when there is mutual respect, each one does something when he or she wants and when one opens to others.

<sup>6</sup> My English translation: Speaking affectivity and sexuality with youth.



The above lessons are essential in the early stage of adolescence for the student to understand his or her own affectivity, sexuality and relationship with others. The problem is that the lessons are in French and French is spoken

as home language by 3.6 per cent of the population (Statistics Mauritius, Population Census, Main results, 2011) This leads us to raise the question of the language of instruction in sexuality education.

# Discussion

## About vulgarity

It is interesting to note that the choice for French by Catholic education for the teaching of EAS was considered self-evident. It was not a choice. It was imposed. It could not be otherwise because other sexuality education programmes in the past were in French. Sexuality education has always been elaborated by church people who are mainly urban middle-class Catholics and who are traditionally French speaking and Francophile. The Catholic church was established by French missionaries during French colonisation in the 18th century. A century later when the country became a British colony, attempts by the British Colonial Office at converting the population into Anglicans (known as anglicanisation) and making English the official language (known as anglicisation) were met with strong resistance by the descendants of the French settlers to preserve their language, culture and religion.

When the British imposed that only Catholic missionaries from the United Kingdom could settle in Mauritius, the church tactfully looked for Irish missionaries who were French speaking. In the 20th century when the Vatican II reform encouraged local churches to use the vernacular instead of Latin for the liturgy and other ceremonies, it was French that was chosen, and not Kreol, by the church in Mauritius despite the majority of Catholics being of the Creole ethnic group and Kreol Creole speaking. By the end of the 1990s, Kreol started to gain ground in the church. From 2005, Catholic education has been instrumental through a mother tongue-based literacy and numeracy programme alongside

multilingualism in influencing policymakers to introduce Kreol Morisien as an optional subject in primary and secondary schools. Thus, all primary schools and secondary schools have offered Kreol Morisien as an optional language subject since 2012 and 2017 respectively. However, French still remains the language of prestige for the middle class and Kreol language speakers. This explains partly how Kreol was not considered at the inception stage of the project, partly owing to the argument of 'vulgarity'.

Addressing the notion of 'vulgarity' in the language-teaching classroom through the possible prohibition of the use of slang and colloquialisms, Fein (2011:98) starts from the definition of the Latin of 'vulgarity' ('vulgaris') meaning 'common, ordinary' and 'of or pertaining to the common people'. Fein (2011) argues that it is the responsibility of teachers to set the basic standards for acceptable language use. At the same time, schools must allow the language of the youth to enter the class to enable a better expression of feelings. Giving examples like French word 'pute' (whore) or 'punaise' (expression often used by children in a conversation), Fein (Ibid.) argues that 'foul language' is a question of register originally considered obscene that may weaken or alter in terms of meaning over time. It is possible to imagine that Lesson 2 (sexuality), Lesson 3 (anatomy) and Lesson 4 (puberty) of the EAS programme, if conducted in Kreol, would certainly border on 'vulgarity' because all Kreol words to describe the intimate parts of the human body fall in the basilectal register<sup>7</sup> or are

<sup>7</sup> For example, 'Kok' or 'gogot' for male sex organ

homophobic and gender discriminatory<sup>8</sup> (Sauntson, 2015:5). Similarly, the study of swearing in politics and why vulgarity works brings additional insights into language and vulgarity. For Cazzava and Guidetti (2014:538): 'the vulgar message, regardless of the nature of the swear word, induced greater attitude change toward the topic when the source was a woman rather than a man even if in both cases profanity had a detrimental effect on the perceived credibility of the communicator'.

It may also make a difference when a male or female teacher conducts a class in sexuality education. The more a language is considered vulgar, the lower the probability that the teacher will accept this language. There is a deeper reason for this embarrassment to talk of sexuality in a post-colonial society, which is outlined below.

## Post-colonial sexuality

The term 'post-colonial sexuality' is gaining currency as societal issues in the South are being looked at from a non-Euro centrist perspective. Drawing from anthropology, ethnopsychiatry and ethnopsychanalysis (Stoler, 1995; Cameron and Cullick, 2003; Nathan, 1977; Devreux, 1978), I argue from a post-colonial perspective that sex is not just the instinctive behaviour of humans. It is a cultural behaviour and as such it is always semiotically coded (Stoler, 1995). Language then becomes the most powerful definitional or representational medium available to humans that shapes our understanding of what we are doing. 'Sexuality shapes and is shaped by what is not said, or cannot be said, as well as what is actually put into words' (Stoler, 1995:30).

The Truth & Justice Commission (TJC), set up in 2008 by the State of Mauritius to investigate the consequences of slavery and indenture labour from colonial days to date, points out in its report the following: 'The Commission finds that black-skinned, young Creole, or slave descendants, women in Mauritius experience the worst form of racism. They are often the ones harassed and harangued' (Truth and Justice Commission Report, 2009:287).

The observation of the TJC Report (2009) reinforces the position of colonial studies and the history of sexuality, which argue that the female body is the site of dominance and resistance (Stoler, 1995). The (black) female slave is attributed with voluptuousness and sensuality as frequent stereotypes. She embodies the

sexual fantasies of the coloniser. This gives rise to the archetypal body of the female as sexual object (Stoler, 1995:12). It is this type of relationship which might inhabit the collective psyche of post-colonial societies. We can therefore understand the embarrassment of the urban middle-class Catholics if explanations about the body are given in Kreol and not French. Examining the case of Mauritius, Pyndiah (2016) refers to Ngũgĩ (1986) who describes how colonial residues have distorted the view of post-colonial realities and alienated the ex-colonised from itself, through the language of adoption (Ngũgĩ, 1986 in Pyndiah, 2016) and its derivatives. The researcher argues that Kreol in the history of resistance to colonisation is, potentially, a carrier of decolonial knowledges. By 'decolonial knowledges', we mean that the birth of the Kreol language as a form of resistance to the language and culture of the colonisers has the potential to explain the world in its own words without using the world views of the coloniser.

<sup>8</sup> For example, 'Liki' or 'sousout' for female sex organ

# Laying the basis for a programme in the 'naturalised' language

I propose that the sexuality education programme evolves towards inclusive textbooks (UNESCO, 2015) and makes use of the 'naturalised language' (Harmon, 2017). I used this term as working definition of Kreol Morisien in my critical ethnography study. I borrowed the term from natural science, which defines naturalisation as a three-stage process, namely Introduction, Naturalisation and Invasion.

My argument for a sexuality education programme in Kreol as a naturalised language is underpinned by the Bangkok Language Statement and Agenda 2030/ SDG 3, which stand good for any education system. Paragraph 7 of the Statement 7 reads as follows:

Policies related to language(s) of instruction impact learners at several key junctures,

including early childhood education and school readiness (SDG 4.2), the transition to primary education (SDG 4.1), and carry-through into secondary, tertiary, vocational, and lifelong education of various forms (SDG 4.4). Language policies at each level play an important role in creating a positive learning environment, while fostering enduring peace (SDG 16), gender equality (SDG 4.5), and sustainable development (SDG 4.7).

As per the Agenda 2030, Sustainable Development Goal 3 also invites member states to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.

## Conclusion

My main recommendation is that a working committee be set up to introduce on an incremental basis a sexuality education programme in Kreol Morisien. This committee will not just look at the language aspect,

but also at the whole anthropological dimension of sexuality education in a language considered as 'vulgar', but which is the language in which the youth of the common people and the disenfranchised feel, cry and think.

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