

Lorna Morris

## THE TREATMENT OF HUMAN REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS IN SCHOOL DICTIONARIES, WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PRIMARY SCHOOL DICTIONARIES

**Keywords** School dictionaries; illustrations; taboo topics; illustrations in school dictionaries

This paper is a pilot study that investigates options for treating human reproductive organs in primary school dictionaries in South Africa, with particular emphasis on the illustrations. This study is a response to concern by some Grade 5 and 6 learners that younger children would be exposed to inappropriate illustrations in school dictionaries.

This paper is placed in the South African context and shows how this is a complex and relevant topic in South Africa, due to the different cultures that are represented in each classroom.

The study shows how school dictionaries, both print and online, currently treat human reproductive organs, and presents examples of entries from school dictionaries. It also presents examples of other organs in the human body as comparison. This article investigates whether the reproductive organs should be treated differently to other organs. The eight dictionaries considered are the *Longman South African School Dictionary*, *Collins New School Dictionary 2e*, *Pharos English Dictionary for South African Schools*, *Illustrated School Dictionary for Southern Africa*, *Oxford South African Illustrated School Dictionary*, *Oxford South African School Dictionary 4e*, *Britannica Kids* (online), and *Word Explorer Children's Dictionary* (online).

The literature examined will comprise lexicographic theory on illustrations in dictionaries and the treatment of taboo topics in dictionaries. Literature on the following aspects is also discussed: cultural aspects of sex education in southern Africa, and sex education in primary schools globally.

The study includes questionnaires completed by primary school teachers and parents to establish their attitudes on whether reproductive organs should be included in primary school dictionaries, and, if so, how they should be treated. Some examples of different options for illustrations are also included. The teachers and parents were given different questionnaires, but they included the same options for illustration preferences. The options were: an anatomical drawing, such as a cross section showing internal and external parts; a “coy” illustration that suggests more than shows, such as a child looking down their pants; an illustration hidden behind a click; a full (naked) child's body, with everything labelled – arm, leg, penis; and a clear, non-nonsense picture of the body part in question. The teachers' preference was an anatomical drawing, such as one would find in a science textbook, while the parents preferred the diagram of a full body with all the parts labelled. The majority of parents stated their preference to include these terms in a primary school dictionary, and to treat them the same as other organs and body parts.

This study is a pilot study due to the small sample of parents and teachers surveyed and it will discuss how a larger study can be conducted. The questionnaires show an overwhelming preference to include terms relating to sexuality, but the literature shows significant cultural reservations to these terms being used at school, and especially at primary school.

This presentation will show why it is important to treat these terms in a school dictionary in a clear and unambiguous way, despite this causing potential discomfort to some users. Further research is required in this area, largely because there is such a lack of user research in school dictionaries. Further research is also required with a statistically significant sample size of teachers and parents from different demographic groups. This study could simply be replicated on a larger scale.

The presentation will conclude with recommendations for the treatment of human reproductive organs in primary school dictionaries, as well as recommendations for further research in this area.

## References

- Bullon, S. (2007): Longman South African school dictionary. England: Pearson Education.
- Cullen, K. (2002): Collins new school dictionary. 2nd edition. Glasgow: HarperCollins.
- De Kock, C. (2014): Pharos English dictionary for South African schools. Cape Town: Pharos Dictionaries.
- Dictionary Unit for South African English (1999): Illustrated school dictionary for Southern Africa. Cape Town: Francolin Publishers.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica (2022): Britannica kids dictionary. <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/browse/dictionary> (last access: 22-02-2022).
- Hiles, L. (2008): Oxford South African illustrated school dictionary. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, M. J. (2019): Oxford South African school dictionary. 4th edition. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Wordsmyth (2022): Word Explorer Children's Dictionary. Available at: <https://kids.wordsmyth.net/we/> (last access: 22-02-2022).

## Contact information

**Lorna Morris**  
Stellenbosch University  
lorna@lemma.co.za