

A Comparative Study of Sex Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in China and the United States

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Abstract. Sex education is of great significance for the healthy growth and wellbeing for children and adolescence. Currently, the importance of sex education is learnt by a growing number of people globally. The thesis cites progresses made in sex education of China and the United States and compares the histories of sex education, sex education in schools and families of the two countries, finding out the differences. It is found that compared with developed countries such as the United States, China still has some shortcomings in sex education. The sex-related curriculums in China are not well arranged and the Chinese teachers of sex education are not fully trained. Besides, Chinese parents do not play their parts well in sex education. Then, referring to the advantages of sex education in the United States, five suggestions are raised to improve sex education in China. Policies about sex education should be made, curriculums and teachers of sex education need to be more appropriate for current children, evaluating systems should be built and parents attendance in sex education ought to be attached more importance to.

Keywords: comparative study, sex education, mental health.

1. Introduction

Sex education plays an important role in the physical and mental development of children and adolescents. Therefore, providing sex education in a timely manner can promote the healthy growth of the young. Sex education includes two mainstream models: abstinence sex education (ASE) and comprehensive sex education (CSE) [1]. ASE education, which absolutely prohibits premarital sex as well as adolescent sex, has proven ineffective or even harmful; CSE designs educational curricula that seek for the cognitive, mental, material and social dimensions of sexuality, aiming to foster respectful social and sexual relationships and help adolescence defend their rights throughout their lives [1].

In many countries, the practice of sex education in schools has some achievements on children's wellness, such as delaying the first sex, reducing the frequency of sexual intercourse and the number of sexual mates, avoiding sex behaviors of high risk, increasing the use of contraceptives, and making them know more about of sex as well as changing their attitudes [1,2].

In China, sex education has also achieved certain development results in recent years. But since it is still in its infancy, there are a lot of problems. The school sex education systems are imperfect, and in-depth research on sex education in schools is inadequate. Besides, there are insufficient professional teachers in the field of sex education. Qualified sex education teachers need relevant training in colleges, and only a very few colleges in China have set up those majors, so the talents cultivated are far from enough for social needs. Moreover, a large number of Chinese families have a backward concept of sex education.

Compared with foreign developed countries such as the United States, sex education began in the 50s to 70s of the 20th centuries [3]. After decades of exploration and practice, it has been continuously improved, forming relevant systems and education models [3]. Their teachers of sex education are also professional and well-educated. Besides, their emphasis is placed on the coordination of family, school and society to jointly educate children and adolescents about sex [3].

Therefore, it is significant to analyze and compare the sex education in China and the United States in order to tackle the problems and find out efficient methods to promote sex education in China.

The thesis firstly introduces the significance of sex education, then respectively analyzes the state of China and the United States. Next, a comparison between sex education in the two countries is made. Finally, some suggestions to improve sex education in China are given and there comes a conclusion.

2. The State of Sex Education in China

In recent years, the Chinese government has continuously amended and promulgated a number of laws closely related to sex education. Therefore, the legal status of sex education in China has become clearer and more comprehensive [4].

In recent five years, in China, there have been several new policies and regulations about sex education (see Table 1).

Table 1. Relevant policies on sexuality education in China from 2018 to 2022 [4]

Promulgation time	Promulgation department	Name of the document	Main content
2018	National Health Commission	<i>Core Information and Interpretation of Health Education for Adolescents in China (2018 Edition)</i>	CSE can raise awareness among adolescents about sexual and reproductive health.
2021	Standing Committee of the National People's Congress	<i>Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors (Revised in 2020)</i>	Schools and kindergartens shall carry out sex education appropriate to minors' age and promptly employ relevant protective measures for minors who have suffered sexual assault or harassment.
2021	Ministry of Education	<i>Provisions for the protection of minors in schools</i>	It is necessary to carry out puberty education and sex education in a targeted manner.
2021	State Council	<i>Programme for the Development of Children in China (2021-2030)</i>	Children at appropriate ages have sex education mostly, and it has become easier for children to get sexual health services.
2022	Cyberspace Administration of China	<i>Regulations on the Protection of Minors Online (Draft for Solicitation of Comments)</i>	It contains a large number of online literacy education content related to sex education for minors, as well as strict prohibition of online pornography and bullying.
2022	General Office of the Ministry of Education	<i>Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the implementation of the National Plan for the Construction of Healthy Schools</i>	Health promotion will run through school teaching process and management, and accelerate the construction of school health promotion capacity.
2022	General Office of the State Council	<i>The General Office of the State Council issued a notice on the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Health</i>	It contains a wide range of content related to childbirth, marriage, infant and child care, and sexual and reproductive health of women and children.

However, the status quo of sexual and reproductive health among children and adolescents is not so good as it is expected. According to data, at present, sex education in Chinese schools is still mainly coming from ASE [3]. Since they do not have enough knowledge about sex, young students are more

likely to take risky sexual behaviors [5]. 13 million abortions occur each year, which occupies the largest part in the world [6]. The percentage of people with HIV who are between the ages of 15 and 24 is rising, and the HIV infection rate is rising yearly [7]. Sexual assault of minors is frequent and on the tendency of rising [8]. These pose a serious threat to the sexual, reproductive and mental health of children and adolescents.

3. The State of Sex Education in the United States

Since the 1980s, when the HIV epidemic first emerged, American governments have usually supported the teaching of HIV and sex education, and sex education in schools continues to have strong popular support [9]. Programs for sexuality education have been established and subsidized by many important institutions of the United States [10]. These programs have played an essential role in many kinds of organized places [10].

In the United States, in 2012, American Health Association, American School Health Association, American Education Association and other departments jointly issued National Sexuality Education Standards. It has become the basic guide for states in the United States to formulate curriculum standards and school health education policies, and it is also the basis for the development and formulation of the Interstate Joint Evaluation Student Standards and the National Sex Education Standards - Core Content and Skills in the United States [11]. The school provides compulsory sex education courses for teenagers, which is a common practice for the states in the United States to carry out adolescent sex education. The state supports the sex education plans of the states in terms of policies, promulgates sex education programs in the form of the National Sex Education Standards of the United States or the Teacher's Guide Manual, standardizes the goals, contents and implementation principles of sex education, and has a significant effect in ensuring the quality of sex education. Currently, all U.S. states offer sex education in public education in some way, and state education departments have different guidelines for sex education. By 2020, 29 states in the United States and the Columbia have stipulated public schools to start courses about sex education, of which 27 states require sex education and AIDS prevention education. Students must undergo AIDS prevention classes, which are mandated in 39 states and the District of Columbia. In 22 states, the curriculum for sex education and/or AIDS prevention instruction must be factually, medically, and/or technically accurate. Each state has a different definition of "medically accurate", which requires the local health department to verify the accuracy of the course.

In the US, changing sex behaviors of the young has largely been accomplished through instruction [10]. During the past thirty years, plenty of curricula were created in an attempt to change risk-taking and modulate its psychosocial antecedents [10]. Furthermore, research has indicated that some of these courses may have a favorable influence on conduct of the young [10].

But there are also problems. The data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2019 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey has shown that 38.4% of students in secondary schools had ever had sex and 8.6% had sexual intercourse with more than or equal to 4 persons [12]. Among 27.4% students who had more sex, only 54.3% had used contraceptives when they had had sex the last time [13]. Additionally, students of higher grades describe negative interactions with others throughout their lives, including forced sex (7.3%), dating violence (8.2%), and physical and sexual assault (8.2%) [12].

4. Comparison

4.1. The History of Sex Education

The United States started sex education far earlier than China.

The United States is one of the earliest modern countries to pay attention to sex education. In 1892, Alan. Walter's *The True Teachings* was the first of their teachings in the US. In the 1960s, school sex education in the United States began to receive widespread attention. Since then, sex education has

greatly increased in the US. Unguided Sexuality Education, Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM), and Comprehensive Sexuality Education are the three levels of sex education in the US.

The research on sex education in China has gone through three stages: research initiation period (1982-1993), research accumulation period (1994-2003), and research development period (2004-present) [14]. In the early stages of research, scholars called for attention to primary and secondary school students, hoping to develop some physical health education courses [14]. In the research accumulation stage, the academic community began to study the physiological and psychological characteristics of adolescent students and study their sexual psychology [14]. The third stage begins to study the sex education methods of adolescents and college students in combination with the times, and advocates the diversity and operability of methods and other aspects [14].

4.2. Sex Education in Schools

There are differences in school curriculum arrangement and training of teachers in the field of sex education in the two countries.

In Chinese schools, the position of sex education curriculums is not specific. Sex education is a system of curriculum that has a framework and includes all elements of teaching, closed to other subjects of compulsory education [4]. Currently, sex education content appears in the form of integration into the relevant curriculum, in this way the presentation of sex education content is fragmented and incomplete, lacking appropriate teaching materials [4].

Moreover, so far, China has made continuous efforts in the training of teachers in sex education. Yet on the whole, the number of expert teachers is obviously insufficient, the training work is still in its infancy, and achievements as well as the accumulated experience are very limited [15]. Whether it is sex education or health education, there are high requirements for the quality of teachers. However, through literature, it is found that at present, primary and secondary schools in China do not set up the specific position of sex education teachers, and most of them are concurrently held by other teachers [15]. Besides, the degree of mastery and knowledge source of sexual knowledge of sex education and related teachers in China is not ideal, especially the knowledge of sexual physiology [15]. On the one hand, teachers do not receive sex education at the basic level; On the other hand, the lack of professional and systematic training of sexuality education teachers has also made it difficult to improve the situation for a long time [15].

In schools of the United States, as a major component of comprehensive health, sex education is integrated into one or more school curricula, and sex education is included in school health education, physical education and related psychosocial education [3]. Full-time sex education teachers in the United States generally graduated from colleges and universities majoring in sexual health education, having learnt about human sexuality of different cultures, and have studied sex education philosophy and measures [3]. Besides, there is also an evaluation of the implementation effect [3]. In some periods of schools, students are tested by teacher to make sure whether they have commanded those abilities needed [3].

4.3. Sex Education in Families

In families, there are also differences between sex education in the two countries.

China has the largest adolescent population compared with other countries, but due to traditional thinking, some Chinese parents are ashamed to talk with their children about sex [16]. Even if understand how significance sex education is of adolescence, some parents do not know how to use reasonable and effective methods to guide their children. Coupled with the mixed content on the Internet, the correct view of sex education among children and adolescence is likely to be affected [16].

In families of the United States, many parents expressed the idea that they should be in charge of teaching their kids about sexual issues, such as chastity, STDs, pregnancy, and child sexual abuse. Parents also listed other sources as being in charge of children's sex education despite the fact that there was general support for parental responsibility [17]. Strong support from parents for school

education that covers a wide range of sexual and reproductive health topics in both the elementary and secondary grades has been observed in studies [18].

5. Suggestions

According to those differences between sex education in China and the United States, it can be seen that there are some improvements required in sex education in China. Therefore, the thesis provides some suggestions.

First of all, education administrative departments and relevant research institutions should work together to integrate the relevant educational advantages of China, refer to the advanced experience of developed countries, formulate relevant policies for sex education in primary and secondary schools in China, and establish operable sex education goals, content, implementation, evaluation systems and syllabuses [3].

Second, schools should establish a comprehensive sex education curriculum in the form of stand-alone and integrated sex education programmes [4]. School sex education curricula can be in the form of stand-alone or integrated curricula, depending on a region's overall education policy, resources and availability, school curriculum priorities, time planning, student needs, family and community support for sex education, etc. [4]. Besides, there are few sex education teaching materials in China today, and it is very important to develop sex education materials as one of the curriculum resources to effectively carry out sex education in schools and present correct and comprehensive sex education to students [4].

Third, at present, China has not carried out corresponding monitoring and evaluation of the teaching quality of sex education. The promotion of sex education in schools needs the introduction of relevant support policies and supervision mechanisms [4].

Fourth, China's normal universities have a large number of reserve teachers, most of them will step into the teaching position after training, and integrate the relevant content of sex education into the teacher training plan of those colleges, so that every teacher has the awareness and ability to carry out sex education; For teachers of various disciplines who have already participated in the work, integrate sex education content into their daily training, teaching and research, or organize daily training and exchanges; Social groups involved in sex education should develop curricula to train sex education teachers and encourage them to take every opportunity to teach sex knowledge [15].

Finally, parents should participate more in sex education. As the first teachers of children, parents must abandon the traditional view that sex is difficult to speak out and carry out necessary sex education [19]. They should not solely care about children's learning but ignore children's other aspects of development, instead, parents ought to timely learn about the child's physical and psychological dynamics, understand the child's real situation [19].

6. Conclusion

To conclude, sex education is a significant concept for the mental and physical health of young people, and it is urgent to widely promote sex education to protect children and adolescence.

In recent years, though sex education has developed globally, there is still a gap between sex education in China and sex education in the United States. The curriculum arrangements, training of teachers and parents' views about sex education in the two countries are different, and there are many advantages in the sex education mood of the United States, which is able to provide reference to sex education in China.

Therefore, steps such as the government coming out more relevant policies, schools preparing more comprehensive curriculums and training more qualified teachers, and parents participating more in children's sex education should be taken to change the current situation of sex education in China.

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