Research on Early Childhood Sexual Education in China

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Abstract. Traditional Chinese ideology and social customs have exerted a certain influence on the field of sex education. Sex education has long been regarded as a sensitive and taboo subject, causing many Chinese to remain silent on the issue or to regard it as an unspeakable secret. As a result of this phenomenon, China has been relatively weak in terms of children's sex education, and even in some areas, sex education is almost blank. Nevertheless, the importance of children's sex education cannot be overstated. For children, recognizing their own bodies, understanding the concept of gender, learning to protect themselves, and developing good habits are all crucial life skills. This study adopted the literature analysis method to read and analyze the relevant research literature in depth, and to explore how to improve children's sexuality education in China from the three levels of society, family, and school. This will not only help children establish a correct concept of sexual knowledge, but also enable them to better understand and accept sex in the future, thus avoiding the possible psychological pressure and distress caused by a lack of sexual knowledge. The conclusion of this study emphasizes that only through the joint efforts of society, schools and families can a comprehensive improvement in children's sex education be achieved.

Keywords: Sex education, Early childhood education, Scientific health knowledge, Gender consciousness.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the media has frequently reported news about sexual abuse of young children. According to the "White Paper on Prosecution Work for Minors (2022)" released by the Supreme People's Procuratorate on June 1st, the data shows that the number of arrests approved by the procuratorial organs for crimes against minors was 38,854, 45,827, and 39,380 in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively [1]. In 2022, there were 36,957 cases of prosecution for crimes such as rape and molestation of minors, representing a 20.4% increase compared to the previous year. According to statistics from "Girl Protection," out of the 332 cases reported by the media in 2020, there were 89 cases involving the terms "minors," "young girls," or "children [2]." Among the 243 cases, there were 198 cases where the victims were below the age of 14, accounting for 81.48% of the total. These data reflect a concerning social issue [2].

In this context, "Fang Siqi's First Love Paradise," a thought-provoking novel by Taiwanese author Lin Yihan, emerges as a significant work. The novel portrays the story of Siqi Fang, a young girl who undergoes a devastating mental breakdown as a result of prolonged sexual abuse by her cram school teacher, Guohua Li. In the novel, Siqi exhibits a relatively limited awareness and preventive measures concerning sexual abuse. She lacks a comprehensive understanding of the truth and consequences associated with such abuse. Throughout the period of her victimization, Siqi feels confused, fearful, and helpless and not sure how to respond and protect herself. Meanwhile, Siqi discreetly hints at her parents about Guohua Li's actions, but her parents choose to trust the respected outsider. Siqi persists and attempts to narrate her experiences as if they belong to someone else, but her parents dismissively label the young girl as "promiscuous" despite her tender age. Her parents fail to fulfill their responsibility of providing support and protection when Siqi needs it the most. They lack attentiveness and communication regarding her daily life and emotional state, remaining unaware of her psychological changes and distress. This deficiency in familial education prevents Siqi from seeking help and support from her parents. What is even more disheartening is that Siqi faces societal blame and discrimination after enduring sexual abuse. She is burdened with overwhelming shame and a sense of responsibility, instead of receiving care and support from society. This societal attitude

further intensifies her psychological trauma, making her recovery and self-rebuilding process even more challenging.

The prevalence of sexual abuse against young children in recent years underscores a concerning social issue. These events and narrative elements call for profound societal attention and contemplation on the issue of sexual abuse. The frequent occurrence of sexual abuse against young children and the rising trend of such cases indicates a troubling reality. Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth the current situation of sexual abuse of young children, its causes, and effective suggestions for solving this social problem. The significance of this study is mainly reflected in the following aspects: first, to help the general public in society to understand and recognize the seriousness of sexual abuse of young children; second, to analyze and identify the root causes that lead to the frequent occurrence of such incidents, so as to provide a theoretical basis for the formulation of preventive strategies; and third, to propose effective preventive and interventional measures through the study, so as to provide guidance to all parties, including society, families and schools, in order to reduce the occurrence of sexual abuse of young children.

2. Influencing Factors

These issues primarily stem from three factors: society, school, and family.

2.1. Society

Due to China's long history and vast territory, the country has experienced a long period of small-agriculture economic development. Confucianism has played a significant role in culture. And the gender consciousness of "male superiority and female inferiority" and "the men plough and the women weave" is deeply rooted [3]. Women are usually in the role of a dependent or companion to men, and expected to conform to the standards of "a woman's lack of talent is a virtue" or a "good wife and a good mother." At the same time subject to the restrictions imposed by the system of paternalism, the Three Principles and Five Rules, and other inequalities in ethical norms, and these concepts and norms are deeply rooted in society [4]. This entrenched gender consciousness has defined women primarily within the context of family and marriage, overlooking their individual needs and rights.

Consequently, there has been a lack of comprehensive and robust sexual education. Traditional gender norms often confine sexual education to the confines of the family and marriage, neglecting topics related to gender equality, gender rights, and sexual and reproductive health. Simultaneously, there is a dearth of comprehensive education and cultivation of gender equality and gender rights. This results in young people, especially women, lacking the necessary knowledge and understanding in sexual education, making them unable to protect themselves effectively and more susceptible to sexual abuse and gender discrimination.

On the other hand, although the initiation of sex education in China during the early 20th century, traditional beliefs still stigmatize discussions about sex, leading to the perception of sex education as a sensitive and taboo subject [5]. Between 1984 and 2016, the government issued a number of documents related to adolescent education, but rarely did they directly mention "sex education." Instead, terms such as "health education," and "adolescent education" were used for expression [6]. This traditional mindset has hindered the widespread dissemination and promotion of sex education, impeding open and inclusive discussions and the provision of comprehensive sexual knowledge.

2.2. Schools

In addition, there is a lack of specialized sex education courses in schools, and teachers lack professional teaching plans and guidance materials [6].

2.2.1 Lack of specialized sex education courses

Textbooks are one of the main mediums of education and implicit carriers of social gender culture [4]. Due to the influence of traditional Chinese thinking, most of the sexual education materials in

China tend to be implicit and indirect, lacking direct and intuitive transmission of sexual education knowledge to students. Moreover, China does not have unified sexual education textbooks. The lack of specific teaching materials leaves teachers uncertain about how to effectively address these sensitive topics, resulting in misleading delivery of sexual education and ultimately leaving students with vague and incomplete concepts of sexual education knowledge.

2.2.2 Shortage of trained and knowledgeable sexual education teachers

On the other hand, due to the limited attention and emphasis given to sex education in China's education system, there is a lack of specially trained teachers with professional knowledge in sex education. 85.48% of teachers indicate that their schools do not have well-qualified sex education specialists. Although most teachers recognize that sex education should be the responsibility of all teachers and not just specialists, they still primarily focus on their assigned subjects in their daily teaching lives. Only 17% of teachers believe they have professional and extensive knowledge of sex education, but they are afraid to engage in sex education activities due to concerns about teaching accidents and other issues [6]. Since sex education is considered a sensitive topic, it can lead to controversy and social pressure. Teachers are afraid that involvement in sex education teaching may result in teaching accidents or face opposition from parents and society, so they hesitate to attempt related teaching activities.

2.3. Family

The overall level of family sex education in China is not high. In cases where urban children are victimized, the majority of the victims are migrant children who have followed their parents to live in the cities [7]. The parents of migrant children typically come to cities for job opportunities, which forces them to be away from home for extended periods. This results in unstable family structures and insufficient parental supervision.

The lack of adequate care and protection for children makes these children easier targets for victimization. At the same time, as this group tends to be in a lower socio-economic status, they may face poverty and livelihood pressures, which makes them more vulnerable to victimization. Additionally, there is a lack of sexual education in families, primarily manifested in parents deliberately avoiding "sexual questions" raised by children, suppressing children's "sexual curiosity," and difficulty in recognizing children's "sexual language" [7]. In some cultural contexts in China, sexuality is viewed as a sensitive and private topic, and is often considered inappropriate to talk about openly. Parents are influenced by social attitudes and traditions and feel that sex education is a taboo or inappropriate topic. Besides, they feel embarrassed or ashamed of the topic of sex and are afraid to face their own children to talk about it, thus avoiding discussing or evading children's sexuality. Other parents may lack the knowledge and confidence to answer their children's questions or deal with their curiosity properly. They may be worried about giving the wrong information or misleading their children and therefore choose to avoid talking about it.

3. Suggestions

In order to protect children, society, schools, and families should provide support and resources, strengthen child protection and care, and enhance education and awareness to reduce the occurrence of sexual abuse incidents.

3.1. Society

Society needs to pay more attention to sex education for young children. Sex education should not only be seen as an effective means of preventing sexual abuse and harassment but also as a comprehensive course that provides accurate and comprehensive knowledge about sex. It is a teaching process that encompasses clear understanding of sexuality, emotions, physical aspects, and social implications [8].

3.1.1 Develop picture books on sexuality education

For young children, educators should actively develop and disseminate picture books on sexuality education. Picture books are a form of children's literature that young children are exposed to at an early age, and in a certain sense, picture books are synonymous with literature for young children [9]. Picture books have attractive illustrations and interesting storylines, and they can be used to learn basic concepts related to sexuality, such as recognizing male and female reproductive organs, private parts, and so on. This will stimulate children's interest in reading and gradually introduce sex education in a relaxed and pleasant reading atmosphere.

3.1.2 Promote relevant sexual education knowledge

Furthermore, experts should collaborate with kindergartens and communities to promote relevant sexual education knowledge. They can provide professional guidance and training to assist teachers and parents in properly and appropriately guiding young children in their exposure to and understanding of sexual education content. This includes educating young children to recognize their own bodies, identify their private parts and develop an awareness of self-protection. Through such cooperation and popularization, it can help kindergartens and communities create a positive and open environment where sex education is regarded as a normal and important topic. Such widespread education can provide children with essential sexual knowledge and skills, helping them grow up in a healthy manner and preventing the occurrence of sexual abuse and related issues.

3.2. Schools

Teachers should organize diverse and engaging sexual education theme activities for young children, aiming to help them better understand and apply sexual education knowledge across multiple disciplines and levels [10].

3.2.1 Incorporating sex education cartoons into classroom discussions

First of all, teachers can consider downloading some sex enlightenment cartoons and watch them together with students, such as " where willy wen ", "Sex Education for Fathers and Sons", "Make My Sex Clear", "One-Minute Sex Education" and other illustrated books that utilize interesting animations to explain physiological and sexual knowledge [10]. Where willy wen is not only available in illustrated version, but also in animated version. It uses fairy-tale language and clear drawings to clearly explain things like sperm, eggs, fertilization, and heredity. By responding to children's curiosity in a way that they can understand. At the same time, teachers can organize relevant discussions and activities after watching the cartoon in order to deepen children's understanding and ability to apply their knowledge of sex education.

3.2.2 Interactive activities and art creation

Teachers can bring students together to do games, knowledge quizzes and other activities to raise children's awareness. Teachers can guide students to create art pieces related to sexual education through activities such as drawing, crafts, or paper-cutting. This can include artwork depicting body parts, crafting expressive pieces, or designing informative posters. Such creative activities can stimulate students' imagination and creativity while deepening their understanding and memory of sexual education knowledge.

3.2.3 Body parts identification and naming through visual aids

Additionally, teachers can use pictures or drawings to help students identify and name different body parts, including public and private areas. This can be implemented through matching games, sticker activities, or drawing exercises, aiding students in learning and reinforcing their knowledge of body parts.

3.3. Family

Parents play the most crucial role in sex education and are the primary choice for providing sex education within the family for young children. They are also the first source of help sought by children in cases of sexual abuse [11]. Parents should not only take the responsibility to establish a scientific and correct concept of sex education, but also need to actively participate and guide the sex education of young children in their daily life.

3.3.1 Understanding the "Sexual Exploration Period" (Ages 3-6)

First of all, parents should realize that sex education should not wait until after the child's puberty, but from the early childhood stage should be carried out at the right time. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 are in a stage known as the "sexual exploration period". During this stage, if parents lack proper guidance and timely intervention, children may develop habitual behaviors that are detrimental to their physical and mental well-being [10]. In daily life, parents can take a series of measures to promote sex education for young children. Parents should patiently educate their children and create an environment where kids feel free and comfortable to ask questions and engage in discussions about sex.

3.3.2 Nurturing proper behavior: teaching children about privacy, boundaries, and respect

In addition, parents need to guide their children in proper behavior. Teach children about the concepts of privacy and boundaries, helping them understand which behaviors are inappropriate, and instruct them to respect their own and others' physical boundaries. If a child touches their private parts or shows curiosity about another child's body, parents should promptly correct such behavior and calmly explain why it is inappropriate, providing correct alternatives and positive behavioral models.

3.3.3 Seeking professional support for confident sex education guidance

Lastly, when facing sex education issues, if parents feel confused or unsure about their knowledge or approach, they should seek professional support. They can consult professional organizations or experts to obtain accurate and scientific sex education knowledge, ensuring they provide children with proper guidance and support.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, the seriousness of the problem of sexual abuse of young children has attracted widespread attention, while the overall level of sex education in Chinese society has been recognized as deficient. In response to this problem, this study puts forward a series of recommendations to improve the situation at three levels: society, school and family.

First, at the school level, educators should be actively involved in writing and publicizing books related to sex education for young children. These books can be presented in the form of pictures in order to attract the attention and comprehension of young children. In addition, experts should work with kindergartens and communities to popularize knowledge about sex education. They can provide professional guidance and training to help teachers and parents to correctly and appropriately guide children's exposure to and understanding of sex education. Teachers should organize diversified and interesting activities on sex education themes, such as games and age-appropriate cartoons, so as to enhance children's interest in sex education through interaction and entertainment.

Secondly, at the family level, parents play a crucial role. Apart from establishing a scientific and correct concept of sex education, parents also need to actively participate in and guide sex education for young children. This can be done by engaging in an open, frank and appropriate dialog with their children, answering their questions about sex and providing appropriate information and guidance. Parents can also take advantage of educational opportunities in their daily lives, such as through books, movies, and television programs, to enlighten educational topics and discuss and share ideas with their children.

However, it is important to note that this study utilizes a literature research method and therefore has certain limitations and shortcomings. The suggestions made are somewhat generalized and thus need to be applied in practice by taking into account the local government and school situations and making moderate adjustments according to the actual needs. Further research studies can provide relevant data support and suggest more targeted recommendations and measures to further promote the development and implementation of early childhood sex education.

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