

Unpacking The Problems of Sex Education in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools and The Improvement Measures

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Abstract. Adolescent sexual health is an important issue in society. However, its current school-based Sex Education for adolescents is still woefully inadequate. Based on the existing practical studies, this essay analyses the importance of school-based sex education and the existing problems in the context of China. The results show that school-based Sex Education helps improve the physical and mental health development of adolescents. In addition, it improves social stability and national development. However, the occurrence of sexual crimes related to minors, the Internet pornography have engendered negative impacts on adolescents, and the increasingly open-minded public sexual concepts are calling for the implementation of an enhanced program of school-based Sex Education. The analysis further reveals three main reasons for these problems. Firstly, China has an entrenchment of the concept of sexual shame. Secondly, there is a lack of related policies designed to support the progress. Lastly, the existing school-based Sex Education curriculum has many problems, and the relevant teaching staff is lacking. Therefore, a comprehensive proposal, encompassing applying the 'CSE+Peer Education' mode, fostering its school-family partnerships, and establishing professional and specialized teaching staff for Sex Education, is put forward to initiate effective Sex Education in Chinese primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: Sex Education; school-based education; adolescent; gender; China.

1. Introduction

The physical and mental health of adolescents and Sex Education have always been the main focus of societies worldwide. Over the past decade, the Chinese Government and the United Nations (UN) have kept revising and completing the guidelines, laws, and policies relating to adolescent Sex Education. These all point out that school-based Sex Education benefits adolescents physically and mentally. Specifically, the study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) illustrates that Sex Education helps reduce the frequency of adolescent sexual behavior effectively, especially for those risky groups. Furthermore, Wang and Zhang find that individuals who receive proper Sex Education before adulthood can improve their awareness of self-protection, thus significantly reducing the rate of sexual victimization in their adulthood [1]. Moreover, school-based Sex Education helps foster adolescent's correct perception of gender, such as overcoming gender stereotypes, bias, and inequality, as well as the discrimination against homosexuals and AIDS patients. However, this Sex Education is far from being pervasive in Chinese primary and secondary schools. According to Zhang and Xue, the problems lie in the dysfunction of the education system, such as the missing of comprehensive sex education (CSE), and more importantly, a lack of concern for gender education [2]. In other words, Chinese school-based Sex Education focuses only on helping enrich children's knowledge of reproductive health, instead of developing their cognition of gender and self-identity [3]. Notably, although studies on sex education have become increasingly popular among Chinese scholars, a core and authorized research group at the national level remains absent. Current studies have mainly focused on the cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects of sexuality, while few of those are about sexuality values [4]. Therefore, based on a holistic review of existing studies on sex education practices, this essay aims to analyze the problems of current sex education in Chinese primary and secondary schools with a focus on the education of gender. Subsequently, several improvement measures are recommended to contribute to gender equality among Chinese adolescents.

2. Relevant Work

2.1. The Role and Importance of School-based Sex Education

2.1.1 Physical health protection

The existing sex education practices at the international level have proved that sex education has a positive effect on the health and safety of adolescents. For example, the excellent sex education in the Netherlands is evidenced in its lowest adolescent pregnancy rate among European countries [5]. In Sweden, the pioneer of Sex Education, both the pregnancy rate and HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of Swedish adolescents have significantly decreased due to the implementation of Sex Education. According to Roser, the proportion of underage pregnant women has dropped from 1.6% to 0.5% while the Swedish young people living with HIV/AIDS (YPLHIV) only take up 0.05% of the total national population over the past decade [6]. It is also evident that Sex Education helps enhance adolescent awareness of self-protection and reduce the occurrence of adolescent sexual assault [1]. In another aspect, Sex Education helps improve adolescent sexual satisfaction, attitudes, and self-efficacy. In sum, such education would contribute to more satisfied and safer future sexual experiences for adolescents [7].

2.1.2 Gender awareness establishment

UNICEF defined gender as the social attributes and opportunities relating to being male and female, and the relationship between same-sex and opposite-sex. These are constructed by society and acquired through individuals' socialization processes, which are intimately related to gender equality [8]. As the process of Sex Education practice is complex, the acquisition of sexual health knowledge is only the explicit effect. The implicit effect is on adolescent social interaction, and the cognition of gender and racial identity [5]. The racial problem in China is not as diverse as that in Western countries, such as America. Thus, the main goal of Sex Education practice in China is the establishment of adolescent gender awareness, of which gender norms or roles and subgroups are the frequently discussed topics.

Studies on Sex Education practice have proved that adolescents receiving school-based Sex Education tend to show more respect and inclusion to the subgroups, such as YPLHIV and LGBTI people [9]. They also have a lower level of gender stereotypes and higher recognition of gender equality. It is noteworthy that gender stereotypes in China cannot be easily eliminated due to their long-standing existence history, and their roots in many aspects of Chinese society. However, the potential to remove the negative part through Sex Education can be further explored.

2.1.3 Social stability

Wang suggested that the lack of Sex Education is associated with adolescent dearth of sexual knowledge, leading to adolescents committing sexual crimes. This was because their psycho-sexual disorders cannot be well treated, and their sexual morality and legal awareness fail to be cultivated [10]. In comparison, having Sex Education helps enhance adolescent awareness of self-protection and reduce the sexual crime rate. Additionally, as mentioned above, the reduced adolescent pregnancy rate and HIV/AIDS prevalence rate contribute to the reduction in the demands of artificial abortion and the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The side-effect is that it reduces societal medical burden and expenditure, especially in economically underdeveloped regions.

Sex Education's benefit in social stability also manifests in the construction of a fairer social environment. For instance, currently, gender discrimination exists in all kinds of industries and enterprises in the sense that males and females have different salaries and promotion paths (albeit the laws emphasize gender equality), and female workers are burdened with the pressure of managing both voluntary domestic chores and workplace tasks. However, the Meiyou Institute showed that establishing gender awareness of the new generation in the process of Sex Education can inspire them to think more about creating an equitable workplace environment and improve the establishment of relevant policies and measures [11].

2.1.4 National development

Another wider benefit of Sex Education is its stimulus in national development. Sex Education improves the physical and mental health of adolescents, and creates healthier and more productive social labor, thus, boosting the economy. Meanwhile, the reduction of societal medical burden and expenditure attributed to Sex Education will lower the poverty rate, therefore, narrowing the gap between rich and poor. In the international vision, the nation's practice situation of Sex Education and the level of attention attached to it are considered as the criterion for assessing the nation's level of humanistic concern and human rights protection. Excellent Sex Education practices can beautify the national image [12].

2.2. The Urgency of Carrying Out School-Based Sex Education

School-based Sex Education is crucial for adolescent development. However, sexual crimes and Internet pornography are damaging adolescent health. And the sexual knowledge of adolescents fails to match their increasingly open-minded cognition. Individuals' health situation and social development are badly in need of school-based Sex Education to improve.

2.2.1 Sexual crimes and minors

The situations of minors becoming victims of sexual crimes and juvenile sexual delinquency in China are severe. According to the white paper by China's Supreme People's Procuratorate, the rate of minor victims of crime has a year-on-year increase of 35.3% since 2021. In terms of the case types, rape cases, and child molestation cases take up the largest proportion, at 36.3% and 16.4% respectively. Concurrently, juvenile delinquency has a year-on-year increase of 15.5%, and 10.5% of them are rape cases, occupying the largest in addition to robbery cases (30.8%) [13]. This may illustrate that the public lacks an awareness of sexual health and cognition and reflects the dearth of school-based Sex Education in China.

2.2.2 Internet pornography

The Internet is a vital access for adolescents to acquire sexual knowledge in China. A survey by Yang showed that a mere 9.5% of adolescents acquire sexual knowledge from school-based Sex Education, while 12.1% of them do so from the Internet. Among the latter, Internet pornography is the main source [14]. However, pornography aggravates the occurrence of risky sexual behavior and prevents the realization of gender quality. It presents a large quantity of risky sexual behavior examples, such as unprotected sex behaviors, group sex, and sexual violence. Meanwhile, the gender roles demonstrated by the majority of pornography are females being submissive and passive, while males being aggressive and active. The exaggerated expression of females magnifies the sexual pleasure of males. This leads to the distortion of healthy gender roles in sexual behavior. According to Navarro-Prado S et al., male viewers tend to accept sexual violence and humiliation, while females tend to regard sexual behavior as a means to please males even though they mentally refuse the unwanted sexual behavior [15]. Therefore, adolescents are in urgent need of a proper guide to school-based Sex Education as the main access to sexual knowledge.

2.2.3 The dilemma between open-minded cognition and the lack of sexual knowledge

Chinese adolescents now possess a more open-minded attitude toward sex and less importance is attached to chastity. This is evidenced in Yang's survey where adolescent males' acceptance of premarital sex exhibited a decrease by 0.5% from 2004 to 2017, while the counterpart of adolescent females fell by 9.3% [14]. However, their sexual knowledge does not keep up with the change in sexual cognition. For example, dangers exist in the sexual behavior of Chinese female college students. Xiao and Liu showed that more than 50% of female college students do not know the proper usage of condoms and four out of ten are using the incorrect contraceptive methods [16]. To avoid risks and make the sexual demand be fulfilled healthily and safely, schools should carry out a Sex Education curriculum among the new generation.

3. Identification of Barriers to School-Based Sex Education in China

3.1. The Damaging Concept of Sexual Shame

Different cultures have different ways to set the bottom line and standards of belief. While some Western culture connects humans with gods and builds 'guilt culture' (i.e., humans are born with the original sin), the oriental culture emphasizes the connection between individuals and societies, and its 'shame culture' is built by moral means [17]. Shame is the painful feeling of admitting one has a congenital deficiency and not being accepted by others. It is also a way of communication to admit one's mistakes, a negative self-evaluation, and psychological and cultural moral constraints. 'Shame' is the core of Chinese Confucian culture. It is related to the 'mianzi culture' and group consciousness, significantly impacting Chinese society. Meanwhile, 'sex' is considered a 'taboo' and 'immoral and undignified desire' in traditional Chinese society. Discussing sexuality blemishes personal image and violates social standards. To keep a good reputation, people would avoid discussing sexuality in public. As a result, their concept of sexuality turns out to be negative and conservative. In ancient China, things related to 'sexuality' were considered filth, such as menstruation. The concept of sexual shame created by passive sexual culture is continuously influencing contemporary Chinese society. As females start their physical development, their body shapes will gradually show curves that make them look 'sexy', which is treated as an immoral sign from a social perspective [18]. Pushed by the Internet, large quantities of body talk make individuals constantly pay attention to their physical appearance and make body comparisons. This, over time, leads to self-objectification and eventually induces body dissatisfaction. In this sense, the body becomes an object that brings embarrassment to individuals [19]. On the other hand, the negative and avoidant attitude of society and households toward discussing sexuality has greatly influenced individuals' interpersonal communication skills, their satisfaction with intimacy, and sex psychology health level. More importantly, it impedes the development of Sex Education and the change to this damaging sexual shame concept [18].

3.2. The Lack of Related Policy Support

The first policy that marked the promotion of adolescent school-based Sex Education on a nationwide scale was known as the Notice on the Implementation of Adolescent Education in Middle Schools by China's State Education Commission and National Health and Family Planning Commission in 1988. Although guidelines about Sex Education in Chinese primary and secondary schools have since been released continuously, Cheng and Ju found that the index of school-based Sex Education policy targets is distributed unevenly. To be specific, they mainly focused on discussing teaching methodology, teaching process, and educational resources, while lacking consideration of educational evaluation, a guarantee of the right to education, and the educational environment [20]. This, as contended by Li et al., demonstrates that the policies are too macroscopic, and the practical educational paradigms and instructive practical measures are yet to be provided to ensure the delivery of Sex Education [21].

3.3. The Sluggish Development of Sex Education at the School Level

At the micro-level, the curriculum design of Sex Education in Chinese primary and secondary schools is developing at a slow pace. Firstly, the majority of primary and secondary schools need to consider adopting appropriate teaching methodologies. There are three mainstream educational modes of Sex Education, namely abstinence Sex Education, holistic Sex Education (HSE), and comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) [8]. Abstinence Sex Education advocates that premarital sex is an irresponsible act. To reduce adolescent females' pregnancy rates and STD transmission rates, it also disapproves of using condoms and applying contraceptive measures [22]. In contrast, HSE does not resist premarital sex and the application of contraceptive measures, aiming at protecting adolescent reproductive health. CSE is based on HSE and emphasizes more on the establishment of adolescent sexuality concepts and values to promote gender equality [23]. Currently, abstinence Sex Education is proven to be invalid and even harms the physical and mental health of adolescents. Xiao

and Liu have proven that advocating abstinence blindly can increase the possibility of risky sexual behaviors among female college students [16]. However, current Sex Education in Chinese primary and secondary schools is mainly of the abstinence Sex Education mode whereas CSE has not been given enough attention and promotion [21]. The Sex Education curriculum contents in most schools are too monotonous and lack cultural sensitivity, such as the discussion of sexuality attitudes, gender awareness, and gender equality [1].

Secondly, Sex Education is placed at a relatively low position across all the subjects taught at schools. It is a pass-or-fail educational content in classroom teaching where students attend lectures and listen. However, inadequate attention has been paid to students' level of concentration and participation. There is also a lack of educational evaluation [24]. Thirdly, there is a shortage of practical Sex Education textbooks. The existing textbooks fail to meet the use standards as their contents are inconsistent. Take the education of gender stereotypes as an example, the textbooks for primary and secondary school students, such as the ideological and moral course, focus on eliminating gender stereotypes. In stark contrast, the textbooks of other courses still present character images that demonstrate gender stereotypes. For instance, mothers are portrayed as being tender, careful, and the individual that is responsible for household chores, while fathers are powerful, less likely to stick to trifles and the individual that brings home the bacon [25].

Lastly, there is a shortage of specialized and professional teachers who are equipped with the knowledge of Sex Education. This is evidenced in the education about sexual physiology and psychology where teachers in biology and political science are employed to teach such courses. Although they are good at other subjects, these teachers do not possess a systematic understanding of the educational methodology and teaching contents of Sex Education (e.g., a lack of understanding of sexual knowledge and sexual concepts). Moreover, Liu and Li have shown that some of them often feel embarrassed when giving lessons because of their sexual shame, resulting in less-than-satisfactory educational outcomes [24].

4. Recommendations

The analysis of barriers to the implementation of school-based Sex Education presents somewhat a concerning picture. In order to turn around the damaging concept of sexual shame, schools need to realize the complementary nature between sexual health and confidence and Sex Education, discuss sexual topics boldly and naturally, and carry out Sex Education properly. Therefore, for China to adapt these initiatives to its context successfully, the following three recommendations are discussed.

4.1. 'CSE+Peer Education' Mode

CSE, as a science-based, accurate, orderly, and gradual educational mode, can adapt to the development level of adolescents of different ages. It is based on human rights principles and the realization of gender equality and pays attention to cultural relevance and environmental adaptation. It will bring a fundamental change to the social concepts [8]. The implementation of CSE meets societal needs and international demands. Thus, Chinese schools should abandon abstinence Sex Education, and instead emphasize more on the education of safe sexual behaviors, treat the establishment of gender awareness as the key focus, and promote gender equality.

Meanwhile, peer education should be integrated into CSE to form the 'CSE+Peer Education' mode, which is students student-centered. By cultivating peer sexuality educators, healthy communication and mutual-help relationships between students can be established, and they can have mutual supervision and grow with each other. Its main educational means include group discussion, topic presentation, and role play [26]. This kind of educational methodology is suitable for discussing sensitive topics occurring in Sex Education, which features a higher flexibility in educational time and space [27]. Currently, regions like England and Ghana have brought peer Sex Education into practice. They have achieved significant results in preventing the occurrence of risky sexual behavior and the spread of STDs [28]. The possibility of this initiative being successful in China is that,

according to Zhou, peer Sex Education brought a greater positive influence on students' sexuality attitudes than the traditional one [29].

It should be noted that when cultivating peer sexuality educators for the 'CSE+Peer Education' mode, the topic of gender awareness ought to be included as an essential educational component. In class, it can be carried out as a group discussion focusing on gender stereotypes, and the role play about dealing with the situation of encountering discrimination against homosexuals. After class, the peer supervision mode can be established. This mode will enable students to recognize and stop the occurrence of speech and behaviors with a discriminatory tone around them.

4.2. The School-Family Partnerships

Although establishing the connection between school and family is always an important content in school-based education, the importance of forming cooperation between school and family in Sex Education needs to be brought to the fore in China. The combined effect of school-based and family-based Sex Education is obvious and complementary [7]. In the aspects of enriching students' sexual knowledge and establishing proper sexual values, the educational outcome of Sex Education with school-family partnerships is superior to the counterpart that is school-based only. This is because school-family partnerships create a more comfortable and inclusive environment for discussing sexuality [21]. Sex Education with the school-family partnerships stresses the positive support of guardians, family-based health care, and a good parent-child communication relationship for discussing sexuality [2]. Thus, school-family partnerships should be established in Sex Education in Chinese primary and secondary schools. It could focus on the observation and supervision of students' sexual safety and sexual attitudes both inside and outside the school so that Sex Education can intervene and the key points of teaching can be adjusted in time.

4.3. The Teaching Staff

As teachers have direct and frequent interactions with students, it is key to grow the pool of specialized teaching staff for better implementation of Sex Education. Given the severe lack of relevant teaching staff, Chinese schools should train some full-time staff to become specialized Sex Education teachers (e.g., the injection of the idea of 'CSE+Peer Education' mode). By doing so, their knowledge of reproductive health can be enhanced, increasing their comfort when proceeding with Sex Education practice and improving the quality of the dissemination of sexual knowledge. Among these benefits, the level of comfort teachers feels when discussing sexuality is more critical, and has a more profound influence than its educational contents [7].

The teaching methods adopted by Sex Education teachers can be improved as well. Those in the Netherlands can be of certain reference values due to their leading role in Sex Education. For example, a good communication atmosphere and student-centered discussion focusing on gender topics can be established. For the classroom seating arrangement, students can sit in a circle to create an open-minded and inclusive educational space where student questioning is the major way of teaching. Everyone has access to the information and the transmission of knowledge is two-sided. Teachers pay attention to the establishment of gender awareness and will carry out discussions on special topics given the related questions brought about during the discussion in class [5]. To do so, the Chinese Government should set up the national professional standards for Sex Education teachers. This can include Sex Education as a content of the Chinese national teacher certificate examination, which will help bring appropriate Sex Education methods into the Chinese education system and guarantee the quality of school-based Sex Education.

Training teaching staff in terms of the number of qualified staff and their teaching methods does not mean the roles of school nurses and guardians should be downplayed. On the contrary, as they share a complementary effect in school-based Sex Education, school nurses should be set up to be the special teaching staff. Their roles are similar to psycho-sexual health consultants. They will lend emotional support to adolescents and improve adolescent attitudes toward sexual health. Navarro-Prado et al. have shown that school nurses help reduce adolescent exposure to internet pornography

and the occurrence of risky sexual behaviors, and importantly have become another means to acquire sexual knowledge [15].

5. Conclusion

By analyzing existing studies on Sex Education practice, it can be found that Sex Education benefits the development of individuals, society, and the nation. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of school-based Sex Education in China has been blocked due to the entrenchment of the concept of sexual shame, a lack of related policy support, and the sluggish development of Sex Education at the school level. Taken together, they have created a dire need for China to change its Sex Education practice in primary and secondary schools. By using the successful cases of international sex education practices, this essay then suggests the application of the 'CSE+Peer Education' model, fostering the school-family partnerships, and developing professional and specialized teaching staff as the local strategies for China's Sex Education system to adopt. These proposals can inject a new way of thinking into Chinese primary and secondary schools' Sex Education. Meanwhile, this essay is a supplement to the existing body of literature on Sex Education focusing on sexuality values. In future research, it is worthwhile analyzing the performance of these proposals and discussing more effective methods for school-based Sex Education.

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