

Schools' and Parental Responsibility: Students' Experiences of and Perceptions on Sex Education

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Abstract

The Chinese society becomes more opened up towards topics regarding sex, sex education is, however, not on the right track. This research conducts a mixed-method study among 140 participants to investigate adolescents' perceptions on schools' and parental responsibility for providing sex education. It is found out that there is mismatch between Chinese students' expectation on where and how they received sex education and the reality. Schools and parents are both expected to provide sex education so as to build intimate parent-adolescent relationship, learn comprehensive system of scientific knowledge on sexual behaviors. Also, it points out that there is a lack of attention to those topics related to sexual behavior that mostly generate negative outcomes (e.g., abortion, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse). This study implicates schools' and the parental responsibility of sex education.

Key Words: *Sex education, school's responsibility, parental responsibility, mixed-method study*

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, sex education has been a long-debated issue that faces challenges in China. According to this researcher's observation, most schools in China do not provide comprehensive sex education. Discussion about sex education for non-married adolescents also tends to be culturally, institutionally, and historically oppressed and ignored in Chinese society. As shown by a 2015 study conducted by the Youth Network in China and the China Family Planning Association, only 10% of the nearly 20,000 university students from over 130 universities surveyed had received any sexuality education in primary school (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, considering the responsibility of schools and parents to provide adequate and appropriate sex education is of utmost importance.

"Sex education" refers to finding out about sex from parents, friends, teachers, adults in general, or mass media (Campos, 2002). Patricia Schiller (1973) claims that "finding out about sex" means learning factual information on all aspects of sex, learning about the sexual self, the opposite sex, and the sexual behavior of others, and learning that sex is a part of life. Sex education refers to the curriculum for achieving the objective of teaching youth about any of the preceding aspects (Campos, 2002). Both of the definitions are used as operational definitions in this paper.

According to Widman and Kamke (2018), during the period of sexual curiosity in one's childhood, if the caregiver conveys messages that sexual curiosity is bad, dirty, or sinful, children may develop a sense of sexual shame. Later on, in the period early to mid-adolescence (11-17 years), parents are still an important source of

education and monitoring. Other researchers conclude that parent-child communication specifically about contraception lowers the rate of risky sex (Aspy et al., 2007; Donenberg, Emerson, & Mackesy-Amiti, 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2003; K. Miller et al., 1998; Steinberg, 2019). Due to the important nature of sex education, this study aims to survey students, seeking to understand how they received sex education, as well as their perceptions of and attitudes toward school-based sex education with parents engaged.

2. Methodology

This research was based on a two-stage, mixed methodological design consisting of both quantitative (17 survey items) and qualitative (five items) data collection. In the first stage, to collect and analyze numerical data, the researcher distributed a survey and analyzed the data using the Wenjuanxing.cn (问卷星, <https://www.wjx.cn>) on social media via WeChat to Chinese bilingual students from June 9, 2020, to June 11, 2020. 142 people participated in the survey. The students who completed the questionnaire were mainly from Shanghai, with some other students from Chongqing, Hunan, Hubei, Heilongjiang, Hainan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Chinese students who currently live abroad. The education program is designed for the next generation and people's attitudes towards sex education are becoming more opened up over the last few decades in China. Consequently, the target subjects were Chinese students below the age of 20 and two of the 142 responses from participants aged at 23 and 30 are excluded from data analysis, that is, in total of 140 questionnaires were selected for further and detailed analysis.

The current survey was loosely based on a mixed-methods study of Romanian young people that focused on the relationship between the sex education provided in the family of origin (FOO) and the debut of sexual activity (Faudi & Rada, 2019). The current survey asked every participant to provide personal information regarding their experiences of having discussions related to sexuality or being educated in the familial context. Students' preference for how sex education is instructed is considered as well. The researcher took some questions directly from the study conducted by Faudi and Raga (2019) such as the following questions: "To what extent have you discussed the following subjects with your parents" and "Have you experienced any form of sex education in the family?" The seven subjects chosen and the three-point Likert-type scale used for the two preceding questions in this questionnaire are the same as those included in the Romanian study. Meanwhile, this researcher made several modifications to the options in some of the questions that inquired about age in the Romanian survey since the participants of that survey were between ages 18 and 30 years (Faudi & Rada, 2019). At the end of the survey, this researcher asked whether the participant was willing to take part in a face-to-face in-depth interview. If the answer was "yes", then the participant was asked to leave their contact information for the second stage of the research.

In the second stage of this research, collecting qualitative data, this researcher contacted five of the 13 participants (9.29%) who were willing to be interviewed in order to provide further description, specification, or reflection. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the selected participants conducted. Safe and quiet environment was provided to help relieve the interviewees' uneasiness, make them feel more secure, and reduce their embarrassment for more genuine qualitative data.

3. Findings and Discussion

Among the 140 participants in the survey, whose age has a range from 13 to 20 years old, there are 46 (32.86%) male participants and 94 (67.14%) female participants. 64 (45.71%) of the 140 participants have discussed with their parents about any topic related to sexuality while 59 (42.14%) of the 140 participants have experienced sex education in their family. "Even having only a little discussion with parents regarding sexuality is much better than lacking the whole discussion," commented by one of the interviewees. The diagrams below show to what extent the participants have randomly discussed the seven subjects with their parents (Figure 1) and the content of sex education the participants have formally received (Figure 2) respectively.

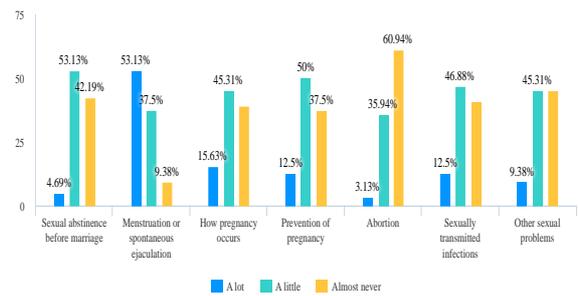


Figure 1 Student-Parent Subject Casual Discussion

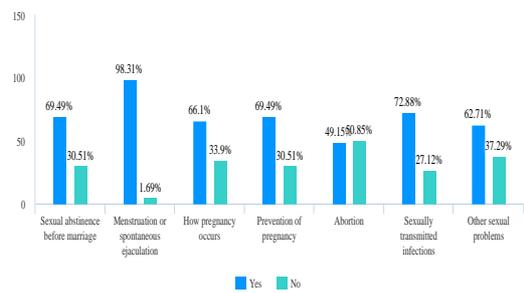


Figure 2 Student-Parent Subject Formal Education

As shown in the figures above, the subject that has been discussed and educated the most is menstruation or spontaneous ejaculation which is the most closely related to the adolescents' daily life. It seems like parents are more willing to address only practical issues that their children are currently and consistently experiencing, since children may have the most concerns or curiosity for those issues. On the other hand, abortion has been least discussed and educated. In fact, there are 55.56% female participants and 73.68% male participants have almost never discussed this subject with their parents. Meanwhile, 48.84% female participants and 56.25% male participants reported that they did not receive any education from their parents on the subject of abortion. It can be inferred that parents may want to avoid topics related to deaths or ethical issues arisen from abortion, but still, it is important for the adolescents to understand the process and consequences of abortion so that they can possess stronger sexual decision-making skills.

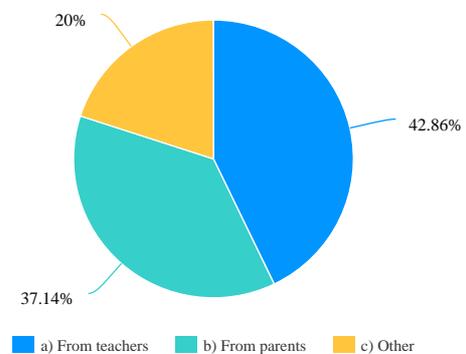


Figure 3 How Sex Education is Taught

As shown in Figure 3, the percentages of participants who would like sex education from teachers and parents are both around 40%, with slightly more participants preferring being instructed by teachers (42.86%) than by parents (37.14%). This indicates that participants expect to receive sex education not only from parent but also from school teachers.

The five interviewees explained why parents and school are expected to fulfill the responsibility of delivering sex education. Three of the interviewees preferred learning from teachers because they thought that parents are relatively conservative and receiving sex education directly from parents is “the most embarrassing thing in the world”. They expressed that they didn’t want to “lose face” in front of their parents. Therefore, they preferred being taught sex-relevant knowledge by teachers but not parents mainly because of their desire to produce and maintain a positive image in their parents’ eyes. It indicates that talking to their parents about sexual topic is an action that will lead adolescents to lose status or other negative consequence. It further suggests that parents are structured in higher position in a family and parent-adolescent relationship, when talking about sexual topic, is more intensive. Sex, coming from traditional Chinese culture and beliefs, is till a taboo subject in Chinese society. The discomfort projected by adolescents shows that sex subject is still not acceptable to talk about with parents and it play into fears of being negatively viewed by parents.

Secondly, participants explained that adolescents should get scientific fundamental knowledge from authentic resources, like teachers. Here, teachers are considered as faithful transmitter of scientific knowledge and parents. It further hints that adolescents view their teachers as having inherent authority regarding knowledge about sexual topic and view their parents. In participants’ rational, teachers are supposed to provide students with general information about what is better to do and what is not. Parents should be more specific with their own children to provide sex education that is based on each child’s personality and experience.

In contrast, an interviewee preferred learning from parents because she thought that if parents are willing to discuss and provide information related to sex, then this topic is not that “forbidden” in the family. “Parental sex education is equal to parental support on healthy sexual activities which shows parents’ understanding and trust of adolescents’ own sexual decision-making abilities,” she added. It indicates that the main reason students prefer learning sexual knowledge from parents is for to build close, intimate, and trusting relationships with their parents. Together, it is suggested that the two key educational stakeholders, teachers, and parents, are both expected to be involved in the sex education.

4. Conclusion

Based on conclusions reached by many other scholars and the findings from quantitative and qualitative data analysis

of this paper, schools and parents are expected to fulfill the shared responsibility of sex education in China. Specifically, school is suggested to comprehensive, systematic and scientific knowledge about sexual topic to adolescents, which will significantly contribute a knowledge-based understanding of sexual behavior, and sexual health and diseases. The participation of parents in the sex education is also strongly encouraged, as personal private stories of parents can be shared for educational purposes. The information provided from parents may be more specifically based on every adolescent and can show parental support on adolescents to make independent and rational decisions. This contributes to building intimate, and trusting parent- adolescents relationships.

Considering the discussion and education of abortion in the family context is few compared with those of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) and other five subjects chosen for the study, schools and parents should pay comparable attention to those topics related to sexual behavior that mostly generate negative outcomes (e.g., abortion, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse). After all, both abortion and STI may be harmful for people’s health physically and mentally, especially for adolescents who may not even be fully sexually mature. Meanwhile, abortion has to take the life of another living organism into consideration. This significantly requires adolescents’ ability to make reasonable decisions after thinking thoroughly over potential consequences. Consequently, responsibility falls to schools and parents for enhancing adolescents’ decision-making skills according to their expectation by providing sex education.

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