

# Comparison Between Chinese and Danish School-based Sex Education from Gender Aspects

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## ABSTRACT

School-based sex education is distributed unequally in different areas, to be specific, more advanced in most western countries while still requires significant development in most eastern countries. Therefore, two randomly selected nations: China and Denmark, are chosen for school-based sex education comparison. The overall sex education situation of the two nations is illustrated, and then comparison from gender-relevant aspects, including gender stereotype and sex roles formation, sex orientation and gender formation, and national gender equality level, is conducted. Through comparison of both current curriculum and course possible outcomes, problems and improvements are identified: Danish school-based sex education shows a lack of gender and sexuality minority references so that students could be influenced by the hetero- and cis- normality in the mainstream society and consequently enhance gender equality; while Chinese school-based sex education itself is governed by hetero- and cis- normal content, therefore, is also deepening the gender gap of the society but with a deeper degree. Furthermore, common problems, including lack of sex-positive education, consent education, and diversity background references, are identified. Overall, Denmark shows a higher level in the completeness of school-based sex education, and the data of the two nations suggested a positive relation between school-based sex education level and national gender equality level. The need for further study on school-based sex education from a gender aspect and the relation between sex education level and gender equality level are also indicated.

**Keywords:** *Sex education, Gender, China, Denmark.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The earliest sex education started in the late 19th century in Northern America and Europe due to the progressive education movement which sought to realize social reforms for women, children, immigrants, workers, the urban poor, animals, and society [1]. Progressivism in education is built on the trend of idealized childhood that enhances the construction of public schools. As an ideal tool of national force strengthen, public school education publicizes the importance of public health, including sexual health through sex education. Sex education was further consolidated and widened by the first and second world war around the 1920s and 1950s due to the prevalence of venereal diseases and extra-marital pregnancy [2]. Hence, school-based sex education has been developing with social culture and national needs after then; however, the argument that sex education might lead to promiscuity and encourage adolescent sexual behaviour has been the main criticism throughout history [3].

The education of sex then spread globally from Western countries but distributed with different levels. Most eastern countries that have sex education in school, like China and Japan, started their school sex education between the 1950s and 1990s, aiming to strengthen the nations by improving reproduction, sex, eugenics, and women's liberation [4][5]. However, with more significant influences from different historical, cultural, and religious taboos about sex, limiting the completeness of sex education curricula, a significant fraction of eastern countries has no school curriculum related to sex education [6].

As a result, sex education level has been unequally distributed and deeply affected by the sociocultural differences between the nations. Consequently, the Western countries show a higher level in the content completeness and cover range in public school sex education, while sex education curricula in eastern countries' schools are mainly in developing stages.

Besides, as public school is the central institution in sex roles socialization and gender formation, sex education is expected to provide young people with relationship skills and address the complexity of gender stereotypes [7]. Therefore, the correct cognition of gender should be able to enhance the degree of gender equality. Subsequently, owing to the sex education level gap between western and eastern countries, a corresponding gender status difference should be raised.

Most research on school sex education of certain nations, sex education, and gender stereotypes has been conducted individually. Thus, there have not been many papers comparing western and eastern sex education directly and investigating sex education from gender aspects. Therefore, this paper will firstly investigate the public-school sex education difference with its consequent gender gap through comparison of sex education, sex roles and gender stereotype, sex orientation, gender identification, and gender equality level of Denmark and China; two countries were chosen as examples of western countries with relatively higher school sex education and eastern country with developing school sex education respectively. The common issue raised, suggestions for both educations and the relation between school education and gender equality will also be discussed. Consequently, needs for further research will also be identified.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. School-based Sex Education in Denmark***

Sex education has been in the Danish school system since the 1900s, and in 1970 it was made compulsory [8]. According to a large-scale survey conducted among people aged 15-24, about 95% have received school-based sexual education. However, in this age group, 43% reported being unsatisfied with school-based sex education since the education has been of limited or no use [9]. The majority also reported that school is their primary source of information about sexual health [10].

From a Danish political perspective, the school sex curriculum aims to promote pupils' health and well-being, including general health, sexual health, sexuality, and family life. The curriculum describes sexuality as one of the central and lifelong aspects of being human, a significant aspect of human identity and self-perception, and a dynamic interplay between various bodily functions, cultural norms, and societal rules [11][12].

As a result, in Denmark, school sex education is included in the compulsory cross-curricular theme Health, Sexuality and Family Life Education. The curriculum is taught to all pupils in Danish compulsory education, consisting of ten years of primary and lower secondary education, and is designed at different levels for pupils of different grades [11]. The Health, Sexuality and Family

Life Education module is then split into two categories: Health and Wellbeing and Gender, Body, and Sexuality. Health and Wellbeing focuses on providing the pupils with knowledge regarding their mental health, general physical health, rights, and sexual health. At the same time, Gender, Body, and Sexuality has a more thorough guideline which requires that teachers instruct their students to meet diversity with recognition and respect, and specifically emphasize the diversity of sexuality, gender, body, ethnicity, religion, social background, and age. Finally, teachers must instruct students on their sexual rights [13].

On the other hand, since the current Danish sexual education is a decentralized system in which the government provides guidelines of education content that must be covered instead of providing a set curriculum in place, each school is free to create and implement its curriculum [14]. Consequently, information often gets condensed or skimmed over so that student knowledge varies significantly across the country. Moreover, not all teachers are trained in sexual health education, so they often avoid teaching about the emotional aspect of sexual health and only teach the biological and anatomical aspects [15]. From another aspect, the decentralized system provides more engagement in teaching and a chance for students to be lectured by non-governmental education organizations and guest speakers, making teaching more meaningful, relevant, and of interest to the children [12].

### ***2.2. School-based Sex Education in China***

The school-based sex education started in the early 1960s and was officially promoted in 1979, stimulated by the launch of the one-child policy. Based on a survey covered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2021, the percentage of primary and secondary Chinese schools that provide sex education is within the range of 76-100% [6].

In China, sex education is referred to as puberty education and sexual health education, aiming to educate the population into moral beings and enable them to contribute to national development. The official promotion of school sex education programs for pupils is highly associated with broader social and health issues, including population control and prevention of venereal disease infection [16]. However, sex education in China underlines sociocultural sexual morality and self-regulation prioritized over the need for epidemic prevention [4]. Specifically, young people in China are considered too immature to deal with emotional and sexual relationships and are expected not to be distracted from educational and social matters by sexual interest. Therefore, sex education was primarily used for preventing young people from engaging in undesired sexual practices. Subsequently, the policies on school-

based sex education are mainly from the health and moral education aspect, including policies on school hygiene and health care, health education, moral education, safety education, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) prevention education, and preventing child sexual abuse [17].

Consequently, although policies promote school-based sex education, there are neither national guidelines nor national curriculum for it [19]. Moreover, school-based sex education is not a stand-alone subject; it is usually included in other relevant courses like general health education, moral education, and puberty education. Restricted sex educational content is mentioned in these courses, and they are not considered formal subjects [18]. Thus, the topics covered vary a lot across the nation. From the school-based sexual education survey generated by UNESCO on the coverage of critical concepts of sexuality education: 42% of all schools surveyed covered the topic Relation, 38% covered sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and HIV, 37% covered Gender, 36% covered Rights, and only 29% covered Violence [17]. These low coverage rates indicate the need for a more structured school-based sex education program.

Furthermore, since sexual education is not a stand-alone subject in the nine years of Chinese compulsory education, there is no professional provision for teacher training on sexuality education in China's teacher education system [18]. Therefore, there are very few specialized sexuality education teachers in China's schools, so teachers from other subjects are usually assigned to teach sex education [17]. Optimistically, in recent years, China has promoted digital platforms like You & Me, which provides free-of-charge sexuality educational skills to interested educators to strengthen school-based sexuality education [6]. Various evaluations suggested positive changes in students' knowledge and attitudes after taking sex education from teachers supported by these platforms [19].

### **3. COMPARISON OF SEX EDUCATION BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES**

This section will compare school-based sex education content and outcome between China and Denmark from gender and sexuality aspects. This section has three parts comparing sex education from sex and gender formation, sexual orientation and gender formation, and national gender equality level of both countries.

#### ***3.1. Sex and Gender Stereotype Formation***

The school-based sex education in Denmark covers the topic of gender. It provides a thorough guideline for pupils to construct their knowledge on gender, including gender stereotypes and sex roles, though there is a lack of

relevant references in their curriculum might lead to pupils being influenced by the dominant gender stereotype and sex roles norms in society[10][11][12]. In contrast, in China, information on gender is rarely covered; moreover, the course teaches the traditional sex roles and gender stereotypes through the asymmetrical gender assumptions, female sexual morality, and heteronormative content [20][21]. In Chinese school-based sex education content, girls are presented as more vulnerable, weak, and emotional than boys. Romantic love relationship is also forbidden and linked to sexual morality for adolescents, especially for girls, since it can lead to immoral sexual activities. Additionally, girls are expected to be responsible for their reproductive health, and menstruation is still stigmatized, not taught, and not presented positively [21]. Moreover, masturbation is mainly associated with boys' energy, strength, and behaviour, while female masturbation is not expected and refers to female purity and reproduction health [22]. Thus, the double standard in sexual behaviours for females and males has been developed to benefit males personally and within the broader social structure [7].

Furthermore, unlike Danish pupils' primary sexual information comes from school-based education, a significant fraction of Chinese pupils' sexual information also comes from mass media [10][23]. However, media present unrealistic and skewed accounts of human sexuality, leading commentators to raise concerns with the formulaic portrayal of gender roles and sexuality, developing and sustaining stereotypical gender-role schemas. Subsequently, this incorrect sexual information leads to further female self-objectification, male acceptance of violence against women, and perpetuation of rape myth [24]. Therefore, Chinese school-based sex education has enhanced gender stereotypes and sex roles deeper than Danish school-based sex education.

#### ***3.2. Sexual orientation and Gender Identification***

For Denmark, there is a lack of representation of sexuality and gender minorities, which will open space for the interpretation of the curriculum from the perspective of dominant heterosexual and cisgender norms in society [11]. Consequently, the marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and all the other sexual orientation and gender identities (LGBTQ+) issues in the sexuality education curriculum risks contributing to the reproduction of hetero- and cis-normativity, the potential exclusion of sexual and gender diversity among both pupils and teachers, and the continued side-lining of sexual and gender minorities as such [25].

As the heteronormative discourses remain dominant in China, sex education remains to enhance and shape young people's sexual desires and behaviours into the single kind desired by the party-state. Therefore,

internalized homophobia is common and can be enhanced by sex education in China. Many minor sexuality people may struggle between their desire for a minor-sexual relationship and the familial/social expectation of marriage and reproduction [20].

The two countries face similar issues, but Denmark covers a relatively more comprehensive sex education about gender and sexual orientation while those contents are absent in Chinese school-based sex education. Therefore, the sexual orientation identification and gender identification of students from both countries are influenced but lower for Danish students.

### 3.3. Gender Equality Level

The global gender gap index in 2021 is 0.768 for Denmark and ranks 29th globally, while the index of China is 0.682 and ranks 107th [26]. The gender inequality index in 2018 is 0.040, ranking 2nd for Denmark and is 0.163, ranking 39th for China [27]. These statistics suggest that the gender equality level of Denmark is much higher than in China. Furthermore, as the overall Danish school-based sex education level is higher than China's, there is a positive correlation between school-based sex education level and gender equality level.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Although Danish school-based sex education is more comprehensive than Chinese sex education, there are some common problems in school-based education, including the lack of sex-positive education, consent education, and diversity background references.

Sex-positive content is absent in Chinese school-based sex education; while for Denmark, although the curriculum aspires to promote a sex-positive discourse, from analysis, the current curriculum counterproductively provides limited space for sex-positive content. Moreover, when sex-positive content, especially sexual pleasure, is presented, it is regularly followed by content on challenges, risks, and the need for caution like contraception, sexual infections, and unwanted pregnancy. The curriculum text has a striking absence of reference to genitals, erogenous zones, sexual techniques, masturbation, or orgasm. Sex-positive means being open, communicative, and accepting of individuals' differences related to sexuality and sexual behaviours and allowing for a wide range of sexual expression that takes into account sexual identities, orientations, and behaviours; gender presentations; accessible health care, education, and multiple vital dimensions of human diversity [28]. Hence, sex-positive content is necessary for school-based sex education.

In addition, the lack of consent education in most curricula in both countries leads to sexual violence,

especially towards women. Therefore, it is necessary to teach students exactly what consent is, when a person is not equipped to consent, such as drunk, and the sociocultural construction of normalization of rape. Consent education has been proven to be more beneficial in reducing sex-related crimes [29]. Besides, method and encouragement of intervening in sexual assault should also be covered in school-based education [30].

Furthermore, for both countries, there is also an absence of diverse ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds, which may potentially harm pupils from these backgrounds. These pupils risk experiencing exclusion, discrimination, or racism because the sexuality education curriculum neither recognizes nor represents their experiences, values, or future aspirations [11].

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper examined school-based sex education in China and Denmark from gender aspects and found that education in Denmark is more comprehensive than that in China. More gender-relevant content, including gender stereotype, gender identity, and sexual orientation, is covered in Danish sex education, while Chinese sex education rarely covers these topics and enhances hetero- and cis- normality. On the other hand, since heteronormality is still governing both nations, there are still loops on relevant topics in curricula. The paper also showed that gender equality level has a positive correlation with the level of school-based sex education in the two selected countries. Besides, both Denmark and China face a lack of sex-positive education, consent education, and diverse background references.

Further studies investigating national school-based sex education regarding national gender equality and gender-relevant concepts are needed. In addition, further investigations on multi-national gender equality and school-based sex education levels should be conducted.

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