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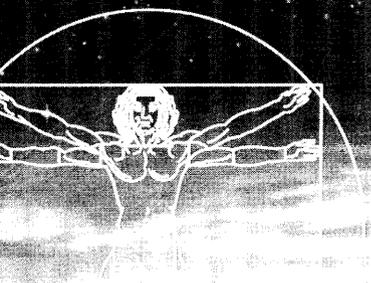
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# Sex Education in a Knowledge-based Society

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Angeline Khoo and Lim Kam Ming

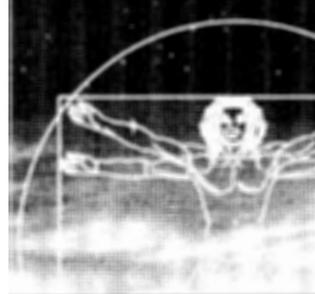
## *The need for sex education in our society today*

A new generation of children are growing up with the Internet. Our youth today have skills to access any kind of information they want. Obtaining information about sex is no longer a problem — these can be easily obtained at the click of the mouse. While the Internet provides limitless opportunities and resources for sex education, parents and teachers are faced with new problems and challenges which involve “issues of quality, accuracy, developmental appropriateness, comprehensiveness, parent-child communication, professional development, and public perceptions of the sexuality education field” (Roffman, Shannon and Dwyer, 1997). Anyone who uses the search engine to find information about sex may find websites with explicit sexual graphics and advertisements. There is a bias of search engines towards such material (Gotlib and Fagan, 1997), and even with websites that do give information about sex, their credibility is questionable as the authorship is unknown.

What kinds of dangers exist on the Net? One of the most common fears of Singapore parents is that their children may be exposed to sex on the Net. In a recent straw-poll survey, 80% of parents in Singapore indicated that they are concerned about pornography. Their worries are exacerbated by stories in the newspapers. We read of children or teenagers being lured and raped by strangers they met in chat rooms. (Lum and Hee, 2000; Lim, 2000). A Straits Times survey conducted in 1998 found that more than a third of teenagers admitted to having watched and read pornographic material (The Straits Times, 1998).

Cyberporn can be obtained and distributed with greater ease. Not only is there greater proliferation of pornography on the Net, there is also greater variety, ranging from the mildly erotic to the all kinds of paraphilias or odd sexual practices. It is also easier for kids to conceal — the sexually explicit image on the computer screen is hidden with a swift “Alt-Tab” movement the moment a parent is around. Moreover, the child or teenager need not be actively seeking out pornographic websites. A search for an apparently innocent topic, a typographical error or mistaking a “dot com” instead of a “dot org” can yield a host of pornographic websites.

The Internet is indeed a very useful resource for sex education. However, research on the effects of pornography has not been conclusive, but one finding is clear — that exposure to pornographic material increases acceptance of interpersonal



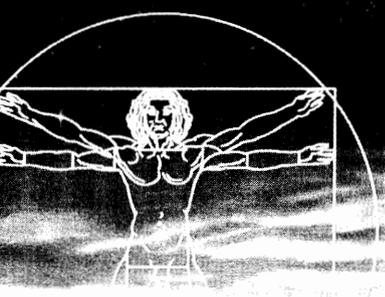
violence and rape myths (Wallace, 1999). There is evidence that early exposure to pornography is related to subsequent rape fantasies and attitudes that are in favour of sexual violence towards women. Sexual aggression can be perceived by both men and women as sexually romantic! However, parents can take comfort that for many students, their curiosity about sex is only a passing phase. 30% of students who responded to an NTU study on Internet use in May 2000 (Kang, 2000) said that they had surfed porn sites before, but they got bored and stopped.

There is strong evidence that people on the Net tend to reveal more personal information to a stranger online than to strangers they meet face-to-face (Aftab, 2000). More personal secrets tend to be shared readily, but often the gullible newbie fails to realize that the real-life (RL) person at the other end of the terminal is far from what has been presented in virtual reality (VR). The typical pedophile takes pains to befriend, cultivate and win his victim's trust. When the online meeting progresses to an offline encounter, one often wonders why the child who suddenly realizes that the "friend" is far from the person he claimed to be on the Net, does not run away but becomes a willing victim. Perhaps it is the nature of the online relationship that has been nurtured for a long time in the Chat rooms. Or perhaps there is a strong sense of denial, the unwillingness to face reality on the victim's part. Whatever the reason, what may seem virtual and harmless becomes painfully real.

There is therefore a real need for sex education. Then the question of whose responsibility arises. There is a general consensus that this is the purview of parents as curious children often begin to ask questions at a young age, often even before they are in school. However, with the Internet, parents play a much reduced role as disseminators of knowledge (Kraut, Schelis, Mukhopadhyay, Manning and Kiesler, 1996). They face a greater challenge with teenagers who prefer to learn and discuss such matters among their peers whom they meet in school. However, according to SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) report, many studies have shown that parents are uncomfortable in discussing issues such as intercourse, masturbation, homosexuality and orgasm with their children, and would appreciate help from formal programmes.

Thus, SIECUS recommends school-based sexuality programmes which "can add an important dimension to children's ongoing sexual learning". The aims of such programmes would include the following (Went, 1985):

- To generate atmosphere where questions about pubertal changes and reproduction can be asked without embarrassment
- To counteract myths and folklore and to provide accurate information about contraception, sexually-transmitted diseases and AIDS
- To help children understand they have rights, and should have control over their bodies, and to increase communication skills about these
- To help children accept their sexuality as part of their whole personality



- To provide constant reassurance that body changes, physical, emotional and social, are normal and acceptable, and give help in adjusting to these changes, particularly for early developers
- To develop communication skills in personal relationships, including those necessary for getting help if things go wrong (child abuse, rape, pregnancy, etc)

### ***The role of the teacher***

It is understandable that many teachers tend to be apprehensive about talking to students about sex. Some of their concerns include fear of students asking personal questions, fear of being embarrassed, not knowing answers to some questions, handling issues of confidentiality, and facing negative responses from parents (Went, 1985). In a study of experienced Pastoral Care teachers, Soong and Khoo (1994), found that teachers found it most comfortable to talk about value questions, and were most uncomfortable with questions of a sexual nature. Older teachers are more comfortable answering these questions. In general, teachers prefer to talk about values to all girls rather than all boys or mixed classes, but male teachers are comfortable only in all boys classes.

Does the perspective of sex education of our graduate trainee teachers today differ from that of the more experienced teachers six years ago? Given the new challenges of the “wired” society, are our newly trained teachers willing to play a role in facilitating discussions about sex and sexuality in the classroom? Do they feel confident in handling issues not only about sex, but also sex on the Net?

### ***A study on trainee-teachers’ perceptions of sex education***

This study examines some issues pertaining to the perceptions of sex education of PGDE teachers who have just completed their training. Some of these issues include

- knowledge of sexuality
- perceptions of the importance of sexuality topics
- responsibility for sex education
- comfort/discomfort levels
- concerns and worries

Two hundred thirty-three trainee teachers (63 men, 170 women) from the Post-graduate Diploma in Education programme completed a survey assessing their attitudes about sex education in school during a mass lecture presentation on May 8, 2000. Several items in the questionnaire were taken from a study by Soong and Khoo (1994). Topics on sexuality were categorised into biological, sexual and values questions.

### **Knowledge of Sexuality**

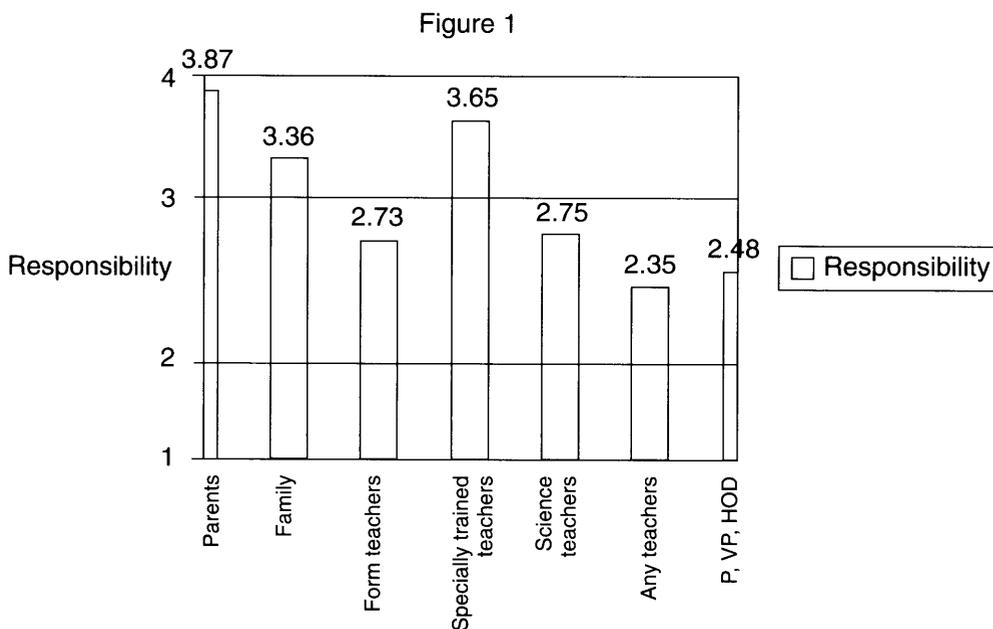
One obvious gender difference in knowledge of sexuality is about gender specific issues. Male trainee teachers knew more about male sexual organs, circumcision, and nocturnal emission than do female trainee teachers whereas female trainee teachers knew more about female sexual organs and menstruation do than male trainee teachers. No gender differences were found for knowledge about other topics such as pregnancy, contraception, pornography and abortion.

### **Perceptions of the Importance of Sexuality Topics**

There were no gender differences in terms of the trainee teachers' perceptions of the importance of informing teenagers about different sexuality topics. Older male trainee teachers thought that it was not important to teach this topic compared to younger male trainee teachers or to female trainee teachers.

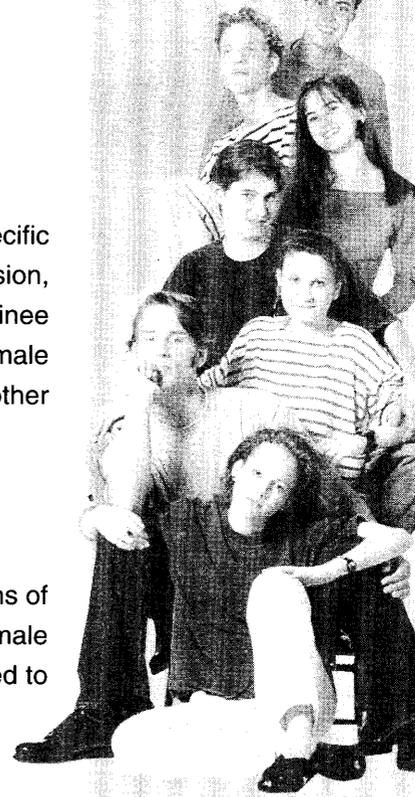
### **Responsibility for Sex Education**

Trainee teachers indicated that parents and specially-trained teachers have the greatest responsibilities for teaching sex education (see Figure 1).



### **Gender Effects On Comfort/Discomfort Toward Sex Education**

Women trainee teachers would be more comfortable teaching sex education in a same gender class or have no preference as compared to teaching in a mixed gender class (see Table 2).





**Table 2**

Comfortable teaching sex education (number of trainee teachers)

	Same gender	Mixed gender	No preference	Total
Men	15	13	35	63
Women	74	17	77	168

There are no gender differences in trainee teachers perceptions in whether mixed or same gender classes would most benefit the students (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

Benefits of sex education

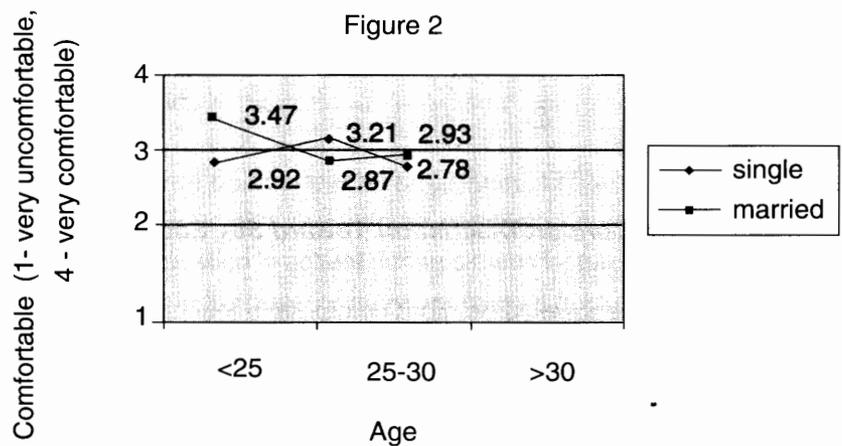
	Same gender class	Mixed gender class	Total
Men	30	33	63
Women	87	79	166

***Level of Comfort in Teaching Sex Education Topics***

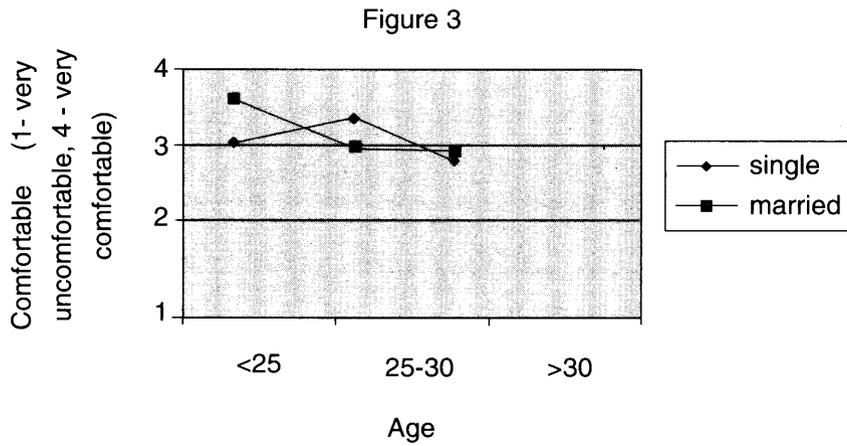
The specific possible topics in sex education were classified into three categories: 1) Biological or physiological topics (e.g., Why do boys have wet dreams?), 2) Sexual (techniques) (e.g., When a man is having sex, can he maintain his erection as long as he wants?), and 3) Moral issues (e.g., Opinion about homosexuality or lesbianism).

Male trainee teachers would be more comfortable talking about sexual techniques (mean=2.79, sd=.75) as compared to female trainee teachers (mean=2.38, sd=.78).

Younger married trainee teachers are more comfortable talking about biological issues than younger single trainee teachers (see Figure 2).

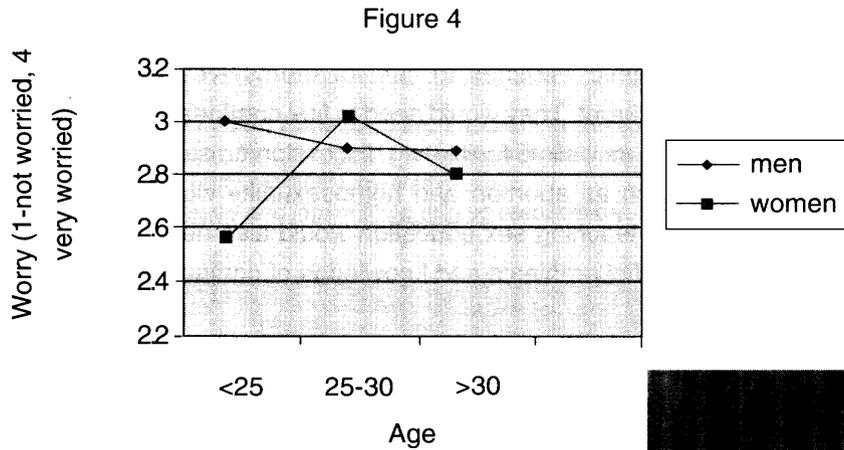


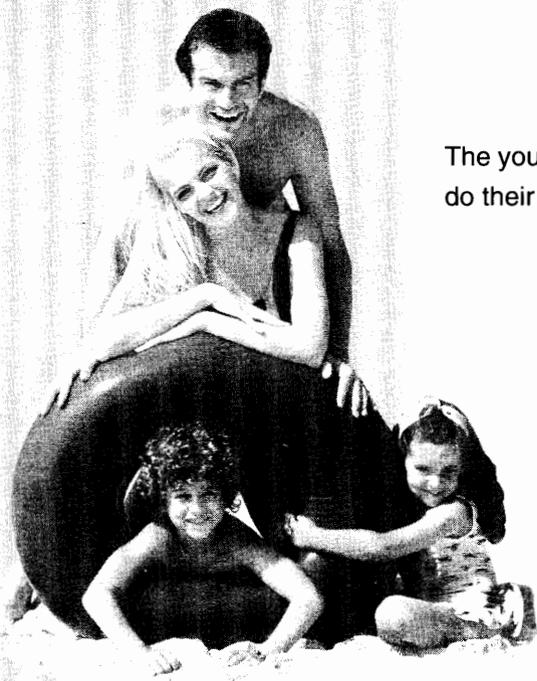
Younger married trainee teachers are more comfortable talking about morality issues than younger single trainee teachers (see Figure 3).



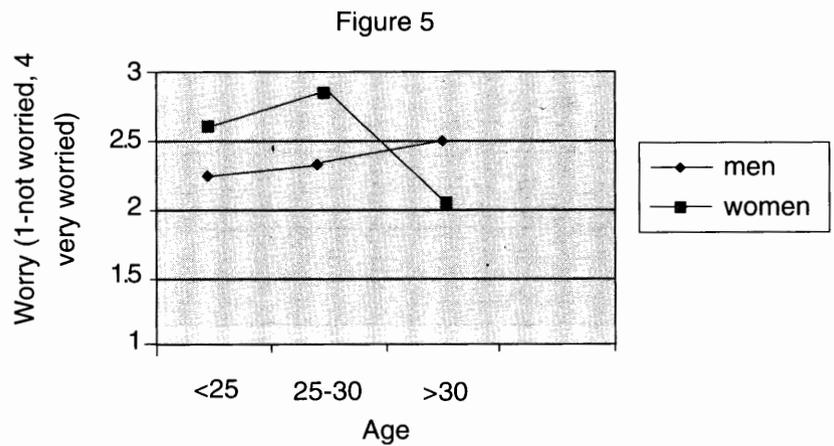
### Concerns and Worries

Female trainee teachers who are below 25 years old (mean=2.55) are less worried than the older female trainees between the age of 25-30 (mean=3.02) or their male counterparts. Both male and female trainee teachers above the age of 25 are equally worried that the class would be unruly (see Figure 4).





The younger female trainee tend to be more worried about upsetting parents than do their male counterparts (see Figure 5).



### Implications

#### Training

There is need for sex education training for teachers. While it is not surprising to find that teacher trainees have more knowledge about the sexuality of their own gender, results suggest that more knowledge about the sexuality of the opposite gender would prove useful. Teachers would need to know the jargon of chat rooms and understand what cybersex and cyberporn are. They would need the courage to surf the pornographic websites to see for themselves what the teenager experiences on the Internet. They would need to feel comfortable discussing topics that interest students, as well as facilitating discussion on such topics as oral sex, cybersex. Issues such as abortion and homosexuality would also need to be addressed. Teachers teaching sex education would also need basic counselling skills to identify potential problems and knowledge of community resources.

#### Selection

Our findings suggest that if newly trained teachers, who may be considered more Internet savvy, are chosen to be sex educators, their marital status and their age are important factors to consider. In contrast to the earlier study by Soong and Khoo (1994), it is not the older teachers who are more comfortable in teaching sex education, but the younger married teachers. It would be useful to replicate this study with a sample of experienced teachers.

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**Dr Angeline Khoo** and **Dr Lim Kam Ming** are assistant professors, teaching educational and social psychology in the Psychological Studies Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.  
Email: [ceakhoo@nie.edu.sg](mailto:ceakhoo@nie.edu.sg) and [kmlim@nie.edu.sg](mailto:kmlim@nie.edu.sg) respectively.

