Sex education in a knowledge-based society

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SEX EDUCATION IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

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Abstract: Getting information about sex is no longer the issue. Information about sex from adult movies to zoophilia can be easily obtained at the click of a mouse. The call for more sex education comes as no surprise with the increasing rate of teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and abandoned babies. A recent Straits Times poll indicated that four of five respondents wanted schools to conduct sex education courses. As the Internet makes its presence felt in the classroom, teachers in a knowledge-based society must face the new challenge of addressing sexuality issues that their students may have. How knowledgeable and comfortable are these new teachers about such matters? How prepared are these teachers in answering biological, sexual or value-laden questions? What kind of questions would these teachers be most comfortable or uncomfortable with? This study examines the attitudes towards sex education of new PGDE Primary and Secondary teachers who have just completed their training at NIE.

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.

One major worry of parents is the kind of information they are obtaining on the Net. Durkin and Bryant (1995) point out that online bulletin boards provide opportunities for users to communicate with others who share similar kinds of sexual interests, among which is child pornography. In a study on identities in chat rooms, particularly in chat rooms that appeal to young gay men, Lamb (1998) found that two-thirds were adults masquerading as children with the purpose of engaging in cybersex. In fact, the use of the Internet by pedophiles to engage in sexual communication with children and with other pedophiles present a challenge for law enforcement agencies (Durkin, 1997).

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).

Pornography is not new but with the Internet and the World Wide Web, much more is easily available, ranging from the mildly erotic to the hardcore. For example, by surfing under Yahoo Health, one can easily obtain information about sex that ranges from adult movies to zoophilia. Pornography can be easily accessed either intentionally or by mistake. Also, it is easily disseminated through emails and chat rooms.

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.

**Aim of this study**

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?

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

**Method**

**Participants**

Two hundred thirty three trainee teachers (63 men, 170 women) from the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programme participated in this study.

**Material and Procedure**

Participants 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. Questions that did not fit the three categories were revised till there was a satisfactory level of agreement of 95%.

**Results**

**Characteristics Of the Participants**

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Characteristics of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Less than 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children for married participants</th>
<th>No Children less than 13 years old</th>
<th>Children more than 13 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
<th>No experience</th>
<th>Contract / relief teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest qualification</td>
<td>General degree</td>
<td>Honours degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. However, the interaction between gender and age on the importance of informing teenagers on the topic of male sex organs was significant, \( F(2,193)=3.27, M_{\text{error}}=.4, p<.05 \). Older male trainee teachers thought that it was not important to teach about this topic compared to younger male trainee teachers or to female trainee teachers. The interaction between gender and age on the importance of informing teenagers on the topic of puberty was also significant, \( F(2,193)=3.24, M_{\text{error}}=.41, p<.05 \). Older male trainee teachers thought that it was not important to teach about 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).

![Figure 1](image_url)

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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Same gender</th>
<th>Mixed gender</th>
<th>No preference</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Same gender class</th>
<th>Mixed gender class</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, how can he maintain his erection as long as he wants?), and 3) moral issues (e.g., Opinion about homosexuality or lesbianism).

There is a significant main effect of gender on sexual topics, $F(1, 217)=5.02, M_{error}=.59, p<.05$. 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, $sd=.78$).

The interaction between age and marital status on biological issues is significant, $F(2, 217)=3.24, M_{error}=.42, p<.05$. Younger married trainee teachers are more comfortable talking about biological issues than younger single trainee teachers (see Figure 2).
The interaction between age and marital status on morality issues is significant, $F(2, 217)=3.1$, $M_{error}=4$, $p<.05$. Younger married trainee teachers are more comfortable talking about morality issues than younger single trainee teachers (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image-url)

**Concerns and Worries**

The interaction between age and gender on worries that class may be unruly is significant, $F(2, 205)=4.46$, $M_{error}=74$, $p<.05$. 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).

![Figure 4](image-url)

The interaction between age and gender on worries of upsetting parents is significant, $F(2, 205)=5.70$, $M_{error}=90$, $p<.01$. The younger female trainee tend to be more worried about upsetting parents than do their male counterparts (see Figure 5).
Implications

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. 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.

References


