

# ***The Comparison of Eastern and Western Societies' Attitudes Towards Offering Sex Education in Schools***

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**Abstract:** Sex education is considered as a rather sensitive topic in school worldwide, and differs in various aspects. It involves policies of governments, devoted resources, social norms, education of teachers, depth of content and feedback from students. Eastern countries and regions are more conservative. Though policies have been revised on supporting sex education in school and effort on balancing resources have been made, there are still difficulties to overcome. For instance, violating social norms, educating teachers to know the strategies on giving sex education and being provided with feedback from students in order to improve tactics used. Western countries are generally more open to sex education in school, resources have been devoted into it and policies have been made decades ago. Though it is controversial on which kind of sex education is most suitable for students, governments would listen to feedback from students and teachers on their advices. This paper provides with detailed conclusion on the above-mentioned points comparing between Eastern and Western aspects on teaching sex education in school.

**Keywords:** sex education, comparison, western and eastern view

## **1. Introduction**

Sex education (SE) has been a topic that receives great attention from government, teachers and society during the recent decades. The aim of which is to provide sufficient knowledge to students in order to reduce teenage pregnancy, rate of sex-related diseases and raise gender identification.

Eastern countries and regions are comparatively more conservative towards providing SE in schools due to social norms, lack of supporting policies, resources and practices. Therefore, the controversial part focuses on what could be done to offer SE in schools [1-3]. As Western countries generally had supporting policies decades ago, people are acceptable on having SE in schools, and they are mainly arguing on which subtype of sex education would be the most suitable according to students' feedback [4-6].

This paper aims to provide Western and Eastern countries' views and policies on offering sex education in schools, among which the barriers met in both societies would also be introduced.

## **2. Sex Education**

Sex education would be considered as a broad definition, as information of sexual organs' maturity and development would be taught to students, together with the methods on avoiding teenage

pregnancy and sexual related diseases. Most importantly, it is “age appropriate, culturally relevant and provide non-judgmental information” [4]. The knowledge taught is about sex, while also providing the students with a full-scale understanding of the education. Therefore, sex education differs from sex knowledge, because it aims to help students on avoiding mistakes that they may encounter and also introducing gender equality.

## 2.1. Sex Education and Policies in Eastern Countries

This paper collected information and citizens’ proposals from China mainland, China Hong Kong, China Taiwan and Japan, among which certain variations exist though most views have overlapped. Because of religious barriers like Confucianism, the already formed social norms in certain districts and lack of supportive policies and teaching resources, they all hold conservative views toward sexual education [3].

The social norms have the central element of the lack of social status and gender equality of women. With the growing up of teenagers, they might be unconsciously impacted by their own culture’s “gender-related rules, norms and expectations” [1] and therefore impose the norms on their same generation. For instance, in certain regions, being a “good girl” according to social norms involve being virgins, being blank about sex-related knowledge and not wishing to mention this topic both publicly and privately. Therefore, females in these regions would have “less self-efficacy to seek sex-related information” [1]. People might question on why the females would not innovate, this would be concerning the fact that if people violate the already existed social norms in a society, they would be considered with comments such as “weird, not belonging to this group”. However, as public knows, Eastern countries mostly retain collectivist culture and therefore value intergroup relationship more than other social groups. Moreover, as they are humans, they have the natural need to belong and are socially attached toward their own social groups. If they are being criticized as “abnormal” by their own society, certain consequences might take place like increase morbidity in mental illnesses.

Moreover, sex education has not been a distinct subject in Chinese mainland policy and curriculum, as most related content “exists implicitly under the rubric of health education and moral education (UNESCO 2019)” and sex-related information is limited [2]. Knowledge taught in school focuses on abstinence-based approach [4], which has restrictions toward the whole image of sex education as the majority of topics might not be covered fully in class. Similar situation has been found in China Hong Kong, where certain survey provides evidence of comprehensive approach that holds the purpose of expressing sexuality of students in an appropriate way. Most school still rely on school social workers and community resources on carrying out sex education, resulting to low incentives to adopt an evidence-based sex education [4].

Notwithstanding, China Taiwan has a more comforting situation on carrying out sex education in schools that is supported by regional policies. Back in 1998, sex education was already involved in the “Nine year Joint Curriculum”, and teachers are well-educated under guidance of NGOs. Therefore, students’ knowledge on sexuality is improved. With the suggestion of increasing time and initiatives, more impacts can be brought to their attitudes. Moreover, as school principals have increasingly realized the importance of need for sex education, there could be more improvements in the coming days [4].

Nevertheless, there have been gradual improvement and lift of prejudice towards sex education in Mainland China, like the suggestions made by governors during the 2022 Two Sessions (National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference). First, sex education is advised to take place since kindergarten. Second, it is suggested to include SE on sexual abuse in compulsory education in all regions of China. Moreover, in the revision of the Law of People’s Republic of China on Protection of Minors in 2020, policies on offering age-appropriate

sex education in schools have been made, emphasizing the importance of school-based knowledge and guidance [1].

The above revised policy elicits the third major point of the barriers of sex education in Eastern Countries, which is teaching resources. By summarizing the current situations in various regions of China and Japan, this paper holds the view that there can be increasing education of teachers, especially on the aspect of offering the knowledge to students without being conservative or embarrassed. As mentioned in texts, when female teachers face male students or male teachers facing female students, there can be embarrassment and loss of words. Above circumstance leads to the situation of students not wishing to present their problems to teachers, and embarrassed teachers not being able to offer useful advices, causing a negative circulation [2]. Similar situations have taken place in Japan as well, teachers might only cover basic biological factors in class, causing students unable to find answers to their questions in class [7].

Furthermore, due to the school curriculum and high competence in China and Japan, teachers should consider advising students not to stubbornly focus on class materials. Situations have occurred in texts that students find sex education unrelated to their exams, and therefore not focusing on it or suggesting an end to this [1,3]. According to certain suggestions, teachers find online sex education having greater positive impacts towards the students. This is because without the need of face to face, students' nervousness could reduce, leading them not hesitate on asking relating questions. Additionally, before starting an online class, students have the chance to introduce themselves, like their social and cultural background, therefore they could be replied with a more detailed response from teachers, whom would take various perspectives into account [7].

### **2.1.1. Conclusion to Eastern Perspectives**

In the selected countries and regions mentioned in this paper, there has always been a conservative view towards sex education due to social norms, lack of supporting policies and teaching resources. However, there has been gradual increase in attention from governments and societies on the importance of sex education over time. With the perfection of policies and teaching strategies, students in Asia could gain more knowledge on sex education in the coming days than they own today.

## **2.2. Sex Education and Policies in Western Countries**

Western countries generally hold a rather liberal view towards sex education in school, as it has been taught in school for years. Although in part of USA, there have been debates on which way of sex education suits students the best. Therefore, this paper holds the view that in most Western countries and regions, residents are liberal and agree that children should be taught sexual knowledge in school. The controversial part would be focused on the details of choosing which method is most suitable, like abstinence, abstinence plus, comprehensive SE or condom use.

In the late 1990s, an Abstinence Only Until Marriage Approach was published to 49 provinces within USA and programs were set up in schools to teach related knowledge. Because each state has different standards, policies on various aspects are revised according to different cultural backgrounds. Take California, which could be considered as one of the most "aggressive" states as an example, a law of mandate sex education in public schools was regulated in 2016 [4].

Although variations exist in the degree of determination, sex education in US is compiled in health or physical education (PE) curriculum, and the content taught differs from state to state. The main aspects taught include information about human sexuality, which includes gender identification and sex-related diseases. Moreover, helping kids develop positive attitudes, useful communication with others and practicing safe sex is also believed to be necessary in sex education.

There are specific health issue-related teachers who would deliver the information to students and NGOs also offers community-based sex education as complementary. Furthermore, the teachers in school are trained from time to time through lessons, speeches and online resources. The above-mentioned would be mainly offered by State Department of Education, NGOs and other related departments [4].

During studies conducted in North American schools, sex education has significant impacts among students' behaviors and thoughts. For instance, school-based sex education normally leads to vigorous outcomes such as increased protective measures and delayed initiation of sexual behavior [8]. This could be more evident when a study of female students was conducted. Female students who receive primarily abstinence knowledge has the least possibility on unplanned pregnancy [9]. However, the school-based sex education could provide various outcomes according to the knowledge taught to students. For instance, abstinence-plus programs were believed to bring the most positive outcomes of increasing protection and knowledge while reducing the risks [9]. This belief is derived from countless randomized trials with a large base number for scholars to draw a conclusion, which can be proved by results provided by students. As they claim that a comprehensive program would help on delaying sex behavior and increase the use of condoms [10].

As mentioned above, it is controversial on deciding which way and what topics should be introduced in class. Advices have been made by adolescents in the USA, as they believe it would be helpful if medical facts and detailed information on safety measures during sex activities are presented. This is due to the fact that adolescents believe information on abstinence only is unrealistic and out of date, as there are now non-heterosexual communities who would also like to obtain knowledge on manual sex [5]. By summarizing what they desired the most, it can be concluded that adolescents are more tolerant than teachers think they are. As they wish to obtain information on emotions and relationships and have an open discussion of pleasure and how to prevent sexual abuse, which is also an important outcome that sex education could bring to students. Evidence claims that neglecting the mention of pleasure may cause the reduced use of condoms and other protective behaviors among adolescents. Furthermore, by mentioning refusal skills in class, there is an increasing chance of protecting students from sexual assault and abuse in college [5,6]. Therefore, for students in USA, they generally wish to have a comprehensive sex education instead of abstinence only, which could be considered as a wise choice considering the benefits it could bring to students.

In UK, policies seem to be more renewed, this is because a new policy passed in 2017 and came into use since September 2020, focusing on mandate relationship and sex education for all school children [5]. However, this does not mean there were no policies before, as related guidance had been in use since 1960s on bringing sex education into the curriculum, and the aim of sex education was made clear in late 1980s. Though it is the same as the USA and varies in districts. Due to the variation, there have also been controversies on content that should be taught in class, as there are 5 different methods of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in total. Most of the education would be based on abstinence only information rather than sexual identity, which is claimed to overlook students' needs. Although there has been a basis for sex education and the policies are continually revised, there are still barriers to be overcome on which type of education would fit nowadays adolescents the most. Statistically, a quarter of the teachers hold the view that SRE fails to prepare children for future needs and it is believed current SRE neglects adolescents' sexual identities, relationships and cultural backgrounds [5].

Though there have been controversies and negative comments, sex education in school is considered by scholars to reduce the possibilities of unprotected sex. The positive outcomes are not only useful in UK, but also the whole Europe. This can be induced by experimental results, as sex

education knowledge enable students understand more about HIV and other sex-related diseases, therefore students would consciously remember to use condoms during sex behaviors [9].

The situation is more positive in Australia, as there has been a survey every 5 years issued from the National Survey of Australian Secondary Students since 1992. The survey is consisted of a wide range of topics, including whether students are confident on discussing sex-related topic with parents and teachers, which in certain states of USA seems abnormal. Moreover, source of information is also taken into account. Students would answer in details about what they learn in school and how important and useful they find the information to be [6]. With sex education basis, support from students, teachers and the public, there will be a way of teaching that would eventually fit the student's needs in the coming years.

### **2.2.1. Conclusion to Western Perspectives**

This paper holds the view that Western countries all have a basis of sex education for decades already, although there have been barriers on deciding which way would suit students the most. However, governments have revised policies and listened to students' view on the improvement of sex education. Eventually, there would be a teaching plan that suits everyone the most.

### **3. Comparison Between Eastern and Western Perspectives**

This paper holds the view that the main difference between Eastern and Western perspectives would be their emphasis. Eastern countries focus on the perspective on disseminating the importance of sex education to students, teachers and the whole society. Though there have been old and revised policies, social norms and limitation on resources still exist, which would disable students from accepting and talking about sexual knowledge in their conversation with teachers, parents and companions. However, people could not repudiate the effort of Eastern governments and organizations, as people nowadays are gradually accepting the mentioning of sex-related knowledge in schools. Moreover, they also realized how sex education could help on decreasing related diseases and teenage pregnancy. Therefore, this paper believes that the society in Eastern countries are gradually accepting sex education in schools, while government and teachers are trying to find a suitable way to teach students.

Western countries have established sex education in schools for decades and they are generally more open on discussing relating knowledge in schools or with their parents, though in certain regions situation might be a bit conservative. The overall society agree with the fact that their students should accept sex education in schools. Most Western countries are discussing which way of sex education would be the most suitable for students, like abstinence only, abstinence plus or condom use. Governments also listens to students' suggestion on improving their teaching method and including more related knowledge, for instance, on gender identification or mentioning of pleasure.

Western and Eastern countries are all making advancements on the barriers they encounter. Western countries have received comments from students and trying to change their method of sex education to include more perspectives instead of abstinence only. Eastern countries have realized the importance of sex education in schools and are convincing the whole society of its essentiality, while on the meantime increasing necessary resources and education of teachers into the curriculum. Therefore, this paper holds the view that sex education would play an important role in future schools' curriculum and would bring benefits towards students on various perspectives. For instance, decreasing teenage pregnancy and possibilities on sex-related diseases, while also increasing identification of gender.

## 4. Conclusion

With the effort put in supporting policies and resources from governments, sex education has come into public's view as a necessary part within the curriculum. Society has realized that sex education covers various aspects, including reduction in teenage pregnancy and sex-related diseases. Moreover, SE also proves useful on helping students with gender identification and reducing sex harassment. Under the stride of society cognition, social norms in eastern societies are gradually disappearing, therefore sex education could be taught and discussed in school. While western societies have steady basis of SE policies, progress on cognition enables content to students' wishes to be taught in school. Though eastern and western countries hold different cultures and norms, both have realized the importance of SE in school and are working towards disseminating it in schools. With the effort made, it would be a goal for every student to know enough knowledge on SE and discuss it in school, with parents or in public.

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