



Perceptions of School Teachers about Sexual Health Education

KEYWORDS

Sexual health education, school teachers, perceptions

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ABSTRACT A cross sectional qualitative study of 35 school teachers to elicit their perceptions about Sexual health education using a pre-tested, semi structured, self-administered questionnaire reveals that most of them felt the need for sexual health education in their school and their formal training for the same. They were well informed about the needs of the students, barriers as well as benefits of implementing such program in their school. Though teacher's perceptions about sexual health education were positive, culture issues and lack of training were barriers to implementation. Training of teachers to make them well informed and skillful as well as updating school curriculum to include all aspects of sexual health education is the need of the hour.

INTRODUCTION:

Research proves beyond doubt that adequate knowledge, positive attitude and healthy practices for sexual health, confers the best immunity to an adolescent experiencing physical and psychological change against a host of medical illnesses, psychological trauma and socially adverse consequences.

Unfortunately, due to various cultural, social and personal factors as well as lack of clear policy guidelines, sexual health education is neither commonly included in the 'comprehensive' and 'holistic' academic curriculum nor practiced in most of the schools.

School mental health program essentially includes sexual health education as an integral part to safeguard adolescent health.

After parents, it is the teachers who spends most time and have maximum opportunity to communicate and educate adolescents in this important aspect of life. In India, much less is known about the teacher's perception about sexual health education & their role in the same. Thus, it becomes imperative and this study attempts to understand the perception, need for, experiences and opinions about sexual health education among school teachers.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:

A cross sectional study was done among a stratified sample of 35 primary, secondary and higher secondary school teachers, covering all standards and subjects of an English medium school with CBSE curriculum of a metropolitan city. Participants were voluntary invited to participate for a sexual health awareness program in their school, before which an anonymous qualitative survey was done while explaining them about the purpose of the study and implied consent taken for voluntary participation.

A pre-tested, semi structured, self-administered questionnaire was administered which focused on areas like – questions pertaining to need for sexual health education on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (frequently/completely) (see Table 1) as well as experiences and opinions about sexual health education (see Table 2). Participants were encouraged to provide information, by explaining each and every section step by step and addressing their queries.

Data was gathered and analyzed to generate results.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION:

A total of 35 teachers participated in the survey. Structured responses to 7 questions related to the 'perceived need for sexual health education' were scored on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely/frequently) and median response was calculated (Table 1).

Table 1: Expressed Need for Sexual Health Education (structured responses)

Questions asked	Median Response (scale of 0-10) (n=35)
Do you feel the need for sexual health education in your school?	9
How frequently you come across a question related to sexual health in your routine classes?	4
Rate your level of confidence in handling sex education questions asked by your students	6
How strongly you feel that students would welcome sex education sessions?	6
How strongly you feel that parents would welcome sex education sessions?	7
Do you agree that sex education should be integrated with general health education sessions in routine classes, rather than having separate sessions?	8
Are you prepared to undergo training for imparting sexual health education in your school?	8

Majority of teachers in this study strongly expressed the need for sexual health education in their school. Although most of them reported that they fairly come across a question related to sexual health in their routine classes, they were almost confident in handling such questions. They largely felt that students & parents more so would welcome sex education sessions in the school. Majority of them agreed that sex education should be integrated with general health education sessions in routine classes, rather than having separate ses-

sions. Most of them positively, expressed their preparedness to undergo training for imparting sexual health education in their school.

Previous study from Delhi of 476 school teachers revealed that majority of school teachers (73%) were in favor of imparting sex education to school children.¹ In another study at Pondicherry by Bharatwaj R S, et al. majority of school teachers had expressed that sexual health education is necessary for students, 55% of teachers were not comfortable handling the topic of sex education and 86% of teachers felt that they need special training from doctors and psychologists to be trained in conducting sex education. Contrary to the current study the teachers had lack of clarity and hesitancy in talking about sexual health.² In line with the current study, another study of 50 teachers of 3 schools of Ludiana district of Punjab revealed that they had positive attitudes towards sex education and expressed need for special training in discussing sexuality with students.³

Experiences and opinions about sexual health education were elicited with open ended inquires in different areas and most common responses were listed in a descending order of frequency (Table 2).

Table 2: Experiences & Opinions about Sexual Health Education (open ended inquiries)

Area	Responses (most common – in descending order)
Most important questions / queries related to sexual health that you come across in last 1 year in your classes / from your students	<p>"Being gender conscious - not willing to sit together / share things comfortably"</p> <p>"Boys inappropriately touching their own or other boys/girl's private parts during activity"</p> <p>"Teasing others / gossiping / using abusive words – with sexual connotation"</p> <p>"Curiosity about difference in secondary sexual characteristics & dressing of boys & girls"</p> <p>"Curiosity about the use of separate toilets for boys & girls in school"</p>
Main hurdles / obstacles you foresee in imparting sex education in your school	<p>"Student's & Teacher's shyness"</p> <p>"Teacher's discomfort & lack of knowledge"</p> <p>"Parental attitude / resistance"</p>
Main advantages / benefits that you foresee in imparting sex education in your school	<p>"Giving them right knowledge"</p> <p>"Making them comfortable with their own self/others without shame/guilt"</p> <p>"Ensuring their better future"</p>
Best person to impart sexual health education	<p>Parents & teachers both</p> <p>All teachers of the school – routinely</p> <p>Subject experts conducting program</p>
Sources of your own learning about sexual health	<p>"No formal / reliable source"</p> <p>"Friends, family & teachers"</p> <p>"Internet, books & training session"</p>

Teachers reported that among the most important questions/queries/situations related to sexual health, which they came across in last 1 year in their classes/from students were issues related to 'being gender conscious and not willing to sit together / share things comfortably especially by girls

with boys', 'boys inappropriately touching their own or other boys/girl's private parts during routine school activity' out of curiosity/play leading to embarrassing/disciplinary situations, 'teasing others / gossiping / using abusive words – with sexual connotation' especially among boys, 'having and expressing curiosity and asking reasons about difference in secondary sexual characteristics & dressing of boys & girls' and 'curiosity about and asking reasons for the use of separate toilets for boys & girls in school'. Teachers expressed their genuine discomfort and inability to address/handle these obvious and basic queries/situations from the students.

With regards to imparting sexual health education in their school, they expressed 'student's & teacher's shyness to talk about it' as the most common hurdle, followed by lack of knowledge by the teachers and parental attitude/resistance as the obstacles. They foresee the advantages of sexual health education as 'giving the students the right knowledge and concepts thereby making them comfortable with their own/other's sexuality without shame and guilt, thus ensuring a better future for them'. Majority of teachers considered themselves and parents both, as the best persons to impart sexual health education and that all the teachers (rather than only Biology teacher) should routinely engage in it. Unfortunately, majority of them expressed that there was no formal / reliable source of sexual health education for their own selves in past, while some of them learned the concepts from friends, family, teachers and media.

Previous studies have considered teachers and doctors as the most appropriate persons for providing sex education.¹ In a thesis submitted to Stellenbosch University, Botswana, the researcher found that majority of school teachers (80%) agreed that sexuality education was appropriate and a high proportion of respondents (97%) were willing to teach sexuality education. Only forty-four percent indicated that the current school curricula were appropriate for teaching sexuality education. The major barriers to sexuality education were culture (60%) and lack of training (24%). Majority of teachers (64%) indicated that they were not trained to teach sexuality education.⁴ Previous studies with school teachers in Nigeria have revealed that reasonable proportion of teachers themselves had sex education in school, and thus believed that it should be taught along with other subjects, both males and females jointly taught in the class and strongly disagreed with the belief that it will corrupt students and expose them to early sexual intercourse. This shows the impact of training of teachers on their attitudes.⁵

CONCLUSION:

Thus, this study of school teachers clearly revealed that most of them felt the need for sexual health education in their school. Though they were confident in handling questions from students they strongly expressed their wish to undergo formal training. They felt that students and parents both would welcome the initiative and it should be integrated into routine health education sessions at the school. Teachers knew well about the felt need of the students, the obstacles as well as the benefits of sexual health education in their school. All these in addition to their lack of formal training on this subject, demands that it is high time we start taking sexual health education training and programs seriously, so that they become a routine part of academic curriculum for every school. Teachers have themselves clearly given the message. It's necessary for the administrators and policy makers to now execute concretely and effectively in the same direction.

Conflict of Interest: Nil

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