

Parents' Perspective on Sex Education Implementation within The Context of Early Childhood Education in Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i8/17642> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i8/17642

Published Date: 16 August 2023

Abstract

Malaysia has implemented sex education as part of its mainstream school curriculum about half a decade ago. However, the controversy and lack of knowledge on sex education among the public, specifically parents, continue despite evidence that comprehensive sex education can effectively promote healthy development. In the perspective of sex education, various previous studies have pointed several insights within the context of sex education in Malaysia in general but lacked understandings on the context of sex education in early childhood education. In addition, sex education, which has been a topic of taboo among most Asian parents, including Malaysia lacked clear research conclusions. With the existing visible gap in literature, this qualitative study was hence designed to explore Malaysian parents' understanding of sex education and their perspectives on the implementation of sex education at the early years. A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews among ten conveniently selected parents provided valuable findings which was then developed into five major themes for discussion – parents understanding of sex education, parents' understanding on the importance of sex education in the early childhood context, parents' involvement in teaching sex education to children, method preferred by parents in implementing sex education among children, and range of age to receive sex education. Based on the findings, this study suggests that future researchers should look into designing effective sex education programs in partnership with parents and schools to ensure sex education in early childhood education can be more meaningful and impactful.

Keywords: Sex Education, Parents, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Malaysia, although an Islamic country, consist of a multicultural citizenship with three main ethnic groups, the Malay, Chinese and Indians who have gone through various educational transformation since its independence. Although the ethnic groups in Malaysia come in different religions, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, they undergo the same

educational systems the country provides. Of recent, much has been debated on empowering teachers to teach sexuality education (Ern & Kheng, 2021) specifically after the public backlash for allegedly making rape jokes while explaining sexual harassment in one of the Malaysian public classrooms.

The need for including sexuality education has been a long thought and was brought forward and various discussions took place. In fact, during the Drafting of Assessment Curriculum Standard Documents Health Ministry year 1-6 disunity of agreements in accepting sexuality education into schools was greatly observed.

In Malaysia, sexuality education is considered a taboo (Jerome, 2008). Not only different ethnic groups have their own point of view regarding this subject, but the geographical standing of each state also further contribute to the acceptance or decline of sex education in schools. Geographically, urban areas tend to be more open in accepting sexuality education incorporated into health education in schools, while rural areas such as in the East Coast in Malaysia (Terengganu, Kelantan, Kedah etc) tend to be more conservative about it. According to Suzilianti (2014), there are still teachers who are reluctant to teach sexuality especially in the east coast of Kedah, Terengganu, and Kelantan. In addition, according to the Islamic family law in Malaysia (HPECT, 2007), sexual and reproductive health matters such as marriage, sexual behaviour, abortion, family planning, by authority is only to be spoken by the Ulama (religious scholars). While each state has its own religious council, interpretation and implementation of Islamic laws differ from state to state, thus creating a barrier to the efforts put by the federal government to standardize a national policy on a sensitive issue such as sexuality education.

If on one hand culture and faith interrupted the implementation of sex education, on the other was another developing issue towards sexuality education - the lack of involvement by the community (Khalaf et al., 2014). Most parents took lightly on explaining sexual development to their children who are experiencing it, when they actually play an important role in educating their children on sexuality education. Parents tend to disregard their children's need in understanding and comprehending the importance of sexuality education. They have this image that sexuality education would contribute to their children's sexual and indecent activities when sexuality is more than sexual act itself (Khalaf et al, 2014).

Apart from parents, teachers further impacted to the implementing of sex education. Teaching sex education has different pedagogy aspect than teaching Mathematics, or English. Teachers themselves must be knowledgeable individuals on matters related to sexuality and must be able to deliver information with full of confidence as the delivery plays a main role in determining the success of this respective module (Ern & Kheng, 2021). Due to old-fashioned style of teacher-student relationship in the Malaysian schools, teachers teaching sex education often adjusted precise information regarding sexuality education (Fazli Khalaf et al., 2014). Although teachers play a primary role in delivering sexuality education, parental awareness, and the role they play in the personal development of their children is equally important. Research has proven that a child who receives sexual education from home, in phases and in a manner appropriate to his/her age would be expected to be more stable in his/her relationships with the opposite sex in later life (Fideyah et al., 2020).

With the above background in view, considering the importance of parents providing sexuality education to their children and the lack of published studies on this topic in Malaysia, this qualitative case study was therefore designed to specifically explore the perspectives of parents with three research objectives (RO) in mind

RO1: Parents' understanding on the term 'sex education'

RO2: Parents' opinion on the importance of sex education within the early childhood context

RO3: Parents' views on students' range of age to receive sex education at the early childhood education.

Literature Review

Terminology

In Malaysia, "sexual education", "sexuality education" and "sex education" are often used to signify the teaching about sex and associations through an age-appropriate approach with logically accurate, realistic, and non-judgmental information (Ern & Kheng, 2021, p.1).

The brief history of sexuality education in Malaysian education system

In Malaysia, sexuality education has been fused into subjects like Islamic education and moral education, science, and language, beginning from the high school level since 1989 and then onto elementary or primary school level since 1994. The original module was called Family Health Education before it was renamed Sexuality Education in 2003. Unfortunately, the module was renamed again as the term 'sexuality' was not perceived well. The term Reproductive Health and Social Education or Pendidikan Kesihatan Reproduksi dan Sosial (PEERS) was brought forward and since 2011 onwards, it had been delivered as part of the Health Education subject which has three components, namely PEERS (75 percent), diet (15 percent) and first aid (10 percent).

In general, teachers of PEERS are to ensure students make responsible decisions about their sexual and reproductive health by delivering topics like reproductive health, substance abuse, emotion management, family, relationships, diseases, and safety. PEERS is pitched towards abstinence-only education. It provides information to hinder sex by drilling fear such as AIDS, a sexually transmitted disease. Although much has been said about sexuality education and its importance among children, PEERS does not contribute thorough sexuality education hence impacting the decision-making capacity on the importance of delaying sex.

Implementation of sex education at the early years' education and related issues

In Malaysia, the approach to sex education in early childhood education (ECE) was initiated by Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2017. The PEERS program was infused into the newly revised National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum (NSPC) and focuses on educating young children aged 4 to 6 years old. Due to cultural and religious factors, there has been a continuous conservative approach to discussing explicit sexual matters with young children. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia provides guidelines for early childhood education, but these guidelines do not specifically address comprehensive sex education. Instead, the emphasis is on promoting positive values, social skills, and personal safety. Early childhood education in Malaysia often includes lessons on personal hygiene, body parts, and personal safety, which may touch on topics such as appropriate touch, boundaries, and recognizing and reporting abuse. However, these discussions tend to be taught in a general context without explicit reference to sexual matters.

In this respect, teachers and schools are expecting parents and guardians of being the primary educators in matters of sexuality, and they are expected to address any questions or concerns children may have regarding sex and relationships. In all cultural context in Malaysia, the responsibility of discussing explicit sexual topics with young children is often seen as a private

and familial matter rather than something to be addressed within the formal education system (Fideyah et al., 2020). Another added issue that led to teachers and school relying on parents was that the cultural and religious diversity in Malaysia. Due to the variation, the pedagogy or approach to sex education was even further difficult. Teachers weren't sure how to explain sexuality to a various range of different ethnic students with multiple beliefs and moral understandings.

As put forward by Sharma (2017), parents have better influence on their children's conducts, socialization, and sexual identity formation, including many aspects of the societal and psychological acts (Hazariah, 2020). Hence, parents, rather than school, are considered as a child's primary reference on sexuality matters as the effective parent-child communication can develop an understanding of healthy sexual behaviour (Nambambi, 2011).

Lev Vygotsky's Theory on family involvement

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory upholds that learning is a principally social process in which the support of parents or caregivers and the culture they live within plays a critical role in the development of higher psychological operations. His theory which emphasises on the More Knowledge Other (MKO) can be related to this study, the parent.

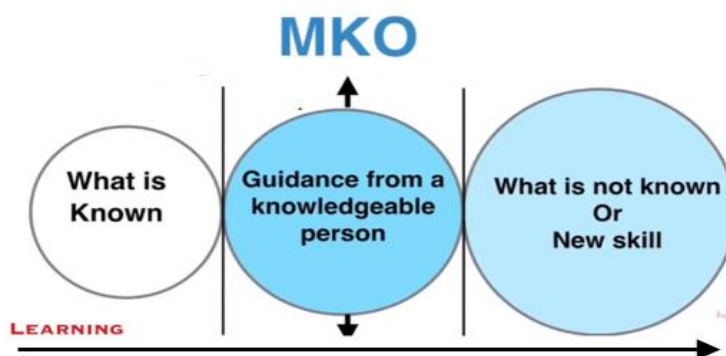
Vygotsky's More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

Vygotsky described more knowledge other (MKO) as a person who has good knowledge, superior understanding of a matter or situation than the individual or child that have lesser experience or knowledge.

For this study, the MKO herein refers to parents. As shown in Illustration 1 below, MKO is an individual who provides guidance for a child and changes his or her knowledge from the unknown to the known.

Illustration 1

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)



Past studies on sex education in the context of Malaysia

Although not many studies are evident on sex education in Malaysia, the matter of implementing sex education has been going on for a decade now. Previous research which has been more on young adults show that major lack of knowledge still prevails in terms of sexual health terminologies, sexual behaviours, and safe sex among Malaysian young adolescents, and there are also concerns with youth pregnancy (Low et al., 2007), hence emphasizing the need to implement sex education into the Malaysian curriculum.

Sexuality education although should be incorporated and implemented in the schools, should not only focus schools and teachers but parents too. Fideyah et al (2020) in her study on the role of parents in providing sex education to their children, found that majority (79.5%) of the parents had good knowledge, and from this, 82% agreed that sexuality information helps their children recognize and avoid sexual abuse.

In a separate study by University Malaysia Sarawak, findings indicated that parents do play important role in educating young people about sexual and reproductive health although many of them always assumed that their children were not matured enough and will not commit in sexual relationships (Azriani, et al., 2011).

Methodology

Research design

This case study approach employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to obtain data. Case study is an appropriate research design to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject as it allows the researcher to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case (Heale & Twycross, 2018; Single, 2017).

Target Population and Sample Size

To analyse parents' understanding of the term sexual education, its implementation and appropriate age-range, the target population for this study was parents from the privately owned Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Malaysia. As this study was qualitative in nature, it was impossible to include the entire population of Malaysia. Hence an accessible population was selected. The accessible population is the population in research to which the researchers can apply their conclusions (Davis, 2019). It is from the accessible population that researchers draw their samples. For this case study, convenience sampling was used to draw a sample since data collection needed to be facilitated by researchers themselves (Saunders et al., 2012). Upon the specification on the characteristics of the accessible population, the geographic and time constraints with which both the researcher and potential subjects will have to contend with was studied carefully. Due to researchers' geographical convenience, only parents from Selangor state were selected. A consent form was also given to parents on their willingness to participate in the interview session. A total of 10 parents were conveniently selected for this study.

Data Collection Instrument

A self-developed questionnaire was used for this study. This research was mainly on respondents' knowledge of sex education and the implementation in Early Childhood Education context. The interview guide was designed based on the three research objectives. Five questions were curated to obtain responses on the research objectives. The interview guide was peer-reviewed by a subject-matter specialist (SME) from the National Child Development Research Centre (NCDRC), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) to ensure its content reliability.

Data Collection Process

Data gathering methods in this research was conducted through interview method. To begin with, the researchers approached and obtained consent to pursue the interviews. The

participants were clearly explained about the research particulars prior interview. They were clearly explained about the purpose and the objectives. The participants were provided schedules to ascertain their availability. While most of the parents consented readily, a few were slightly apprehensive to begin with but later extended their full cooperation. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom Meeting.

Qualitative data analysis

Content analysis was applied to analyse the data collected from the interviews. According to Krippendorf (1980) content analysis is appropriate for research as it "is a research technique for making replicable and valid inference from data to their context" (p. 21). The content analysis for this study was done by stages, first interviews were carried out through MS teams. Next all data obtained were verbatim transcribed. Following that, codes from the verbatim transcripts were highlighted to identify the major ideas. Finally, coding obtained from the analyses were used to develop several themes. For this study, five major themes were developed, which are discussed in the findings section below.

Findings

Demographic data of parents

The parents that agreed to participate in this study were from the state of Selangor only. Table 1 below briefly describes the demographic details related to each parent in terms of acronyms, district, their child's age and the pedagogy practiced by the school their child is attending. For confidentiality, parents were given acronyms SW, NF, NA, RK, SE, TH, ER, MD, SH, and GA.

Table 1
Demographic details

Parent's acronyms	District	Child's age	ECE pedagogy
SW	Subang	6	Montessori
NF	Klang Valley	5	Montessori
NA	Klang Valley	5	Thematic
RK	Denai Alam	6	Montessori
GA	Klang Valley	5	Holistic
MD	Klang Valley	5	Montessori
SH	Klang Valley	5	Thematic
TH	Klang Valley	5	Montessori
ER	Klang Valley	6	Holistic
SE	Klang Valley	6	Montessori

The major findings formulated from the data analysis are divided into five major themes and are discussed under each Research Objective (RO).

RO1: Parents' understanding on the term 'sex education'

Theme 1

Parents understanding of sex education.

Findings indicated that 80% parents were unable to understand the definition of sex education as they were not aware of the term and were rather focused on child safety issues and child's academic achievements.

"I never really am interested to know. Sex education? As I know, we as parent need to teach our children how to protect themselves and not teaching them about sex. It is teachers' job, right?" (Parent SW)

"Oh my god, yah sex education, totally no idea on this matter. Those days we don't learn about this right, that's why not very sure too..." (Parent GA)

"As a parent I think it's not very important subject to teach because too early for their age. Later they can learn when they grow. Now more important is their academic." (Parent MD)

RO2: Parents' opinion on the importance of sex education within the early childhood context

Theme 2

Parents understanding on the importance of sex education in the ECE context.

Findings indicated that 40% of parents agree that certain basic concepts, such as body parts, body privacy, and personal boundaries, is important to be taught to young children.

"Hmm...as a parent I guess that children should be taught about body parts and the impact of good touch and bad touch, personal boundaries and good manners between boy and girl as well. " (Parent SH).

However, they also felt that teaching should be without going into explicit details about reproduction or sexual activity. Parents preferred a more gradual and developmentally appropriate approach to sex education.

"As a parent, I totally agree with these subjects being taught in science or physical education. But it should be taught progressively, little-by-little, not one-shot everything about sex. Must be based on their age!" (Parent SE).

Theme 3

Parents involvement in teaching sex education to children.

Although the question on parental involvement was not directly asked, a vast majority 60% parents did elaborate on their roles in teaching sex education to their children. By offering reliable knowledge, parents can ensure that children receive accurate information from a trusted source.

"My 5 years old son has access to the internet, and he accesses stuff on the internet we should not be ignorant about it or take it lightly. I believe we should tell them and inform them that those things are not appropriate for his age and what is the bad things they should avoid. Thus, I think education should start from family too." (Parents NA).

Theme 4

Methods preferred by parents in implementing sex education to children.

Findings indicate 60% parents find books and online educational resources to be valuable tools in sex education. Parents agreed on age-appropriate books that explain basic concepts, using illustrations, that present information in a child-friendly manner.

"I think teaching sex education, best to use pictures to show about negative behaviour...like people touching ...which is good and bad. What girls can and can't do." (Parent NA)

"The main one is internet...of course YouTube. Everything is there. We as parents and schools can use videos to inform children what is right and wrong." (Parent SE)

Some parents appreciate the support and guidance provided by schools or educators in implementing sex education. They value a comprehensive approach where information provided at home aligns with what is being taught in school. Collaborating with educators allows parents to reinforce the messages and concepts discussed in the educational setting.

"I genuinely feel that teachers and parents should work together to teach sexuality education. Teachers should share the materials they teach so that parents can reteach it at home." (Parents MD)

"Parents will need the materials from school to ensure sex education is more comprehensive." (Parent TH)

RO3: Parents' views on students' range of age to receive sex education at the early childhood education context.

Theme 5

Range of age to receive sex education

About 50% of parents were supportive of comprehensive sex education in the ECE context. They believed that providing age-appropriate information about body awareness, consent, healthy relationships, and personal boundaries from an early age can help children develop a positive and informed understanding of sexuality. All parents recognized the importance of addressing these topics, however all agreed that the most appropriate age will be 6 years old onwards, as to promote healthy attitude.

'I think at the age of six. I have noticed my children learn the difference between themselves, between boy and a girl, and by the age of seven, they start to go towards different friendship groups. So, I think sex education should be taught in preschool itself by teaching what is acceptable and should be and what is bad ...something like that.'(Parent TH).

"Oh...the age. Hmm....I think by age 6... that should be the right age...because this is the age they recognize their gender and usually you can see their attitudes also change....so this is the age that they want to know more details the different gender...you see." (Parent NA)

All parents disagreed on teaching sexuality below age 6 as they felt children will get confused and may not understand between parents loving touch and care and strangers' touches.

"It is not good if my child get scared of my touch. Usually children below 5 years old still need the hug, soft touch from parents and care takers." (Parent SE)

Discussion

Based on the above findings, Table 2 summarises the major conclusions developed from the data analysis.

Table 2

Major conclusions from data analysis

Theme	Major conclusions
<i>Theme 1 Parents' understanding of sex education.</i>	Findings indicated that 80% of parents were unable to understand the definition of sex education as they were not aware of the term and were rather focused on child safety issues and child's academic achievements.
<i>Theme 2 Parents' understanding on the importance of sex education in the ECE context.</i>	Findings indicated that 40% of parents agree that certain basic concepts, such as body parts, body privacy, and personal boundaries, is important to be taught to young children.
<i>Theme 3 Parents' involvement in teaching sex education to children.</i>	Although the question on parental involvement was not directly asked, a vast majority 60% parents did elaborate on their roles in teaching sex education to their children. By offering reliable knowledge, parents can ensure that children receive accurate information from a trusted source.
<i>Theme 4 Methods preferred by parents in implementing sex education among children.</i>	Findings indicate 60% parents find books and online educational resources to be valuable tools in sex education. Schools can choose age-appropriate books that explain basic concepts, using illustrations, that present information in a child-friendly manner.
<i>Theme 5 Range of age to receive sex education.</i>	About 50% of parents were supportive of comprehensive sex education in the ECE context. They believed that providing age-appropriate information about body awareness, consent, healthy relationships, and personal boundaries from an early age can help children develop a positive and informed understanding of sexuality. All parents recognized the importance of addressing these topics but only agreed it to be taught as early as age 6, as to promote healthy attitude.

Although very rare studies have been undertaken in Malaysia to understand parents' perspectives of sex education in the context of early childhood education, the major findings outlined above provided a glimpse into early childhood parents' understanding and awareness on sex education and its importance to their children's development. The results above are parallel to some studies done locally as well as at the international level on parents' perspectives that supported the inclusion of various sexual health topics in school curriculum provided the contents were in line with religious teachings (Makol-Abdul, et al., 2010), and are appropriately introduced and taught by teachers (Sanjakdar, 2004, UNICEF, 2021).

On the matter of understanding the term sexuality education, findings from this study indicated some similar results to past research indicating that parents were at most times unable to understand the definition of sex education as they were not educated and knowledgeable of the term itself (Low et al., 2007; Lukolo & Dyk, 2015). Contradicting, some results on the other hand reported parents having good knowledge on sexuality education but however were unsure to what extent it was taught in school (Athanasel, 2018; Baku et al., 2017; Fideyah et al., 2020). Overall, it can be understood that each study although showed different results on parent's knowledge, sexuality education is still a new phenomenon in the education system.

In terms of parental involvement, the findings of this study are parallel to that of Nambambi (2011) stating that parents, rather than school, are the child's primary reference on sexuality matters as the effective parent-child communication can develop an understanding of healthy sexual behaviour (Sharma, 2017). In addition, parents also agreed that for early childhood learners, age-appropriate books that explain basic concepts, using illustrations, that present information in a child-friendly manner is more suited so that children get the right message (UNICEF, 2021).

In contrast, Kumar et al (2017) in a study conducted in India found that the most preferred source to deliver sexuality education to the children was the doctor (91.5%), and the least preferred source was the parents (37.3%). Similarly in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, significant number of parents were also found uncomfortable in discussing matters of sexuality with their children (Bello et al., 2017). One of the reasons this could be is due to the strong cultural belief and sensitivity toward sexuality issues that prevent parents from delivering sexuality education to their children.

Although a small group of parents felt that teaching sexuality education would contribute to their children's misconception of parents love and care, parents in this study parallel to previous research findings, were overall supportive of comprehensive sex education in the early years' context (Jankovic et al., 2013; Lukolo & Dyk, 2015; Nu Azira et al., 2020) They believed that providing age-appropriate information about body awareness, consent, healthy relationships, and personal boundaries from an early age can help children develop a positive and informed understanding of sexuality.

However, contrary to the discussions on beginning sexuality education as early as age zero onwards by Australia's Raising Children Network (2023), parents in this study emphasized that addressing sexuality topics at the early years should only start at age six and onwards as much younger children may develop fear, anxiety, and confusion between the different relationships they have at home and school.

Conclusion

The need for including sexuality education has been a long thought and was brought forward through various discussions in Malaysia. Implementing sexuality education has seen through various challenges. If on one hand culture and faith interrupted the implementation of sex education, on the other was the lack of involvement by the community, specifically parents. The purpose of this study was wholly to understand parents' understanding of sex education and their perspectives on the implementation of sex education at the early years. Semi-structured interviews revealed interesting findings on parent's lack of understanding of sex education but on the other hand it also revealed parents' total agreement that sex education is important in the early childhood context. In brief, although parents were not extremely knowledgeable on the term sexuality education, they do understand the importance of implementing sex education from the early years, specifically age six onwards and how they can contribute towards children's healthy growth and development.

Sex education in early childhood education plays a significant role in shaping children's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to their bodies, relationships, and sexuality. Research on this area can contribute to both theoretical and contextual perspectives. In terms of theoretical perspectives, this study provides valuable insights to early childhood education curriculum designers into designing policies and appropriate knowledge systems among parents on sexuality education, extending further on theories of parental involvement. In terms of contextual significance, understanding parents' perspectives is vital for schools to design effective sex education programs in partnership with parents that consider their values, beliefs, and cultural sensitivities. By incorporating parental involvement, providing age-appropriate information, and fostering open communication, sex education in early childhood education can be more meaningful and impactful.

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