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Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Sex Education in Hong Kong Pre-schools: A Pilot study

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, once a British colony, 'sex' has traditionally been viewed as taboo, and as such, seldom talked about or openly discussed in public. Schools have, therefore, not implemented sex education. Mass media further challenges the moral standards and values of teenagers by distributing sexual material which is distorted in nature. All these factors contribute to an increase in sexual promiscuity, sex related crime and incest, of which some victims are young children. Since the first few years of a person's life are the most important in the formation of their value and behaviours (Opper, 1996), the foundation of sex education should begin early.

The aim of this pilot study was to investigate the Hong Kong teachers' perceptions of teaching sex education in pre-schools. One kindergarten and one childcare centre were selected for this study. Two pre-school heads and six teachers were interviewed. The findings indicated that almost all of the teachers did not have confidence in teaching sex education in their pre-schools because they had inadequate knowledge and skills. Interestingly, the findings also showed that some unmarried teachers felt embarrassed to implement sex education. Nevertheless, they were willing to take up the responsibilities of teaching sex education if they had sufficient training.

Introduction

Although Hong Kong was a colony of British for over a hundred years and most people grew up under the influence of a 'western' culture, many people still perceive that sex cannot be discussed publicly, and there is also little need to learn about the subject. This is because the Chinese have, traditionally, viewed sex as taboo, and as such, it is a subject seldom talked about or openly discussed in public. This deeply ingrained thinking is a major stumbling-block to the implementation of sex education in most of the schools from pre-to-secondary levels.

In 1997, the year of Hong Kong's handover to mainland China, the Hong Kong Education Department (termed Education and Manpower Bureau since January 2003) recommended that sex education should be implemented in pre-schools. However, due to the shackles of Chinese culture, and also the view that young children lack the intelligence to understand the mystery of 'sex', teachers are, therefore, reluctant to teach sex in pre-schools. As a result, the development of sex education in pre-schools has been inadequate.

This inadequacy may have resulted in a lack of understanding among teenagers on sex. The mass media has over emphasized sex, and teenagers face issues of morality and encounter differing points of views on the subject. This may have led to more cases of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, incest and rape. Against Child Abuse Limited (ACA) had conducted a research study on the age of the victims of sexual abuse in 2001 (Ta Kung Pao, August 2001). The results showed that the youngest victim was only 2 years old. Afterwards, the spokesman of ACA (Sing Pao, February 2004) pointed out that there was a 1.5 times increase in the cases of sexual abuse from 1999 to 2003. The police had handled 611 cases of sexual abuse in 2003, in which most of the offenders were victims' close relatives.

From another perspective, in 2004, the police had announced the statistics of sexual abuse cases of students under the age of 16 over the 3 years (Wen Wei Po, May 2004). The findings showed that the number of cases had increased from 208 in 2001 to 269 in 2003. This reflected that teenagers may have inadequate understanding about sex, and they did not know that the nature of sex was to respect life (Ubito, 1995). In view of the severe situation in the cases of sexual abuse involving children, many

voluntary organizations in Hong Kong started to promote sex education to the youngsters. The aim of such programmes was to complement the inadequate understandings of the secondary students on sex. For example, the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong had already trained a group of experienced mothers to teach sex education to secondary students (Sing Pao, July 2004).

In the light of the above, especially the increased number of the cases of sexual abuse, pre-school teachers should realise that sex education should be first implemented in the pre-schools. The rationale for this argument is the fact that the first few years of a person's life are the most important in the formation of their values and behaviours (Opper, 1996). In addition, young children (at the stage of early childhood) are always curious about the body (Lahaye & Lahaye, 1998). Therefore, the stage of early childhood is a suitable period for introducing sex to young children.

This study is aimed at eliciting the teachers' views on pre-school sex education. It is hoped that the findings will suggest ways of equipping the teaching staff of pre-schools in the planning and implementation of sex education for young children as well as their parents. Ultimately, it is hoped that through sex education, young children can understand that they should respect their own life and also the life of other people (Ubido, 1995).

Method

Participant Sites and Participants

A random sampling was adopted to select an unbiased sample of the pre-schools and participants for this study (Gall et al., 1996). Since early childhood education in Hong Kong consists of kindergartens and childcare centres, one kindergarten and one childcare centre were selected for this study. A total of six teachers consisting of two heads, and four teachers participated in this study. The personal details of each participant are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information: Pre-school Teachers

Name	Sex	Marriage Status	Type of Pre-school	Position	Educational Level	Qualification of Teacher Training	Teaching Experience (Year)
T1	F	Married	KG	Head	Bachelor	BEd (ECE)	25
T2	F	Single	KG	Teacher	Secondary	Certificate	13
T3	F	Single	KG	Teacher	Secondary	*QKT	9
T4	F	Single	KG	Teacher	Diploma	Certificate	11
T5	F	Married	CCC	Head	Diploma	Diploma in ECE	10
T6	F	Single	CCC	Teacher	Secondary	Certificate	3
T7	F	Married	CCC	Teacher	Secondary	Certificate	18
T8	F	Single	CCC	Teacher	Secondary	Certificate	15

* QKT: Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Education Course (a basic course for pre-school teachers)

Data Collection

Since the desired core of using the semi-structured in-depth interviews is to understand the deep experiences of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Cannold, 2001), this method was, therefore, employed in this study for eliciting teachers' perceptions of sex education for young children.

The interview schedule of this study comprised three parts, covering the needs of pre-school sex education, the difficulties of implementation of pre-school sex education, and sharing with respect to pre-school sex education.

Data Analysis

The responses obtained were coded. Categories for emerging themes were then used for analysing and interpreting the data (Denzin et. al., 2000).

Findings and Discussion

Insufficient Understandings of Pre-school Sex Education

The participants in this study had similar views on the term sex education for young children. Almost all of them (seven out of eight) thought that sex education was about the differences between the male and female genders such as the name and function of the different parts of the body, the ways to respect each gender's rights, and the ways to protect one's private parts. Besides, T1 also stated that pre-school sex education was about the psychological development that would help young children understand that different people had different emotions and needs.

It could be seen, however, that the pre-school teachers in this study did not have sufficient understandings of pre-school sex education - that it should be part of life education including the knowledge of physiology, psychology, social culture, and morality (Liu, 1998; Man et al., 1990; The Hong Kong Curriculum Development Association, 1997; Ubido, 1995).

Similar Attitudes towards Pre-school Sex Education

Almost all of the participants (T1, T2, T4, T5, T6, T7 and T8) agreed that sex education was important for young children as they believed that pre-school children should know how to protect themselves from sexual abuse, especially if they had the knowledge of sex appropriate to the stage of early childhood.

The pre-school teachers suggested that young children should learn about sex as early as they could. This was because through sex education, young children could understand that sex is good in nature and this knowledge helps them grow up happier. Similarly, Yan (1998) also indicated that sex education is an important foundation education for children living happy lives in the future. The participant (T3), however, had an opposite view, saying that pre-school children were too young to understand sex education.

Sex Education should be Part of the Curriculum

Except for T3, all participants agreed that sex education should be part of the formal curriculum in pre-schools. If sex education was a part of the formal curriculum, young children could grasp knowledge of sex from a reliable source and, hence, acquire a positive attitude towards other people. As T1 points out,

Sex is distorted by the negative side of man. This situation should be rectified and corrected, right? So, young children should receive sex education from pre-school onwards, since the learning of early childhood can influence their leaning and development.

Feeling Embarrassed to Talk about Sex among Colleagues and Parents

Even though the majority of the teachers agreed that sex education should be implemented in pre-schools, only few of them who were married felt at ease to discuss this topic with colleagues and parents to exchange ideas and to better implement sex education in pre-schools.

Interestingly, the findings revealed that all participants who were still single felt embarrassed when talking about this topic with their colleagues and parents. All of them expressed the view that they were not willing to talk about sex publicly. T3 shares her view:

I do not think that I am a right person to introduce this topic to parents, as I still haven't married yet. I think that this topic should be handled by colleagues who are already married and also have a kid... (as) they should not feel embarrassed... Actually, I also do not feel good talking about this topic with colleagues because of my state.

Inadequate Experience, Knowledge and Skills in Introducing Sex Education

Parents have a profound influence on their beloved children. The participants agreed that except for those with young children, the parents should also receive a basic knowledge of sex education that would help them understand the needs of their children. This knowledge would also help them know how to discuss sex freely with their children. Apart from these, it could also minimize the occurrence

of sexual abuse to young children.

Porter (1995) points out that if parents gain the basic information of sex education, it will make the process of sex education more simple. So, it is meaningful to introduce the sex education to young children and their parents. However, only the pre-school heads have the confidence to discuss sex with children and their parents candidly and openly. The rest of the teachers were not willing to talk with the parents, and even young children, because they do not think that they had adequate knowledge and skills of pre-school sex education. They feared that they might mislead young children and parents with the wrong information.

In view of this, the teachers highly recommended that teacher training courses on pre-school sex education should be organized either by the government or pre-schools. They believed that they could grasp the knowledge and skills to design, plan, and implement appropriate curricula and activities for young children and their parents through participating in such teacher training courses, and also know the appropriate language to use when talking with the young children and their parents. Furthermore, it was important that the teacher training courses could provide opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas for the implementation of pre-school sex education, and thus to break through one's psychological barrier with respect to sex.

Actually, it is true that through attending training courses on pre-school sex education, teachers can grasp the skills to develop coherent and developmental sex education for young children and parents, and teacher training courses can also enhance the teachers' personal self-awareness, confidence, and competence for the implementation of sex education (Plant, 1995).

Difficulties Arising from the Implementation of Sex Education

Concerning the kind of difficulties that might arise from the implementation of sex education, almost all of the participants were worried that pre-school children were too young and without sufficient intelligence to understand sex and ask the related questions.

For teachers themselves, as they had insufficient experience and knowledge, they were concerned that they could not handle the curriculum of sex education well, and also they might not know how to respond to questions from children and their parents. In addition, they also worried that the inadequate resources might hinder the effective and smooth implementation of sex education.

The participants believed that some of the parents were still conservative and lacked the knowledge of sex and these might contribute to the poor collaboration between teachers and parents in a sex education programme.

Again, the participants reiterated that, in order to enhance the smooth and effective implementation of the pre-school sex education, teacher training courses should be offered. They felt that the government should allot funding to the pre-schools for buying books on sex education, designing and purchasing related teaching aids and materials, and organizing some training workshops and activities for teachers and parents.

Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study indicated that the teachers in Hong Kong pre-schools did not have sufficient knowledge on sex education. However, it is gratifying to note that almost all of them did adopt a positive and a progressive attitude on the teaching of sex education in pre-schools, and would like to receive training in effective teaching skills, which will facilitate young children's acquisition of 'appropriate' knowledge of sex as early as possible.

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