Abstract
Chinese society has, traditionally, perceived sex as a taboo subject, and as such, is seldom discussed openly, and rarely taught in schools. Under these circumstances, most Hong Kong people never learn about sex education during their formal school years. With an increase in the number of sex-related crimes in Hong Kong, education is becoming increasingly important. Since learning in early childhood influences a person's future values and behaviour, sex education should be implemented early, preferably in preschools (Roffman, 2002; Woody, 2002).

To implement effective sex education in preschools, parents’ views are important. This pilot study aims to investigate Hong Kong parents’ perceptions towards implementing sex education programmes in preschools. One kindergarten and one childcare centre were randomly selected for this study. A total of 12 parents were interviewed. The findings indicated that most parents lacked the confidence to discuss sex-related issues with their children mainly because they had insufficient knowledge and skills, and also felt embarrassed. However, to overcome these inadequacies and feelings they were willing to better equip themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills for the benefit of their children.

Introduction
Sex has long been viewed as a taboo subject in Chinese society. Chinese people, considered culturally conservative, seldom discuss issues concerning sex openly with their children and certainly not in public. Because of this level of conservatism within Chinese society, the Education and Manpower Bureau has failed to include sex education in Hong Kong’s (HK’s) pre-to-secondary schools, at least on a formal basis. As a consequence, many preschools and secondary schools in HK have not been willing to offer sex education programmes in their own schools. Based on this situation, many people in HK never learn about sex during their formal school years.

Situations such as this, may lead to more cases of sex-related crimes. For instance, the findings from research done by the Against Child Abuse Ltd. (ACA) showed that the youngest victim of sexual abuse was only two years old (Ta Kung Pao Local News, August 2001). In 2004, the police reported that the number of sex abuse cases against students under the age of 16 had increased 77% between 2001 and 2003 (Wen Wei Po Local News, May 2004).

In addition, the figures relating to child abuse cases for the first three months of 2005, as recorded by the Social Welfare Department of Hong Kong had increased 53% over the corresponding period in 2004 (Ming Pao Special News, September 2005). From these figures, 25% of the cases related to sexual abuse. Sixty percent of those who actually committed the crime were the victims’ parents. Furthermore, the majority of the victims were the daughters; the abusers were normally the victims’ fathers. In most cases the abuse took place at home (Ming Pao Medical Website, December 2002; Sing Pao Local News, February 2004). In reality, it is suspected that the actual number of the cases involving sex-related crimes is much higher than those actually reported since many of the victims are unwilling to report what they have encountered to either the police, and other family members (Ming Pao, December 2004). Again, this is related to the conservative nature of Chinese society, that “people should not disclose such disgraceful things to others”.

Based on the increase in the number of sex-related crimes in HK, it can be viewed that more and more people abuse their position in the family and their ‘power’ to hurt others. This also indicates that most HK people do not know that they should respect themselves as well as others. This is because they do
not have sufficient understanding about the fundamental basics of sex, which is to respect life (Luk, September 2005; Ubito, 1995). As a result of this situation, HK people are finally beginning to realize that sex education has an important role to play in the development of a decent, educated, and civilized society. As a consequence, some voluntary organizations, and schools in HK have already started to promote sex education to teenagers. For example, the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong has equipped some experienced mothers to deliver sex education classes to secondary school students of which the aim of the programmes was to address the misunderstandings and misconceptions secondary school students had relating to sex (Sing Pao, July 2004).

In another example (Ming Pao Local News, April 2005) a primary school provided some workshops of sex education to parents with the aim of letting them know the importance of sex education for primary school students, and the necessary knowledge, skills, and appropriate attitude that is needed when conveying this message to their children. After working through each of the workshops, teachers and parents collaborated with each other to instill the appropriate knowledge of sex and its related issues to children at both the home and school.

From the above information, it is good to see that on one hand sex education has been gradually promoted by some voluntary organisations and schools. That the importance of passing on accurate information to school-aged students so that they can benefit from that knowledge. However, on the other hand, it can also be seen that the promotion of sex education is not comprehensive enough. That is, sex education is seldom implemented in preschools. This is because many Chinese people cling to the belief that preschoolers are ‘too young to understand the mystery of sex’, and as a result, many preschools are unwilling to offer sex education programmes to their young student.

In the 21st century, it is time to put aside the belief and misconceptions that preschoolers are too young to learn about sex and sex-related issues. For those individuals who harbor such beliefs, it is time for them to change, as well as open their mind and accept the reality that early childhood is the first opportunity for children to learn about sex. This is because scholars from the Eastern and Western Societies point out that the stage of early childhood is the best period for educating children on issues such as sex (Eyre & Eyre, 1998; Hokuzawa, 1993; Luk, September 2005; Roffman, 2002; Ubito, 1995; Woody, 2002). Due to the fact that at this age, preschoolers have a natural curiosity, especially about their bodies (Lahaye & Lahaye, 1998), and they like asking questions about all aspects of life, including sex (Ming Pao Local News, November 2000). Thus, early childhood is a formative stage, which significantly influences the values and behaviour of the rest of an individual’s life (Opper, 1996).

In addition, integrating different ideas from scholars such as Liu (1998), Man et al. (1990), Roffman (2002), and Ubito (1995), preschool sex education is about the knowledge of physiology, psychology, social culture, and morality. Hence, through learning various programmes related to sex, preschoolers not only cherish their own life, but also those of other people. This process begins in early childhood and continues into adulthood. If this is the case, then people might not so readily overuse their powers and abuse others (Lai & Lo, 2004).

As a consequence, parents should be prepared to answer questions posed by their children on the topic of sex and sex-related issues, correctly and accurately. However, it is likely, at least within Chinese society, as a result of cultural traditions and norms, that any HK Chinese parents feel awkward or embarrassed when talking about sex with their children (Lai, 2004; Lai & Lo, 2004). To date, many HK pre-to-secondary schools are still reluctant to provide programmes that discuss sex, since they are heavily influenced by tradition and conservative values that prevent open and frank discussion on the topic. This effect on society is that many HK people never actually learn about sex education during their formal school years. Often parents lack the necessary skills, and confidence to provide information about sex to their children (Yau, 1995; Wen Wei Po Local News, September 2005). Under these circumstances, preschools have a very important role to play, that is to work very closely with the parents so as to transfer the knowledge of how best to discuss the issue of sex with their children (Roffman, 2001).

Since preschools not only have the responsibility to equip preschoolers with the basic knowledge of sex, but also provide assistance to parents on how best to aid learning in a home-based environment, it is essential for the preschool to obtain parental views concerning sex education and its implementation in preschools, what the parents’ needs are, and expectations of home-based school cooperation in relation to sex education. This information will help preschools and their teachers provide better programmes.
that address the need for parental guidance in terms of knowledge, skills, and appropriate attitude of preschool sex education for the benefit of their children.

Methodology

A ‘purposive random sampling’ was employed to select an unbiased sample of preschools and participants for this study (Wellington, 2000). One kindergarten and one childcare centre which were subsidised by the government were selected for this study.

A total of 12 parents participated in this study. All participants were Chinese. Nine of the participants were female, and the rest were male. In respect to the participants’ level of education, five of them held a bachelor’s degree, and two of them were master degree holders. The rest had secondary school education qualifications.

In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to elicit parents’ perceptions of preschool sex education, to understand the deep experiences of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Cannold, 2001). The interview schedule of this study consisted of three parts, covering the needs of preschool sex education, the difficulties of discussing sex education and its related issues with children, and sharing with respect to preschool sex education. The responses obtained were coded. Categories for emerging themes were then used to analyse and interpret the data (Denzin et. al., 2000).

Findings and Discussion

Inadequate understandings of preschool sex education

Parents in this study held similar views towards sex education for preschoolers. All of them stated that sex education was about the knowledge of physiology such as the name and function of the different parts of both the male and female body. Eight of the 12 participants also stated that sex education should include teaching preschoolers how to protect their private parts.

The findings clearly show that the parents had an inadequate understanding of what preschool sex education entails. As stated earlier, preschool sex education includes the knowledge of physiology, psychology, social culture, and morality (Eyre & Eyre, 1998; Hokuzawa, 1993; Roffman, 2002; Ubito, 1995; Woody, 2002).

Sex education should be taught in preschools

When discussing whether sex education should be taught in preschools, nine of the 12 participants agreed that it should be implemented in preschools. This was because they hoped that their children could acquire a right concept of sex education at an early age. Gaining this knowledge from a reliable source could help children better understand, and therefore avoid, instances or situations that could lead to sexual abuse. As Mr. Lam said,

When I was young, I was told that there was no need to talk about sex, and that there was no need to talk about it because I would understand what was involved when I grow up...but society has changed, preschoolers should know about sex education, and what they can do to protect themselves.

Actually, scholars (Lloyd, 1995; Roffman, 2002; Ying, 1995) have gone so far as to say that they highly recommend that sex education be included in the formal educational curriculum. This is because preschoolers should have the right to know and understand about their own development as well as the development of other people. All of this can help preschoolers respect not only themselves but also other people.

The rest of the participants held the opposite view, and claimed that sex education should not be implemented in preschools because preschoolers are too immature to comprehend what was being discussed. They were also concerned that preschoolers are too curious, which turn good will into demerit. These participants believed that sex education should only be discussed at home. As Mrs. Li argued,

I don’t think that children in preschools should have a lesson on sex education, because they are too young to understand the mystery of sex. Honestly, I am bit worried that after knowing more about the sex, my child would indulge in fantasy such as approaching girls, touching their private
parts etc...because young children are curious, right?...so, if my kid does not ask me the questions relating to sex, I will not talk to him directly about it. If he asks me such questions, I will only reply him in a simple way or request my husband to answer his questions.

Parents’ concerns and rejection of the idea that sex education should form part of a formal preschool curriculum confirms once again that some people still do not understand the importance and indeed the value of sex education for preschoolers. These concerns and rejection of the idea that sex education should form part of a formal preschool curriculum may stem from the fact that they missed this opportunity during their formal school years. As a consequence, to allay parents’ concerns about what preschool sex education entails, and how preschool sex education can only benefit preschoolers over the long term, some seminars on sex education should be provided. Actually, if preschools want to run sex education programmes and implement it effectively, it is very important to provide the parents with certain basic information (Porter, 1995). This is because the more the parents know about the holistic picture of preschool sex education, the easier it is for the parents accept that such programmes are actually beneficial.

**Parents’ needs for preschool sex education**

All parents in this study, no matter what they did or did not learn in relation to sex education during their early formal school years, indicated that they would participate in the sex education workshops arranged by the preschools or other organizations. This was because they wanted to know how best to discuss the topic, and how they should phrase answers to questions that their children would inevitably have.

Among the parents, only four parents (33.3%) actually studied sex education when they were in secondary school. All of them were willing to talk to their children about sex. However, they said that their knowledge of sex and sex-related issues was limited at that time, although at least they had some prior knowledge. Given their own experience they would like to be better equipped and learn the appropriate skills so that they are better able to discuss such issues with their children. For instance, Mrs. Chan stated:

> When I was a secondary school student, my knowledge in relation to sex education was learnt through studying biology. Right now I don’t think I have sufficient competence or confidence to solve my kid’s problems when it comes to discussing sex-related issues. So, I would be happy if the preschool would organize some workshops (on sex education) for us (as parents) so that I can enhance my knowledge and skills. Then, I can talk about the issues concerning sex with my kid at home openly without feeling embarrassed or ashamed.

Apart from the parents who had some prior knowledge of sex expressing a desire to learn more, those parents (66.7%) who had never learned about sex education during their formal school years also urged preschools to organize a variety of workshops on sex education for them. This was because they were worried that the message they were delivering to their children may not be correct. In addition, some of them also felt embarrassment to talk about such issues with their children. So, they wanted to know what kinds of issues would be covered during the sex education programme, i.e.: what knowledge their children would gain, and how best they should answer their children’s questions. As Mrs. Kwok stated,

> When my kid asks me the questions related to sex, I very often don’t know how to reply to him, because I have not learned the sex education so far. You know, when my kid asks me such questions about sex, I do not feel comfortable when replying to him. This is simply because as Chinese we seldom discussed this topic. So, I want to know what preschool sex education entails…what I should talk about or do is good for him at this stage…and how to avoid feeling embarrassed when talking about these issues with my kid…

Accordingly, the concept of sex, which is traditionally perceived as a taboo subject by many Chinese, is still embedded in some parents’ minds. This is often because they missed the formal learning of sex during their early formal educational years. As a consequence, they also feel embarrassed when talking about sex with their children. To help parents overcome such conservative thinking, a series of workshops on sex education should be arranged for them. This way, by participating in the workshops, parents can obtain the correct knowledge and skills on how best to discuss such topics with their children. In addition, parents also have the chance to share their feelings with other parents, and practice how to talk or reply to their children about sex, all of these can enhance parents’ confidence in, and minimise their embarrassment when talking through the issues relating to sex with their children.
Ways for parents to get information related to the issues of sex

In this study, most parents (nine out of 12) stated that the resources they normally used to help them answer their children’s enquiries on sex-related issues were books and websites. This was because they found that it was easier for them to search for such information. As Mrs. Wong stated:

I like using the picture books to explain the topics of sex with my child...because I only talk about what I have read on the page. Thus, the pictures in the books can also help my girl understand the meanings of what I have talked about easily... In addition to using the picture books, I also make use of the information from websites, because I can do it at home.

The rest of the parents (three out of 12) did not use any resources to help them explain queries posed by their children because they did not know how to find the books or use a computer. In such cases, to answer their children they normally said what they knew to be true, or created the answers themselves. As Mrs. Lau stated:

Honestly, if my child does not ask me questions related to sex, I do not talk about this topic with her. If she really asks me (the questions of sex and its related issues), I normally reply her with my previous knowledge. However, when I do not know how to answer her (questions), I create my own answers...I never use any resources to help me discuss or explain this topic better with my daughter because I do not actually know how to find the resources.

When asked whether they sought advice or help from their children’s teachers about questions related to sex education, almost all parents (11 out of 12) in this study said that they never sought any direct help from teachers. This was partly because they did not want to trouble them, but also because some said that they did not feel comfortable asking teachers about questions related to sex.

Based on this information HK’s preschools should organise seminars and workshops related to sex education for parents as soon as possible. This will ensure that parents understand where appropriate resources can be found to help them overcome the difficulties in discussing sex-related issues openly and more easily with their children. Also, through attending the workshops arranged by the preschools, parents should know that their children’s preschools are an important resource that they can rely upon to help educate their children.

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly show that parents in HK need to be shown the value and importance of preschool sex education. In addition, parents still need more help when it comes to preparing the right sort of information to provide the right concepts, the necessary skills, and appropriate attitude of sex and sex-related issues when discussing these issues with their children.

It is recommended that preschools carry out this task by equipping parents through seminars and workshop sessions. This argument is based on the fact that the parents are the ones who children face most of the time as they mature. Therefore, it is important for parents to raise their children with an appropriate set of personal values, to teach their children to respect others, to provide correct factual knowledge about sexuality, and to guide their children in making responsible choices in life (Roffman, 2002).

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