

Evaluation Studies in Social Sciences

Evaluation Studies in Social Sciences (2021) eISSN 0128-0473/ Vol 2 Special Issue/ 2021 (71-77) http://ejournal.upsi.edu.my/index.php/ESSS DOI: https://doi.org/10.37134/esss.vol2.sp.12.2021



Perception on Sexuality Education in Secondary Schools: An **Exploratory Study among University of Cyberjaya Students**

Fareez Afiq Shah Zulfais Shah^{a*}, Nuril Munirah Mustapa^b, Syahirah Saharuddin Pakri^c, Norhafizah Ab Manan^d

a,b,c,d Faculty of Medicine, University of Cyberjaya, 63000 Cyberjaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Nor Firdous Mohamed

5 September 2021

30 October 2021

Published date 19 November 2021

Abstract

The Malaysian government has introduced sexual education in schools; however, the misbehaviour of sexual activities among Malaysian teenagers is quite alarming. Therefore, we aim to explore the experience and opinion of sexuality education in secondary schools among University of Cyberjaya students who have recently completed their school years here. A semi-structured in-depth one-to-one interview was conducted among ten foundation and undergraduate students. The interviews were carried out and recorded online which were further transcribed verbatim then reviewed and coded manually into themes. Two themes have emerged which was experience and opinion about sexual education in secondary schools. Regarding experience, the respondents have agreed that their science knowledge was increased in secondary school. However, all the respondents said that the content was not sufficient, and it was a brief topic taught in Science and Islamic studies. Several barriers in sexual education were identified in the study including inexperience educators, shameful and stigma towards sexual education, lead to unclear, incomprehensive, delivered casually, and not helpful in facing the real world. Hence, they have strong opinion that sex education should be formally imparted while some suggested that sex education should not only be in science and Islamic subjects but can be included in other subjects as well. Comprehensive sexual education is essentially needed and it should be integrated into some subjects in secondary school's curriculum. This study also suggests different ways of teaching methods implemented at different ages which cover cognitive, physical, emotional, and social aspects to reduce irresponsible acts and sexual risk behaviours and to prepare them to face the real adulthood world in the future.

Keywords: Sexuality education; secondary schools; social problems; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Sexuality education is an important topic that educates people regarding human sexuality, such as intimate relationships, anatomy and physiology of sexual reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual activity and orientation, gender identity, birth control and reproductive rights and responsibilities (Breuner Mattson, 2016). 'Sex education', education' and 'sexuality education' are used interchangeably to denote this range of topics which are tailored to the age and developmental of an individual. Although sexuality education has been introduced by the Malaysian government starting in primary schools since 1989 and with the updated curriculum in 2011, known as Reproductive Health and Social Education, it is limited to reproductive health information which promotes abstinence-only to curb premarital sex and its consequences but information regarding safer sex and contraception are excluded because of the conservative social environment and lack of political will in Malaysia (Ghani & Awin, 2020).

In light of this, National and Health Morbidity Survey 2017 (IPH, 2018) reported that 12.7% and 10% used a condom and other birth control methods respectively among the school-going adolescents in Malaysia who ever had sexual intercourse. This indicates misbehaviour of sexual activities is still quite alarming among teenagers. Besides, there are abandoned babies found dead every year in garbage and trash bins, and most of the births were from unwed and unwanted pregnancies. This is a large value implying the implications of irresponsible acts of teenagers and adults in sexual behaviour and also a rising concern to society as it reflects the social health of the country. Moreover, based on a study conducted overseas, the percentage of individuals who had protected sex at the first-time sexual intercourse is only 38% (Rada et al., 2013). Ivankovich et al., (2013) reported that unplanned pregnancies and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) has remained in

the list of public health concerns worldwide and are on the rise.

To overcome this problem, UNICEF has given suggestions and recommendations to further strengthen sexuality education by building a solid foundation that promotes safety and quality. Secondly by taking a positive approach as sexuality education needs to promote the positive and not just focus on risk and also promote gender equality and human rights. Thirdly, by achieving more together by empowering the young people and collaborating with many stakeholders, pushing boundaries and increasing intervention. evidence-based A comprehensive sexuality education according to UNESCO will equip young people and children with knowledge, attitudes. skills and values which will empower them to realize their well-being, health and dignity, develop social and sexual relationships which are respectful, and consider how their choices can affect their own wellbeing and others. To add, it also helps them to understand and ensure that throughout their lives, their rights are protected (Kanavathi, 2019). However, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has opposed the proposal of having a comprehensive, and wellplanned sexuality education in school earlier with the reason that it has been taught through other subjects such as Science, Biology and Islamic studies (Talib et al., 2012).

A study was done to know on the perspective about sexuality education among adolescents in Ambala District, Haryana, India reveals most of the respondents have agreed that sexuality education can prevent the occurrence of AIDS, whereas more than half of the respondents believed sexuality education removes myth, and they also believed it makes their future life easy (Kumar et al., 2017). Evidence suggests equipping children with sexuality education will assist them to develop well-being, dignity and also to have a healthy and responsible decision about sexual relationships, however, this idea is disagreed by many parties such as students, educators, parents, public and government (Boonstra, 2010). Moreover, a study done by Khalaf et al., (2014) portrays that sexuality issues are considered as negative topics in Malaysian society. The cultural and religious contexts which view sex as taboo has also limited the sexuality education in Malaysia. For instance, Islamic Law has prohibited premarital sexual relationships and it is also disapproved by the society especially parents due to the misconception that sexuality education will predispose the children to conduct sexual intercourse at an early age. Malaysia is a multiracial and multireligious country with each race, community or religion having their own cultural and religious background may affect their acceptance towards sexuality education. The media and public discourses also play a role in the decision making by showing the negative aspect and criminality of sexuality.

In addition, according to research done by Talib et al., (2012), it was reported that 85% of the

respondents had sexuality education in schools but the coverage is limited and unclear. Despite a few studies that have been done before, this study is designed and conducted to identify if the recent existing sexuality education programme is adequate throughout the school years. Therefore, we aim to explore the experience and opinion of sexuality education in secondary schools among students from a private institution in Malaysia who have recently completed their school years here.

2. Methodology

2.1 Material and methods

A qualitative method was implemented since it is the best way to explore students' experiences and opinions on sexuality education taught in Malaysian secondary schools. It involved one-to-one engagement with individual participants, using a set of questions as a guide which had been created through findings from current literature. The study was conducted using Microsoft Teams.

2.2 Study sample and sampling method

This study was done at the University of Cyberjaya. The University of Cyberjaya is a private university located in Selangor, Malaysia which focuses on healthcare programmes. The participants were recruited from a list of students that are currently in foundation or undergraduate studies at the institution. Participants were purposely sampled according to age, gender, race, and programme of study to ensure rich data. Participants were recruited based on Malaysians who previously studied locally around the age of 18 to 23 years old. They were chosen as they would have had enough exposure or experience on the subject. This study required respondents to evaluate their sexuality education experience; it was appropriate because their age and cognitive ability are optimal for evaluation. The sampling was terminated when the data saturation was reached.

2.3 Data collection

Once identified, participants were contacted via telephone. When they agreed to be involved in the study, an appointment was set to meet them in person via Microsoft Teams for an informed consent. Then a schedule was drawn to divide participants for each interviewer. Three researchers were involved in data collection to conduct the interview. Each interview was conducted by one-on-one interviewer and respondent in one session online. All interviews were standardized in terms of the way the researcher asked questions. Before the interview participants' consent was gained and information on age, educational level, how long have they left high school and marital status was collected. Respondents' behaviour, facial expressions, eye contact and voice were observed and recorded throughout the interview. To ensure the validity of the data collection process,

member checking and debriefing sessions were planned after each interview.

2.4 Research instruments

The study was based on a qualitative method and a semi-structured in-depth online interview was used based on a set of questions as a guide. The questions for the interview included experience and suggestions on sexuality education teaching in secondary school. The interview guide used is shown below:

- i. Has sexuality education been taught in your secondary school?
- ii. If the answer in (i) is yes, in what subject sexuality education has been taught?
- iii. Who taught you sexuality education in your high school?
- iv. How did the teacher explain aspects of sexuality during the lessons in the classroom? Was it clear?
- v. Did the discussion from the teacher on the sexuality information benefit you as guidance in your life?
- vi. Do you agree that sexuality education should be taught in Malaysian schools and why?
- vii. What are your suggestions on the implementation of sexuality education in schools?
- viii. What were the sexuality resources that you get in your high school?

All the interviews were recorded. The interview took about 30 minutes to complete. Instruments including semi-structured interview guides, observations, audio recordings and video recordings were utilised during the interviews to collect all relevant data.

2.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify the themes of the interviewed data. Once the data was collected, the recordings were converted into a text format. All transcriptions of the interviewers were cross-checked by three researchers to ensure that the collected data was consistent and valid. The entire transcript was reviewed, and all the relevant descriptions were identified. The identified descriptions were grouped into initial codes which were generated by the researchers. Lastly, the codes were then categorised or combined into subthemes and themes. The analysis and interpretation were done independently by three researchers before it was compared. If disagreement was found, the most suitable interpretations were being selected.

3. Results

Ten students were involved in this study, which consist of nine females and one male (Table 1). Seven of them were Malays, two Indians and one Chinese with ages ranging from 19 to 23 years old. Most of the participants (n = 5) were studied at public schools.

Table 1. Sociodemographic of respondents

Case	Gender	Age	Race	Type of school
Case 1	Female	20	Indian	Public school
Case 2	Female	23	Malay	Public school
Case 3	Female	23	Malay	Public boarding school
Case 4	Female	23	Malay	Islamic private school
Case 5	Female	20	Chinese	Public school
Case 6	Female	21	Malay	Private school
Case 7	Female	19	Indian	Private school
Case 8	Female	22	Malay	Public school
Case 9	Female	23	Malay	Public school
Case 10	Male	21	Malay	Private school

Table 2 shows the selected quotations, generated coding, emerged subthemes and themes from the analysis. Four subthemes and two themes have emerged from the analysis. The themes were 'experience' and 'opinion' on the sexual education implementation during secondary school.

3.1 Experience

As shown in Table 2, three subthemes were developed under this theme, including increase

knowledge on science, insufficient content on certain aspects, and barriers in seeking sex education. Most of the respondents stated that it was held in school and mostly taught by their science teachers, especially in Science and Biology classes. Two respondents mentioned it was touched during Islamic Studies. Based on their statements, the delivery of the subject was clear with a good explanation of the basic anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system,

puberty, process of fertilization and uses of contraceptives.

"Sex education was mostly held in Biology classes which they most encountered firstly in form 3 to form 5. The subject was mostly focused on the basic anatomical and physiological aspects of reproductive system".

"She explains more details on the anatomy of the reproductive system such as the female body part"

"She also explains the process of fertilization, the concept is quite clear and the information is enough."

Table 2. Emerging themes

Themes	Subthemes	Code	Selected quotions
Experience	Increase knowledge on science	 Science Biology Anatomy Sex health Clear explanation Diversity of teaching method 	"My science and biology teachers taught us about sexual and reproductive organs, puberty and menstrual cycle, how a pregnancy occurs and the way to prevent is such as using contraceptives"
	Insufficient content on certain aspects	 Casual Vague Not depth Exam-oriented 	 "There was no discussion about rape cases and STDs, no proper education at all, a lot of misunderstandings. I didn't know where to go for resources" "I guess my teacher also taught the process of pregnancy and abortion but there was no proper lecture about it. I wasn't sure if I had a clear picture about it during that time" "Simply based it on what is necessarily found in textbooks only"
	Barrier	 Inexperienced Educators Shame Stigma 	 "Teachers were not enthusiastic to deliver the right message" "She explains more details on the anatomy of the reproductive system such as the female body parts rather than thoroughly explaining the process. Other than that, she just diverts the topic or finishes it off quickly" "I could feel that my teacher was a bit shy judging by the way she teaches" "We were afraid to ask questions"
Opinion	Positive attitude towards sexual education	 Introduce early Broaden the scope Integrate with other subjects 	 "It should be as early as in primary school around 9-12 years old because that was the time the girls hit their puberty" "Governments should also input seminars such as 'HIV awareness' in schools" "It should be put in courses like Social studies or Islamic not just Biology"

Diversity of teaching methods used to deliver the topic such as a workshop, and lecture using visual aids such as diagrams and videos were explained by the respondents. According to the respondents, using teaching aids and drawing diagrams on the board helps in understanding the concept better.

"I did have a one-time off session with an external speaker on sexual education like the reproductive organs, how one conceives, which part of the body that should not be touched by the other gender."

"The use of condom demonstration was shown during my teacher's lecture."

"We were taught on how to use condoms carefully by my teacher, she even showed a video in class"

The second subtheme was insufficient content on certain aspects. The respondents mentioned that sexual education was mostly taught in a vague, not-depth and casual manner on the pregnancy preventive measure. Respondents also added they

learnt about sex education for preparing for examination not for seeking knowledge.

"The contraceptives weren't taught as detailed as others as our education was mostly exam-oriented and it was not thought as important as the other parts of the topic"

"Discussion of sex education was just briefed on the pills and preventive measures. I guess my teacher also taught the process of pregnancy and abortion but there was no proper lecture about it. I wasn't sure if I had a clear picture about it during that time"

"There wasn't a thorough explanation about body parts about the female reproductive system, rape cases and also STDs. There was no proper education at all, a lot of misunderstandings. I didn't know where to go for resources."

"The contraceptives weren't taught as detailed as others as our education was mostly exam-oriented and it was not thought as important as the other parts of the topic."

There were barriers found in this study faced by the respondents in learning about sex education such as inexperienced educators and stigma on sex education among students and educators.

"I would say it was not that clear, I could feel that my teacher was a bit shy judging by the way she teaches."

"It was not made really clear. I didn't know how STIs were transmitted."

"I didn't have a clear picture about it. I was told people have to have sex in order to reproduce and that's about it. Teachers were not really clear because I could sense the awkwardness around my teacher when she tries to explain it furtherly."

"The attitude of the teachers where they were so ashamed to explain the information to the students thus, they had to use other methods such as analogy and metaphors in educating the students in the classrooms"

"The classes to be separated based on genders because of discomfitures among teachers and the students"

3.2 Opinion

All respondents had a positive attitude towards sexual education as summarised in Table 2. All were agreed that sexual education should be taught in schools across Malaysia to understand responsibility, interpersonal attitude and skills, to answer their inquiring mind about sex and to avoid misconceptions about sex which further prevent them into digging into pornography. Several suggestions appeared during the interview.

"I think sexual education has to be taught in schools around 13-14 years of age ... conducted in a formal class, girls separated from boys, so as to be more comfortable discussing it, and taught by teachers. However, the teachers must not be biased based on their religion"

"It should be as early as in primary school around 9-12 years old because that was the time the girls hit their puberty. They should have learnt about physical touch and how to refuse being touched. In my opinion, it should be conducted in a class as part of the curriculum and taught by the school teachers. It should be a mixed class of boys and girls so that both genders won't be shy to discuss it."

4. Discussion

4.1 Experience in sex education

We found that the most sexual education exposure stated by the respondents was during Biology classes and some of the respondents have mentioned during Islamic Studies. The respondents agreed that their science-based knowledge on sex education was increased during secondary school. However, they felt that the content of sex education was insufficient in other aspects. The biology syllabus alone was lack on psychological, social, and moral viewpoints. Based on the respondent suggestions, sex education can be integrated with other subjects. It may trigger students' interest and break the stigma by including the element of sex education in other subjects such as Physical, Civic and Moral Education, History, or language subject. The respondents also suggested that blended learning also can be introduced by adding the structured independent learning time, discussions and presentation. Nevertheless, recall bias might occur in this study since it was a challenge to remember topics that they have learnt previously in school about sex education. To overcome this problem, an exploratory study with the triangulation method can be used in the future to increase the credibility of the findings such as data from educators on the same topic. However, since this is a qualitative study, it is not possible to generalise the findings to all the secondary schools in Malaysia. However, the findings from this study may help educators to have an idea about the students' expectations when they learn about sexual education in school.

Besides that, the respondents have stated that sexual education was taught in classrooms. Since sex education includes social relationship aspects, the respondents of this study suggest encouraging students to be involved in sports, clubs and community works by informing and reminding students on the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities. Examples of the benefits are to develop communication skills, improve self-confidence and enhance psychosocial abilities.

One of the challenges faced by the respondents in this study was inexperienced educators which is similar to the challenge found in the Iran education system where the educators did not receive any sexual education course (Khalesi et al., 2017). Therefore, this study suggests more data is needed about this matter so that teachers or educators can be equipped with appropriate skills. Some respondents also had a session with an external speaker on sexual education. This is a good approach to have external parties such as non-government organisations (NGOs) in school to create awareness and educate students on sexuality. For example, the Federation Reproductive Health Association, Malaysia (FRHAM) is conduct programs such as talks, and exhibitions in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions as well as public places to raise awareness on sex education (Jiar et al., 2018).

4.2 *Opinion on sex education*

All respondents expressed a positive attitude towards sex education by giving opinions on the early age of starting learning sexual education in school, broaden the scope and implementation. In western countries, Kirby, (1999) the median age of starting to have sex education was 11 years old with different opinions when it should be started. One of the aspects that contribute to a successful sexual education teaching-learning in schools is having a multielement approach (Kirby et al., 2006). The respondents also suggested that the teachers should have a well-planned strategy in relaying the information appropriately according to the age of the students. Since this an exploratory qualitative study, these findings should be supported by other studies.

The awareness of the importance of sex education should be promoted among parents and teachers since they are the most ideal person to educate the students. A prior study conducted in Malaysia found parents and students gave positive support towards a sexual education program conducted in school which the parents and students were supportive towards the program, but the teachers are worried if certain matters such as naked drawing may give a bad influence on children (Jiar et al., 2018). To address this matter, the participants agreed to have sex education in schools comprehensively since they believed that teachers give more accurate

information than other information sources such as friends, magazines and internet websites. All the information is very important to prepare themselves with knowledge, attitude and skills to develop a healthy relationship in the future. This is in concordance with a study by Schaalma et al., (2004), which stated that less unprotected intercourse is likely to occur in young people who were equipped with sex education. The other study done in Nigeria reported fewer at-risk sexual behaviours among the schoolgoing adolescents who participated in a sexual education programme compared to those who did not attend the programme (Esere, 2008). This further proves the importance of sexual education to be implemented in schools in preventing adolescents from being astray into self-destructing risky sexual behaviours. A longitudinal study is suggested should be conducted to discover the effectiveness of sex education towards sexual behaviours among adolescents in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

The respondents agreed that sexual education was taught superficially during secondary schools and they suggested having a comprehensive sex education integrated into other subjects. Equip the educators with adequate skills and using a variety of teaching materials are also suggested by the respondents. Further study is needed among educators and parents to explore their opinion about this topic.

References

Boonstra, H. (2010). Sex education: Another big step forward—and a step back. *The Guttmacher Policy Review*, 13(2), 27–28. Retrieved from https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2010/06/sexeducation-another-big-step-forward-and-step-back.

Breuner, C. C., & Mattson, G. (2016). Sexuality education for children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, *138*(2). https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1348

Esere, M. O. (2008). Effect of sex education programme on at-risk sexual behaviour of school-going adolescents in Ilorin, Nigeria. *African Health Sciences*, 8(2). https://doi.org/10.4314/njgc.v11i1.36988

Ghani, F., & Awin, N. (2020). Sexuality Education across selected Muslim countries: A review to inform Malaysia's 2020-24 National Reproductive Health and Social Education Plan of Action. Retrieved from http://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:7886.

IPH. (2018). National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2017: Key Findings from the Adolescent Health and Nutrition Surveys; Infographic Booklet. *Institute for Public Health, National Institutes of Health, The Ministry of Health, Malaysia, April,* 29. Retrieved from https://iku.moh.gov.my/images/IKU/Document/R EPORT/NHMS2017/AHSReportNHMS2017.pdf.

- Ivankovich, M. B., Fenton, K. A., & Douglas, J. M., Jr (2013). Considerations for national public health leadership in advancing sexual health. *Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974)*, 128 Suppl I(Suppl 1), 102–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549131282S112
- Jiar, Y. K., Lee, S. H., & Handayani, L. (2018). Effort of NGO in promoting comprehensive sexuality education to improve quality of life among local and refugee communities. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, 7(1), 17-24. https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v1i1.11237
- Kanavathi, F. and A. (2019). Comprehensive sexuality education for Malaysian adolescents: How far have we come? *National Report on The State of the Region Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+25)*,1–141. Retrieved from https://arrow.org.my/wp
 - content/uploads/2019/04/FRHAM-ICPD-25-Final-Report-proofread-and-formatted-Jeremy-Final.pdf.
- Khalaf, Z. F., Low, W. Y., Merghati-Khoei, E., & Ghorbani, B. (2014). Sexuality education in Malaysia: Perceived issues and barriers by professionals. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 26(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539513517258
- Khalesi, Z. B., Simbar, M., & Azin, S. A. (2017). A qualitative study of sexual health education among iranian engaged couples. *African Health Sciences*, 17(2), 382–390. https://doi.org/10.4314/ahs.v17i2.12
- Kirby D. (1999). Sexuality and sex education at home and school. *Adolescent medicine (Philadelphia, Pa.)*, 10(2), 195–v. Retrieved from https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10370704/.
- Kirby, D., Obasi, A., & Laris, B. A. (2006). The effectiveness of sex education and HIV education interventions in schools in developing countries.

- World Health Organization technical report series, 938, 103–341. Retrieved from https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16921919/.
- Kumar, R., Goyal, A., Singh, P., Bhardwaj, A., Mittal, A., & Yadav, S. S. (2017). Knowledge attitude and perception of sex education among school going adolescents in Ambala district, Haryana, India: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Clinical* and Diagnostic Research, JCDR, 11(3), LC01– LC04.
 - https://doi.org/10.7860/JCDR/2017/19290.9338
- Mutalip, S. S. M., & Mohamed, R. (2012). Sexual education in Malaysia: Accepted or rejected? *Iranian Journal of Public Health*, 41(7), 34–39. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3 469017/.
- Rada, C., Albu, A., & Petrariu, F. D. (2013). Age at initiation of sexual life, protection at first intercourse and sources of information regarding sexual and reproductive health. *Revista Medico-Chirurgicală a Societății de Medici Şi Naturalişti Din Iași*, 117(4), 994–1001. Retrieved from https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24502081/.
- Rashid, A., Finnikin, S., & Tackett, S. (2021).

 Accreditation drives teaching: Evidence-based medicine and medical education standards. In *BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine*. BMJ Publishing Group. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjebm-2020-111491
- Schaalma, H. P., Abraham, C., Gillmore, M. R., & Kok, G. (2004). Sex education as health promotion: What does it take? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 33(3), 259-269. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:ASEB.0000026625.65171.1d
- Talib, J., Mamat, M., Ibrahim, M., & Mohamad, Z. (2012). Analysis on sex education in schools across Malaysia. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.284

Citation

Zulfais Shah, F. A. S., Mustapa, N. M., Saharuddin Pakri, S., & Ab Manan, N. (2021). Perception on Sexuality Education in Secondary Schools: An Exploratory Study among University of Cyberjaya Students. *Evaluation Studies in Social Sciences*, 2, 71-77. https://doi.org/10.37134/esss.vol2.sp.12.2021