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A Review of International Experiences in Adolescent Sexuality Education and Practical Implications for China

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Abstract. Sexuality education in China remains fragmented and unevenly implemented, despite adolescents' need for accurate information, skills to make consent, and access to support. Existing studies commonly examine areas alone: such as, curriculum, teachers, parents, or policy; this leaves limited guidance on how those factors may interact with each other in real context. Hence, this review analyses international cases and experiences of comprehensive sexuality education, identifying certain practical implications of those for China under the lens of ecological system theory. Through reviewing international and Chinese literature, together with UNESCO paper, this review covers certain aspects of implementation of sexuality education: curriculum design, delivery, teacher preparation, parental engagement, community support, and governmental policy. The review therefore indicates that the effectiveness CSE depend on several circumstances, in which should be age appropriate, progressive, participatory, and delivered by trained educators under the support from school-family-community network. Regarding the practical implications for China, the future practice could identify transferable experiences and adapt them to local needs, institutional capacity, and cultural conditions.

Keywords: Sexuality Education, Adolescents, Implementation

1. Introduction

Adolescence, from 10 to 19, is recognized as a crucial stage for human development, laying the foundation of good health [1]. As one of the most populous countries in the world, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) towards adolescents is crucial not only to China, but also the global society.

According to a study, among 53508 Chinese adolescents, 54.2% of sexually experienced respondents reported first intercourse before age 18, and 5.7% before age 15 [2]. Indeed, data shows that a large majority of adolescents in China lack knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. Although this study could not be directly taken as direct inference of the entire population, they somehow still demonstrate that concerns in adolescent stage such as puberty, sexual initiation, contraception, pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted infection, prevention, consent, and access to confidential health services are relevant uprising concerns in adolescent stage. Hence, this emphasizes the significance of timely, age-appropriate education, rather than limiting it to biological development alone.

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Previous research has increasingly examined adolescent sexual health through sexual and reproductive health risks, policy implementation, and school-parent based provision [2]. Despite the considerable research into these fields, these strands are often explored separately rather than presented as interconnected influences on adolescents' learning, decision-making, and access to support. Moreover, educators are also facing the context-sensitive situation, which is regarded as an inevitable barrier to overcome in the stage of translating sexual education from policy and curriculum standards into teacher-led classroom practice, family communication, and reliable media information.

Accordingly, this article will aim to address these critical gaps: the limited integration of interconnected subjects that shape adolescent CSE in China, and limited translation of international cases into the context where they lack practical implications of CSE in classrooms. Under the ecological systems theory as a framework that the paper will follow, the review will comparatively examine international CSE cases to identify the strengths in programme implementation, especially teacher training, curriculum design, family engagement,and peer and media education. By comparing how these approaches operate within their respective social and institutional contexts, the review aims to identify how could expand the scale and improve the extent of implementation of the CSE.

2. Method

This study adopts a systematic review to examine international experiences of adolescent sexuality education and their practical implications for China through an ecological systems theory lens.

Peer-reviewed papers will be identified through Web of Science, Taylor&Francis, Google Scholar, National Health Institute, and CNKI. Web of Science Core Collection and Taylor&Francis will be used to identify international peer-reviewed research; and CNKI will be used to find Chinese-language studies on current sexual education situations. Moreover, this study also reviews UNESCO's papers and guides for Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Keywords that are used in searching include: "adolescent", "Comprehensive Sexuality Education", "curriculum" and "Practical implications". While in Chinese, Chinese searches will combine terms such as "adolescence", "Sexuality Education", "Comprehensive Sexuality Education", "Curriculum", "School", and "China". Structure

3. Main body

3.1. Curriculum content

UNESCO defines CSE as a curriculum-based process that equips young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to protect their health, well-being, dignity, relationships and rights [3]. Hence, it is expected to be scientifically accurate, incremental, and age- and developmentally appropriate: a spiral curriculum in which learners revisit concepts with increasing cognitive, social and practical complexity. According to the international guidance of sexuality education, the following review will surround the content and its implementation details.

Accordingly, several studies have concluded that the content of the CSE program should consider four different aspects. Firstly, it should provide scientifically accurate knowledge of puberty, genital anatomy, reproduction, pregnancy, contraception, condom use, and HIV/STI prevention [3, 4]. This assures students understand the fundamental biological knowledge regarding the human body. Secondly, social-emotional learning is also crucial, including body image, emotional literacy,

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awareness, personal values, self-esteem, and the ability to recognize and regulate feelings [5]. Third, it should prepare students for respectful relationships by addressing communication, consent, bodily integrity, healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics, and gender equality [3, 5]. Fourth, it should develop the decision-making skills, it could be related to: their values, health risks, refusal, consent, safety, etc. In this sense, a comprehensive curriculum should discuss sexuality not merely through the risks of pregnancy and STIs, but through the relationships, emotions, social expectations, and practical decision-making progresses. Finally, the curriculum should address the wider social context in which sexual decisions are made, including social norms, gender norms, discrimination, media and online information, human rights, and access to trustworthy health services [2, 4]. Thus, comprehensiveness refers not simply to the number of topics included, but to whether biomedical knowledge, emotional development, relationships, social context, and practical decision-making are connected in ways that learners can use.

3.2. Curriculum organization and classroom implementation

Age-spiral curriculum is being specifically emphasized for curriculum design of sexuality education [2]. To be specific, from childhood to adolescence, sexuality education should be presented and addressed in an age-appropriate and developmental-appropriate way. For instance, on the topic of 'decision-making', younger children may learn about body awareness, privacy, and safety. For adolescents, the course that they learn will expand to content, including health and unhealthy relationships, responsibility, and consent. Indeed, spiral progression introduces a gradual process, encountering CSE from fundamental knowledge to complex decisions. By revising the concept multiple times across age groups, it raises learners' awareness from the start, increasing the complexity of the relationship, health, and ethical contexts in which students apply it [3]. Moreover, appropriate delivery methods should be taken by teachers during class, and it would improve the effectiveness of understanding.

Continuity in CSE depends not only on content but also on its curricular status and teaching duration. In different countries, the policy varies substantially; for instance, in Austria, only 2-3 hours of sexuality education is given per year. The fragmented or one-off activities are unlikely to provide the repetition needed for a spiral curriculum, aligning with the developmental pattern. UNESCO notes that positive results have been reported in programmes offering 12 or more sessions —and in some cases thirty or more sessions—of approximately fifty minutes, delivered over time rather than as isolated events [3]. Two different curricular statuses of CSE: one may be offered as a stand-alone subject, integrated into subjects such as health, biology, social science or guidance counselling, or delivered through a combined model. A stand-alone subject can protect curricular time, signal institutional importance and make assessment more straightforward, but may rely on one trained teacher. Alternatively, an integrated model can connect CSE with related learning and support a whole-school approach, yet it risks dilution when complex CSE content competes with core subjects that will appear in students' examination. As such, different models align with different situations, and it depends on the local educational policy, resources, learner needs, timetable space and community support; neither approach is universally superior [3].

3.3. Pedagogy and teacher's capacity

In School-based education for adolescents, properly designed and properly executed CSE resources and programs are crucial for understanding and engagement. Current studies have focused on

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participatory scenarios, discussion within class, anonymous questions, and teacher training to facilitate more promising practices.

Different interactive and scenario-related activities in sexual education have illustrated its value through engagement and deeper understanding toward the content itself. A study that was conducted in the UK has used 8 short films, in the form of video diaries. The films mainly describe scenarios that legally constituted rape but introduced contextual elements that could complicate adolescents' judgement toward consent [6]. Specifically, the scenarios involve themes such as alcohol use, existing relationships, sexual attraction, peer pressure, online sexual communication, and economic vulnerability. While most of the adolescents who have received the education about 'consent' in theoretical classes of sexual education, are able to describe it in abstract terms, their understanding still remains ambiguous as it is in real-world situations. Hence, this suggests that many young people may still judge 'consent' primarily by the presence or absence of an explicit refusal, rather than by considering whether a person was genuinely free, willing, and able to make a choice. The use of practicable scenarios potentially offer adolescents alternative action to take or examine their situations if the consent is being abused in real life. Alternatively, role-playing exercises, games, and debates on topics are also helpful for adolescents to consolidate their knowledge regarding theories or concepts they just learned. Especially for role-playing, adolescents could practice communication strategies in real-world contexts [6].

Moreover, group discussions and question-answer sessions are two pedagogies accompanying the materials-based activities. Specifically, during group discussions, it allows students to move beyond the passive reception of information, but to engage with conversations that cover personal experiences, questions, and misconceptions. Moreover, current studies show that most of the students would find the fictional character experience offers a safer, comfortable learning space for discussion of issues, encouraging students to comment more on their actions' feasibility. "Question and Answer" then offers students a platform to submit their concerns anonymously, and study has shown it as an appreciated source for communication and information [6].

Interactive activities alone are unlikely to improve CSE outcomes unless they are delivered by educators with sufficient topic knowledge, pedagogical skills, and confidence to facilitate sensitive discussions. In school-based CSE programs, teacher-led delivery could support quite rapid implementation. However, a teacher's limited confidence, inadequate preparation, and burden of other tasks may compromise the quality of delivery. In countries with pre-service teacher education, such as Finland and Sweden, specialised preparation is included in the training program; while in other countries, the teacher-training has been shortened into brief workshops, leading to inability in precisely addressing or solving problems related to sexuality in social context. Moreover, in the sensitive context of sexual education, teacher embarrassment or discomfort may lead sexuality-related content to be diluted or omitted in class [6]. These findings suggest that teacher training programs should develop not only educators' factual knowledge, but also the ability to utilize materials, manage questions, address social and interpersonal dimensions of sexuality, and facilitate inclusive classroom discussion [7]. However, initial preparation alone cannot ensure high-quality delivery throughout a programme. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are needed to assess if the programme reaches its specific objective or goal at every respective stage, including whether the planned curriculum, participatory activities, and discussion-based components are delivered as intended; whether educators have adequate time and resources; and whether students demonstrate changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and feedback.This mechanism allows programme leaders to identify educators' practical difficulties, unanswered questions, or areas in which further support is needed. On the basis of this feedback, ongoing support and frequent refresher training can be

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provided to address emerging challenges and maintain educators' capacity to deliver CSE effectively over time.

3.4. Stakeholders' engagement across ecological systems

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, it provides a viewpoint of how multiple levels will come together and exert influence on one individual [8]; this reveals the feasibility of examining CSE through the ecological system lens.In other words, this section examines how family, school, community and wider cultural contexts can enable or constrain communication between individuals and implementation of sex education for adolescents.

Primarily, in the microsystem, parental involvement in sexual education should refer to the establishment of an inclusive and trusted environment in which sensitive questions can be raised, clarified and discussed without judgement. Rather than replacing school-based sexuality education or acting as adolescents' only source of knowledge, parents can provide direct and continuing support in adolescents' everyday lives. The frequency and quality of communication may depend on how adolescents perceive their parents. According to a cross-sectional study of social communication and education in the United States, it presents three crucial qualities that should be upheld throughout parental communication: Expertise, as parents are able to provide reliable messages; trustworthiness, as parents are honest and could act in adolescents' interests; and accessibility, as parents won't ignore adolescents since they are too busy to talk [9]. These qualities were associated with more frequent parent-adolescent communication about risk-related issues in the study. Indeed, the international review also pointed out how parental involvement in sexual education is associated with positive adolescent sexual and reproductive health outcomes, although outcomes varied throughout interventions.

Nonetheless, evidence also suggests certain impediments in microsystem communication that parents rarely bring up the topic of 'sex' due to religious beliefs, embarrassment, culture, misperceptions of their children involved in early sex, and etc. Hence, one way to overcome those barriers is to move beyond the microsystem, considering how it could be then shaped by the support, information and legitimacy from schools, community resources and social norms, which could be referred to the mesosystem, exosystem, or even the macrosystem.

The mesosystem, referring to the connections between different settings in adolescence, specifically stresses the importance of the interaction between schools and parents. School-based sex education allows parents to get informed with sex-education related information in a formal way. In order to cope with certain factors that restrained parents from sitting down in public face-to-face, such as:time constraint, concerns, embarrassment, the development of technology allows the sex education to appear in digital forms. For instance, the education programme, 'If i was Jack', include short, animated films for parents and guardians. The short, animated videos have been responded with a higher positive percentage of positive feedback and a higher percentage of attendance compared to the previous one, but the overall engagement is still quite low, with 27% of parents visiting the online platform, only 9% watching the anime videos. Hence, in practice, passive information reception should be then replaced with repeated, accessible and two-way contact, as a single meeting once a year simply would not make a significant difference.

Regarding the broader context, in which the ways culture, religion and community judgement influence the fear of discussing 'sex', support needs to move beyond the home-school relationship to the exosystem and macrosystem. A case from Senegal has illustrated the importance of recognition of policy environment, NGOs, and religion throughout the process of scaling-up the programe called 'Family-Life Education', which covers HIV prevention and adolescent reproductive health.

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Community sensitization addressed informational barriers at the exosystem levels, including hosting open days for parents and community members, documentary films, sensitization guides, and community activities. Moving beyond, at the macrosystem level, FLE was supported through education policy and its integration into the own school curriculum. The use of the terms 'Family Life Education' was intended to reduce resistance of the community towards the term 'sexuality education'. Religious leaders were also consulted during the curriculum design and development. Although the take in Senegal did not completely remove the cultural barriers, it somehow made it more legitimate for schools, parents, and community organizations to engage with this curriculum in a more active way [10].

Taken together, the international approaches, in terms of sexuality education, demonstrate the interdependent relationship between different systems. The implementation of sexuality education depend on parents, schools, access to community resources, culturally legitimate implementation, and government policy. However, these measures should still be adapted and evaluated locally rather than transferred directly across contexts.

4. Discussion

In this study, it reviews different aspects of adolescent sexuality education in terms of school education, teachers, forms of delivery, and the connection between sexuality education and the environment. Hence, this study will further discuss how the practical implications of international approaches will help to improve the practice in China.

First, one principal implication is to incorporate Sexuality Education into School-based Education. Since school is presented as the main setting of learning, a progressive, consistent, and age-appropriate spiral program is crucial for CSE implementation for adolescents,instead of fragmented sessions. Nonetheless, in China, schools that provide sex education often deliver it as a single-class or isolated activities; indeed, they mainly focus on topics such as health and puberty, instead of relationship, gender, consent, and practical decision making. Therefore, the fragmented provision of the course makes it different for schools to regard CSE as part of educational responsibility. Hence, regarding the exam pressure and limited timetable space, the more feasible approach would be establishing a protected minimum learning sequence across existing health subjects, with age-specific objectives, allocated teaching time, materials, and monitoring to ensure that core content of CSE is actually delivered. This should be further assured by Ministry of Education to implement policy for schools to follow, to ensure the engagement of schools in this program.

Second, delivery of Sexuality Education would be effective when teachers have sufficient knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical skills. Specifically, pedagogical skills refer to the suitable choice of activity in class, leaving students with a comfortable space to learn for instance, scenario learning, short films, anonymous question-answer, and group discussions could be potential choices of learning activities [6]. However, most of the teachers did not even receive any relevant pre-training for sexuality education teaching. Without enough training, teachers may fail to teach the content properly or even answer questions in class, and this may also lead to the avoidance of certain sensitive information [11]. Instead of letting teachers prepare materials by themselves, a more realistic option to improve delivery would be to train a small group of specialized teachers in every school. Throughout the training, it will cover more than factual knowledge, preparing teachers to deliver core content confidently, facilitate discussions, respond without judgement, and recognise when any support is needed from students. After all, with enough materials, teachers are capable of utilizing the tools to guide the students in the classroom.

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Finally, cultural barriers between school-based sexuality education and the wider community need to be addressed through collaboration between schools, families, health professionals, and community organizations. While in China, where sexuality-related conversations are often associated with embarrassment and shame, and some parents may avoid discussing them with their children [12]. The rooted cultural taboos should then be gradually removed, to let adolescents confront 'sexuality' openly. To change the atmosphere, it is an approach that should closely connect with the coordination between different stakeholders in society. Starting from the connection between parents and schools, schools could use short digital guides, scenario-based videos, anonymous question channels, and regular information sessions to help parents obtain the sex-education knowledge and begin conversations at home. Yet digital resources should support, rather than replace, two-way communication. Moving beyond, NGOs could also work with local neighborhoods hosting open-days, facilitating parent sessions, and providing referral support, rather than offering only one-off lectures.

5. Conclusion

After all, this study reviews different studies that present methods and forms of adolescent sexuality education, and it further considers the possible implications of them in China. Instead of merely delivering biological facts and risk-warnings, cases and international standards that have been reviewed suggest that CSE would be most meaningful when it progressively develops young people's knowledge, agency, communication, and decision-making skills. Moreover, curriculum quality also depends on not only pedagogy and curriculum design, but also wider relationships between parents, schools, health organizations, and policy through the ecological system perspective. Therefore, for China specifically, the key implication is then to adapt the transferable design principles to local contexts, implementation capacity, and adolescents' needs.

This paper is nevertheless a systematic review, instead of an empirical investigation of current sexuality education in China. While the study utilizes and reviews the experiences from other countries, it does not provide direct evidence of the ways that it could be successfully delivered across China, how parents and students experience it, or which barriers are particularly important in certain communities. Hence, without empirical investigation, the effectiveness of the study being used in the process of implementation remains limited.

Following the existing studies of possible implications of sexuality education for China, the future research should then focus on the ways where local empirical studies could implement and expand the scale of sexuality education. First, local empirical studies could examine how sexuality education's current delivery and its impact across Chinese schools and communities, including perspectives of adolescents, parents, teachers and local organizations. Second, the researchers could potentially co-design curriculum materials with stakeholders, adapting to the local situations, but the curriculum should also retain principles such as: developmental sequence, communication, consent, and gender awareness. Thirdly, pilot studies could investigate whether the curriculum could be effectively applied to the local conditions, including teachers, available class time, parent engagement, and students' responses. If possible, further studies could adopt longitudinal or mixed-method evaluations to examine not only knowledge outcomes, but also improvements in engagements, communication, and decision making skills.

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