Exploring Teachers' Attitudes to Sex Education

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Introduction

• Increasing discourse surrounding sex education and tackling gender-based harassment in schools (see: WEC, 2016; Ofsted, 2021)

Figure 1.
Perceptions of the scale of sexual harassment among young people

• New Relationships and Sex Education curriculum became compulsory September 2020 (Dept. Of Education, 2019)

• Tanton et al., (2015) - young people cite school as main source of information about sex

Note. Responses of 'a lot' or 'sometimes' to the above statements (%)."From Review of sexual harassment in schools and colleges, by Ofsted, 2021, UK Government Publications."
Attitude to Sex Education

• Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) can be seen as a political, social and educational process which requires a proactive and positive attitude from all stakeholders (Reis & Vilar, 2006).

• Therefore, a positive attitude to sex education can be seen as a precursor needed to facilitate change

• CSE is hindered by a number of factors including:
  • Lack of confidence (Bragg et al., 2020) and resources (Westwood & Mullen, 2007)
  • Competition for curriculum time (Buston et al. 2002)
  • Key messages being interpreted as more negative by teachers (Pound et al., 2017)
  • Perceived parental objections (Johnson et al., 2014)
  • Discussion of issues such as sexual consent at an early age is feared to tarnish innocence of youth (Bird, 2020)

• What research into CSE has found:
  • Sexuality education is beneficial to children (UNESCO, 2018)
  • With appropriate scaffolding, children can understand and discuss gender-related issues including gender expectations and oppression (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021)
Predictors

- As teachers deliver sex education, their personal beliefs and attitudes might be a reliable indicator of CSE restrictions.
- What beliefs may impact attitude to sex education?

Sexism

- Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) describes how both hostile and benevolent forms of sexism work together to ensure the continuation of traditional gender roles – men as dominant and women as submissive.
- Both forms of sexism have been found to correlate with acceptance of rape myths (Abrams et al., 2003; Yamawaki, 2007; Cohn et al., 2009)

Culturally created sexual scripts

- Navigation of sexual experiences by reflecting the power dynamics found in traditional gender roles (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).
- Representation of sexual scripts are commonly found in media (Ward, 2005) but expectations of gendered behaviour could be transmitted through the hidden curriculum (Hernandez et al, 2013).
Sex Education Teachers’ Attitudes Evaluation Questionnaire

• This scale was developed by Reis and Vilar (2006) to measure the knowledge, attitude and comfort that second and third level teachers in Portugal had of sex education.

• Scale was chosen as there appears to be a lack of quantitative instruments to measure teachers' attitudes to sex education as much of the research in the UK context is qualitative – pilot studies of interventions (Bragg et al., 2020) or observational interviews (Coy et al., 2015).

• It is a 10-item measure with five positive and five negative statements and those marked with [R] are reverse scored.
The items that follow are related to your attitude towards sex education. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree using the scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. School sex education is very important for children and youth.
2. School sex education promotes earlier sexual involvement [R]
3. Sexuality is learned through life experiences and not school [R]
4. Only specialist teachers should provide sex education [R]
5. School sex education should be obligatory
6. School sex education is an effective way to prevent HIV/AIDS
7. Sex education is an effective way to prevent abortion
8. Sex education should be provided by parents not by school [R]
9. With all the information in the media, school sex education is no longer necessary [R]
10. All teachers are responsible for sex education
School sex education is very important for children and youth.
With all the information in the media, school sex education is no longer necessary.

- Strongly disagree: 0%
- Somewhat disagree: 2.53%
- Neither agree or disagree: 1.27%
- Somewhat agree: 8.86%
- Strongly agree: 87.34%

Sexuality is learned through life experiences and not school.

- Strongly disagree: 6.25%
- Somewhat disagree: 20%
- Neither agree or disagree: 32.50%
- Somewhat agree: 15%
- Strongly agree: 26.25%
School sex education should be obligatory.

- 75% Strongly disagree
- 15% Somewhat disagree
- 3.75% Neither agree or disagree
- 1.25% Somewhat agree
- 5% Strongly agree

All teachers are responsible for sex education.

- 36.25% Strongly disagree
- 12.50% Somewhat disagree
- 12.50% Neither agree or disagree
- 8.75% Somewhat agree
- 8.75% Strongly agree

Only specialist teachers should provide sex education.

- 28.75% Strongly disagree
- 26.25% Somewhat disagree
- 27.50% Neither agree or disagree
- 8.75% Somewhat agree
- 8.75% Strongly agree
Future Directions

• Development of a reliable scale to measure attitude to sex education
  • The Sex Education Teachers’ Attitudes Evaluation Questionnaire may not have captured the personal attitudes teachers have about delivering sex education
  • A level of discomfort and lack of confidence found among teachers (Buston et al., 2002)
• What is causing the personal discomfort?
  • Lack of subject related knowledge?
  • Lack of clear and viable resources/teaching tools?
  • Fear of breaching the status quo?
  • Is CSE a threat to the current sexual socialisation process?
Future Directions cont

• Study found that higher scores of hostile sexism as measured by the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory predicted a negative attitude to sex education
  • How prevalent are these views among teachers in primary and secondary school teachers?
  • Endorsement of sexist views tend to decline or change among typically aged university students (Hammond et al., 2018) – implementation of gender bias training for trainee teachers and measure how their attitude to sex education changes.

• How prevalent are the adherence to rape myths among those who teach sex education?
Any Questions?
References


Department for Education. (2019). Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education. Department for Education.


