

Perceived Quality on Junior High School Sex Education and its Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes among Senior High School Students in a Selected Private University in the National Capital Region

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Abstract

Comprehensive Sexual Education is often overlooked due to its sensitive nature in conservative society, resulting in higher teen pregnancy rates, unsafe sex practices, and an increase in sexually transmitted diseases. It also restricts preadolescents from learning about other equally valuable information such as sexual orientation and gender expression. This study utilized scales to measure its main four variables — Background Characteristics, Perceived Quality, Sexual Knowledge, and Attitude — and a descriptive correlational design to explore the relationships between them. The results showed that quality sexual education had positive contributions to sexual knowledge, and that students had a relatively positive sexual attitude. The study also revealed that respondents with higher religiosity had higher perceptions of comprehensiveness and the school environment in relation to their quality of JHS sex education.

Keywords: sex education, sexual knowledge, sexual attitude, religiosity

Introduction

Sex education is an essential, though often overlooked branch of education. It tackles different aspects such as human development, emotional growth, and overall health. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) imparts critical information and skills for life. However, it is the subject of controversy among conservative nations due to preconceived notions that its implementation in the curriculum promotes sexual activity. In the findings of a report examining CSE status in 48 countries across the world, 'Emerging Evidence, Lessons and Practice in Comprehensive Sexuality Education - A Global Review 2015'. Published by UNESCO, the report showed that almost 80 % of assessed countries have policies or strategies in place that support CSE (UNESCO, 2015) In a third-world highly religious country like Philippines, wherein 86% of the population are Roman Catholic (Miller, n.d.), the dated teachings of the church are heavily influential on all matters. This sway amplifies especially on school teachings. As a result, the coverage of sexuality education curricula in schools in Asia is very limited, despite the mention of sexuality education in relevant laws and policies at the national level (Kirby et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2018). The state of sex education in the Philippine curriculum has been heavily afflicted by conservative and religious ideologies, therefore, lacks comprehensive information. Even after decades, the topic is still considered taboo due to religious values that continue to be upheld by the State despite its supposed separation (Austria, 2006; Bella, 2014).

A study by Krebbekx (2018) revealed that school-based sex education acts as a health intervention to reduce unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. It is both terrifying and upsetting that if it weren't for the rise of sexually transmitted diseases such as the human immunodeficiency virus or more commonly known as HIV and sexual violence among the younger spectrum of the masses, there would not have been a sexual education that talks about safe sexual practice and contraceptives. Even more tragic is that these are often weaponized by institutions to scare children into celibacy—an overused tactic overseas that only proves to cause more sexual activity. In addition to the aforementioned arguments, weak sexual education aid in perpetuating harmful and sexist gender norms.

As mentioned in the above sections, sexual education in the Philippines proves to be suboptimal at best. It offers compulsory knowledge most often only pertaining to anatomy. This method of teaching does a disservice to all other elements of sexuality and dims the potential of preadolescents on the

subject of sexual reproductive health and on sexuality in general. The primary reason why the matter of sex education remains stagnant and unexplored in the Philippine context is the prevailing conservative ideology that the nation possesses. Schools and institutions are supposedly safe spaces for learning but in light of the country's dangerously pivotal link to traditional Catholicism, meaningful sexual education has been thoroughly compromised. Melgar et al., (2018) analyzed in their qualitative study that a significant number of Philippine-governmental norms and standards are restrictive, reflecting strong influence from the Catholic church and conservative beliefs, though many Philippine-governmental norms and standards are in agreement with adolescents' human rights to contraceptive information and services as recommended by the WHO. The beliefs of the Catholic Church, as well as conservative society, reflect itself significantly impact the sex education curriculum. As a result, sexually active youths are unaware of basic knowledge that can protect them from the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned parenthood. In 2012, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012 was signed into law after a 14-year wait. This law entails the integration of sex education into the public school curriculum for students aged 10-19. Despite this, sex education is not being implemented to that its full potential. At present, the Philippine Statistics Authority (Ericta, 2021) reports 36% of births in the nation are the result of unwanted pregnancies. A major factor behind this is the lack of accurate information which could prevent this from occurring. In addition, there is far less acceptance of homosexuality in countries where religion is central to people's lives (Pew Research Center, 2013), As a consequence, comprehensive sexual education in the Philippines is not only a sensitive issue but also a controversial one. This is because, in order for a sexual education curriculum to be comprehensive, it must check all of the boxes, one of which is sexual orientation and gender identity (Laud, 2016).

Another concerning note is the existence of a vicious cycle in the curriculum wherein a child who is not taught decently and efficiently, will tend to be a faulty teacher in the future. The nestled grain of unease during the initial learning leads to a fermented hesitance as an adult. This is then passed on to a new generation of students who are abashed in any mentions of sex, let alone its intricacies. It is crucial that this loop be intercepted and relinquished before it causes further damage in other students. Lou, et. al (2012) revealed that many adolescents and young adults, irrespective of gender, learn about sex from the Internet and watch pornography, and these have been associated with more permissive sexual attitudes and higher levels of sexual behavior.

Most of the existing studies on the matter hail from developed countries such as America, UK, and the Netherlands. The researchers found that present findings concerning sex education were typically repetitive, discussing the same factors and claims while failing to critically assess other underlying factors that affect sex education curricula such as parents' involvement in the matter, government priorities, and values, and students' keenness to learn about the matter (see Fentahun et al., 2012; Matos et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2012; Ram et al., 2020). Additionally, the results gathered from these curricula were heavily based on Western samples.

The aim of this study was to determine the perceived quality of Junior High School (JHS) sex education and its relationship with demographic and school characteristics, sexual knowledge and attitudes. The main variable of the study was perceived quality of JHS sex education with three dimensions: comprehensiveness, values and school environment. The antecedent to the main variable were the background characteristics which include age, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, type of JHS, religious affiliation and religiosity. The assumed outcomes of JHS sex education were sexual knowledge, and sexual attitude with four domains: permissiveness, birth control, communion and instrumentality.

Statement of the Problem

This study attempted to describe the perceived quality of sex education among junior high school (JHS) students in a selected private university and its relationship with background characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, type of JHS school, religious affiliation, and religiosity. Moreover this study examined the relationship of perceived quality of sex education on sexual knowledge and sexual attitudes.

Methods

Research Design

This quantitative research used a Descriptive Correlational design to describe the relationship among the four key variables: background characteristics, perceived quality of sex education, sexual knowledge, and sexual attitude. The aforementioned four variables were chosen as the foundations of the theoretical framework based on studies and related literature that correlated background characteristics and comprehensive sexual education to the positive impact on sexual reproductive health knowledge in young people (Li, et.al, 2017), and sexual attitudes (Heinrichs, 1995).

From the mentioned studies by Li and Heinrichs, the researchers concluded that sexual knowledge and sexual attitudes are essential variables to look at when measuring the quality of sex education received by an individual. The conservative society present in the Philippines significantly impacts the sex education curriculum in the country; thus, the researchers also chose to include background characteristics as a variable to gauge its impact on the perception of the quality of JHS sex education.

Population and Sampling

This research was conducted in one private university as its main site. The target respondents were SHS students enrolled in aforementioned university during Term 2, Academic Year 2021-2022. The ideal sample size was based on an effect size of 0.15 and a statistical power level of 0.8 ($p < 0.05$), which was 228. The researchers utilized convenience sampling for the recruitment of respondents. A total of 244 students responded in the survey.

Instrumentation

The researchers utilized a survey questionnaire through Google Forms that consists of the following parts: (1) A multiple-choice and text input questions for the participants' background characteristics [gender, sexual orientation, type of JHS school, religious affiliation, and religiosity.]; (2) A 5-point Likert Scale using the modified version of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Index (Panchaud et al., 2019) to gauge participants' perceived quality of sex education in JHS; (3) A 26-item, true or false questionnaire, modified from the sexual knowledge and attitudes scale for premarital couples (SKAS-PC) by Sadat et. al (2018); and (4) the Brief Sexual Attitude Scale constructed by Hendrick et al. (2006) that utilized a five-point Likert Scale to measure sexual attitudes.

Perceived quality of sex education. This was measured using a modified version of 5-point Likert scale entitled Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Index (Panchaud et al., 2019). Specifically, three components were utilized which included comprehensiveness in the range of topics, values imparted, and school environment. Cronback alpha of this tool was 0.81.

Sexual knowledge test. The questions from the sexual knowledge was based on Sadat et. al (2018), which consists of questions about sexual biology, sexually transmitted disease, the probability of pregnancy and its prevention, and the anatomy of the genitalia. These items present in the questionnaire were generated through focus group discussions and individual interviews.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by Cronbach's alpha (>0.80).

Sexual attitude. The researchers also used the Brief Sexual Attitude Scale constructed by Hendrick et al (2006) for the sexual attitude section of the conducted survey. As with the other 23-item, 5-point Likert survey assessments, the Brief Sexual Attitude Scale is a guided response type. It was categorized into 4 parts: Permissiveness, Birth Control, Communion, and Instrumentality. Each dimension of the Sexual Attitude Scale had a Cronbach Alpha Score ranging from 0.77 to 0.94.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

For ethical purposes, a confidentiality disclaimer and an option for respondents who preferred not to disclose certain background characteristics were also included. The researchers strictly adhered to the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Additionally, only the researchers had the access to the respondents' personal data, which was an encrypted document deleted 3 years after the study has been published. The study was approved by the DLSU-SHS Research Ethics Committee. The researchers distributed the link online through emails and Facebook Messenger. As minors were involved in the study, the researchers emphasized the voluntary basis of participation and sought parental consent.

Data Analysis

For univariate analysis, mean and standard deviation were used for continuous variables. Frequency and Percentage were used for dichotomous and categorical variables. For bivariate analysis, Spearman Rho correlation were used in correlating two continuous variables. Mann-Whitney U was used in correlating dichotomous and continuous variables. Kruskal-Wallis was used in correlating categorical and continuous variables. The significance level was set at 0.05.

Results and Discussion

Majority of the respondents were 17 years old, females (68.0%) and identified as cisheterosexual (58.4%). Majority of the students came from sectarian JHS schools (74.1%) and Catholics (81.6%). Students exhibited below average levels of religiosity ($M=3.71$ out of 7, $SD=1.54$), had moderate levels of perceived quality of sex education in JHS ($M=3.39$, $SD=0.446$), sexual knowledge ($M=16.3$, $SD=4.83$) and sexual attitude ($M=3.17$, $SD=0.494$).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics (N=243)

Key Variables	n / mean	% / SD
Age	17.4	0.734
Sex Assigned at Birth		
Male	77	32.0%
Female	164	68.0%
Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI)		
Cis-heterosexual	142	58.4%
LGBT+	101	41.6%
Type of Junior High School		
Sectarian	180	74.1%
Non-Sectarian	63	25.9%
Religion		
Catholic	177	81.6%
Non-Catholic	40	18.4%
Religiosity (Range= 1 to 7)	3.71	1.54
Perceived Quality of JHS Sex Education	3.39	0.446
Comprehensiveness	3.55	0.725
Values	3.46	0.614
School Environment	2.80	3.39
Sexual Knowledge (Range= 0 to)	16.3	4.83
Sexual Attitude	3.17	0.494
Permissiveness	2.79	0.862
Birth Control	4.50	0.588
Communion	3.30	0.840
Instrumentality	2.99	0.655

Relationship between Background Characteristics and Perceived Quality of JHS Sex Education

Bivariate results suggested that certain domains of perceived quality of sex education was significantly related to type of JHS (values; $u=3.877$, $p<0.001$) and religiosity (school environment; $u=0.145$). Students from sectarian JHS with higher religiosity had higher perception of quality of JHS sex education (See table 2). A possible explanation to this was that topics related to sex, such as STDs, abortion, and contraception, although might be viewed in a conservative light when one is more religious, do not mean that the topics themselves are not discussed. Higher religiosity also showed higher

scores in the school environment section, which means that these respondents perceived their school environment to be a safe space. In relation to this, previous literature has found that personal values and teacher resources vitally affected the content of the curriculum. This was supported by Woo et. al (2011) which found that 80% of teachers incorporated some form of sex education into their curriculum and 54.4% of teachers incorporated a comprehensive education. Ultimately, the teacher's personal values affected the content of the curriculum. Barnard-Brak, et al. (2014) claimed that many students do not receive sex education because many special education teachers often feel unprepared to handle sexuality issues with students. It is asserted that in order to increase the number of students receiving comprehensive sex education, professional development should include collaboration between health educators and special education teachers. These also relate to previous studies, such as Agyapong (2020)'s quantitative study, where it was seen that higher sex positivity was directly correlated with higher levels of religiosity. Additionally, Strayhorn & Strayhorn (2009), through quantitative data analysis, presented evidence that areas with higher religiosity reported having a possibility of higher teen birth rate.

Table 2

Bivariate statistical results for the relationship between background characteristics and perceived quality of JHS education

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

	Perceived Quality of JHS Sex Education					
	Comprehensiveness			School Environment		
	mean(SD)	Test Statistic	p-value	mean(SD)	Test Statistic	p-value
Age	-	0.014	0.830	-	-0.055	0.396
Sex Assigned at Birth						
Male	3.56(0.642)	6268	0.928	3.42(0.587)	5715	0.234
Female	3.55(0.761)			3.50(0.612)		2.85(0.650) 2.78(0.580)
SOGI						
Cis-heterosexual	3.57(0.726)	6971	0.711	3.43(0.603)	6489	0.479
LGBT+	3.53(0.727)			3.43(0.630)		2.85(0.625) 2.72(0.560)
Religion						
Catholic	3.58(0.692)	3248	0.415	3.49(0.581)	3385	0.666
Non-Catholic	3.46(0.793)			3.42(0.656)		2.62(0.547) 2.62(0.547)
Type of Junior High School						
Sectarian	3.54(0.742)	5506	0.733	3.55(0.593)	3877***	<0.001
Non-Sectarian	3.58(0.679)			3.22(0.608)		2.81(0.610) 2.78(0.577)
Religiosity	-	0.169**	0.008	-	0.053	0.413
						0.145*

Higher sexual knowledge in comprehensive sex education

Findings in Table 3 suggested that higher scores for comprehensiveness domain of the perceived JHS sex education was correlated with high sexual knowledge among respondents ($r=0.152$, $p=0.018$). This reinforced previous literature, such as another study conducted in China by Li, et. al (2017) which found that results of a Sexual and Reproductive health (SRH) knowledge quiz, given to 18,000 Chinese college students, were that sexuality-educated respondents scored higher than the others.

Higher instrumentality and communion in good school environments

Findings presented in Table 3 also suggested that higher scores in the school environment domain was observed among those student respondents with higher levels of communion ($r=0.78$, $p=0.005$) and instrumentality ($r=0.166$, $p=0.10$) dimensions of sexual attitudes. This confirmed the study of Frimpong (2010) which demonstrated how students who look forward to comprehensive and inclusive sex education curriculum had positive attitudes about sex. This was also noted in a previous research in Philippines (Gallao et al., 2020; Lacson, et al., 1997).

Table 3

Spearman Rho Tests for Correlation between Perceived Quality of JHS Sex Education and Sexual Knowledge and Attitude

	Perceived Quality of JHS Sex Education					
	Comprehensiveness		Values		School Environment	
	r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value
Sexual Knowledge	0.152*	0.018	0.010	0.880	0.010	0.881
Sexual Attitude						
Permissiveness	-0.080	0.212	-0.022	0.732	-0.070	0.277
Birth Control	0.036	0.576	0.095	0.140	0.027	0.676
Communion	0.106	0.101	0.028	0.660	0.178**	0.005
Instrumentality	0.018	0.783	0.036	0.581	0.166**	0.010

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

Limitations

This study had notable limitations. First, samples included were conveniently in a single site. Hence, generalizability may be limited. Second, this study was cross-sectional/retrospective in nature; hence, causality among relationships signified may not be fully established. Future researchers can conduct longitudinal studies, following up JHS students to note changes in sexual knowledge and changes, and also engage in qualitative designs to see the mechanisms of how knowledge and attitudinal changes is sex due to education is established.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results highlighted that student's type of Junior High School and religiosity influenced the perceived quality of sex education. Students coming from sectarian schools with higher religiosity reported significantly higher perceived quality of sex education. The comprehensiveness of JHS sex education can foster better sexual knowledge and sexual attitude domains of communion and instrumentality.

The study provided pertinent information for members of the academic community who wish to further delve into the state of the Philippine sex education curriculum. It also served as a point of reference and improvement for educational authorities in the Philippines, such as school administrators and the Department of Education, to redesign their sex education curricula to be more comprehensive, as they can see the areas where they are lacking. It can also be of assistance to the amelioration of Philippine society as a whole, as the lack of proper sex education opens the door to a multitude of other issues. This study also aimed to understand the perceived quality of sex education in junior high school by Filipino senior high school students today; thus, this will provide a more in-depth understanding of their relationship with the topic.

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