



Original Article

Parents and issues of sexuality education in the Nigerian secondary schools

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Abstract

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to explore parents' perspectives on sexuality education among 800 parents in Southwestern Nigeria. The data were collected via a validated questionnaire. The results showed that 82.9% of the parents supported sexuality education for both male and female children. The majority (82.3%) would have encouraged teachers to openly discuss sexuality education in the school with their children, while 17.8% opposed it. Parents expressed sexuality education to be handled by Health Education teachers (41.6%), Biology teachers (41.0%), and school guidance/counsellors (35.8%) than any other teachers in the schools. While gender ($\chi^2 = 8.577$, $p < .05$) and location ($\chi^2 = 10.941$, $p < .05$) significantly influenced parents' perspectives of children's sexual education, level of education did not. The study concludes that parents are increasingly embracing school-based sexuality education as appropriate for both male and female children but preferred it to be exclusively handled by relevant teachers within the school setting.

Key words:

Parents, Sexuality education, Disposition, Child's gender

Introduction

Globally, there is a clamour for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to be introduced in schools for the benefits of children and adolescents. This call is the sequel to the acknowledged fact that it is only through comprehensive sexuality education that children and young people can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to make healthy and responsible life choices (UNESCO, 2021).

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CSE is described as a curriculum-based process of purposeful teaching and learning interaction focussing on the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. Several benefits have been attributed to its teaching at the school level. These include facilitation of the realization of sustainable development goals, improving sexual and reproductive health-related outcomes such as reduction in the rate of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV infection and adolescent pregnancy rates that will later help expand the horizon of education opportunities, disrupting harmful gender norms and promoting gender equality, as this contributes to a reduction in gender-based violence that eventually leads to the safe and inclusive learning environment (UNESCO, 2019).

In the contemporary world, sexuality education aims at liberating the minds of children and adolescents from the shackles of orthodox or traditional beliefs in some cultures that forbid discussions relating to sexual matters. Besides, it is also considered an important component of education which is described as a basic human right and the foundation that anchors peace and sustainable development. To achieve this mandatory obligation of equipping children and adolescents with the requisite knowledge and skills for navigating the world of sexuality resulting from the implementation of quality and comprehensive sexuality education domiciled within the school settings, different countries of the world formulate policies and legal frameworks that could enhance the teaching of sexuality education. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Policy on Gender for Basic Education (2006) and the National Policy on HIV and AIDS for the Education Sector (2005) has been identified as a step in the right direction. While the former encourages the respective state government to enforce the incorporation of family life and health education in the school curriculum, the

latter specifies that the abuse or harassment against female staff or students should attract penalties (UNESCO, 2021).

In a survey conducted by the National Population Commission (NPC & ICF, 2019) among 42, 000 households where women of age range 15-49 and men of age 15-59 years were targeted as a representative sample, it was found that women initiate sexual intercourse 4.5 years earlier than men. The median age at which women experienced their first sexual intercourse was 17.2 years, as against 21.7 years found for men. Also, 19 and 57 percent of women respectively initiate sexual intercourse by age 15 and 18, in which 7 out of every 10 women have experienced sexual intercourse by the age of 20. For men, 3 percent of men within the age range of 20-49 years have their first sexual intercourse experience by the age of 15, and 3 out of 10 of them have had sexual intercourse by age 20. The total percentage of women who have had sexual intercourse experience by age 18 has increased from 54 percent in 2013 to 57 percent in 2018, whereas; a decline in percentage was recorded for men from 19 percent to 15 percent. It was also reported that in Nigeria, 19 percent of women aged 15-19 had started childbearing; 14 percent had given birth, while 4 percent were pregnant with their first child.

Parents' disposition towards the teaching of sexuality education in schools

The need for collaborative efforts towards equipping children and young adults with sexuality knowledge and skills cannot be overemphasized. The success or otherwise of comprehensive sexuality education based in the school setting depends on the genuine commitment of the government, the schools, and parents. Each identified stakeholder has one particular role or the other to play. Though, parents are considered a child's first educators, nowadays the occurrences in the global world have shown that parenting is

becoming more complex than ever before. Children and young adults are exposed to online information that is sometimes beyond the reach of the parents as a result of exposure to internet content.

Recently, the access rate of children and teens to the internet and online content is increasing. A completely new lifestyles introduced by the advent of smart phone access and use and the rise of social media has further exacerbated parenting challenges. According to Pew Researcher Centre (2020), not less than 66 percent of parents, including those with at least one child under the age of 18 in the United States, attested to the fact that parenting nowadays is becoming more challenging than it was some 20 years back. A study has shown that media use by children of age 8 to 12 years had increased by 3 percent from 2015 to 2019 and for teenagers (13-18years) by 11 percent. Between the years 2019 to 2021, the rate of usage has soared to 17 percent for the children in the two age categories. According to ACT for Youth Centre for Community Action (2022), some of the internet interactions of children and teens are characterized by flirting, sexting, partner seeking, and pornography.

Social media exposure has contributed to children's and teens' sexual behaviour. Findings of Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith (2015) in the United States showed that 55 percent of teenagers of age 13 to 17 years flirted or talked to someone in person to express their interests, 50 percent of teens have particularly indicated their romantic interest through friendly them on Facebook or other social platforms. Strasburger, Zimmerman, Temple, and Madigan (2019) reported that teens' sexting is becoming a recurring decimal with a rising trend attributed to teens uncontrolled access to smart phones. Sexting has been found capable of increasing the sexual behaviour of teens, and despite the law prohibiting these acts teens' behaviour and

digital invention had surpassed the enactment of relevant new laws.

Schools as indispensable partners in implementing school-based CSE might be confronted with certain difficulties. Literature suggests that teachers expressed their lack of confidence (UNESCO, 2021) and poor knowledge and skills (Adogun and Nwafulume, 2015; Keogh et al., 2021) in delivering sexuality education. However, different countries are trying to scale up teacher training to enable them to overcome their fears and concerns. UNESCO (2021) reported the possibility of opposition to CSE that can be attributed to misinformation about the content and purpose or impact of such education at school level.

Despite the inherent benefits of CSE, its open discussion and teaching at the classroom level might not be totally acceptable by some parents due to certain belief systems and other factors.

Gender and sexuality education

Parents' perspectives on which gender should be exposed to sexuality education, their acceptance of such education in the school settings, and who should actually handle the teaching of sexuality education worth exploration. The need to consider gender while developing and implementing programmes relating to sexual education has attracted the attention of researchers. This is due to some cultural values and practices that seem to give a supposedly undue advantage to a particular gender over the other in the system.

Attitudes and behaviours towards sexuality and impacts on women and men tend to be shaped by gender (Ricardo et al., 2006). Peplau (2003) observed that differences between males and females are pervasive and affect thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are not only peculiar to heterosexuals but also found

among lesbians and gay men. It was also reported that in terms of sexual desire, men usually exhibit significantly greater sexual desire than women, but women usually place a premium on committed relationships as a context for sex than men. Mothers were found as frequently communicating about sexuality than fathers, and girls received more communication on sexuality than boys (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999). In a recent study, Radi (2020) found that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, male participants expressed that at a young age, male children are taught they are superior in the house and that their female counterparts are there to serve them, take care of the household and children. Likewise, Shi et al. (2022) found that sex education is considered more important for female than male children and that men paid less attention to issues related to sex education both as individuals and as fathers in a study in China.

Based on data from the 14th Korean youth risk behaviour online survey, Kim, Park, and Park (2021) found that boys had early sexual debuts, a lower frequency of contraceptive use, and lower rates of access to sex education in school. Gender and age differences were also associated with sexual behaviour and mental health. In a cross-sectional study carried out in South East Nigeria among 150 teachers, Adogun and Nwafulume (2015) found that 82 percent of the participants embraced sexuality education for males and females while 14.7 and 3.3 percent respectively favoured females and males only. However, the findings of Odebo (2019) revealed that most parents preferred sex education to be restricted to only male children.

Another factor influencing successful comprehensive sexuality education in schools is parents' acceptance and cooperation. Nevertheless, there seems to be some pocket of opposition to teaching sexuality education in schools. It is important to stress that the

reasons behind the opposition are not the same across nations and cultures. For instance, the age at which sexuality education should be introduced to children seems to dominate parents' opposition in developed countries. For instance, the 2011 survey conducted by the Baby child website among 1,700 parents in the UK showed that 59% of the parent participants opposed engaging children at a young age with sex education (BBC, 2011). It was reported that 41 percent of the parents agreed that sex education is inappropriate for children, 28 percent indicated that it should be the responsibility of each parent, 27 percent see no need for children to know about sex. In comparison, 22 percent were of the opinion that it may encourage children to ask more about sexuality and sex. Also, 48 percent of parents indicated that children should be exposed to sex education at age 13 or older.

Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017), in their study, carried out among 342 Australian parents of primary school children, found that most parents acknowledged the relevance and importance of teaching sexuality at the primary school level but solicited collaboration between homes and schools. However, some parents acknowledged that some topics should be restricted from being handled at home.

In developing nations, religion and culture pose challenges to teaching sexuality education (Raising, 2003; Ohi, 2016; Mukoro, 2017). For instance, in Zambian culture, discussing sexual matters with an opposite sex who is not a spouse is considered taboo, including discussing with one's children. Taboo only permitted sexual discussion to be handled by grandparents (Raising, 2003). A study (Wangamati, 2020) also suggests that parents may oppose teaching sexuality education due to the fear that such knowledge may promote promiscuity.

In Nigeria, the teaching of sexual education or the designing of its curriculum is also

confronted with values or cultural norms of the society where the schools are located (Mukoro, 2017) and part of cultural settings. This might affect parents' disposition towards implementing sexuality education in schools. The findings of Ugoji (2009) suggest that male, young, and urban parents tend to express a positive attitude towards teaching sexuality education than their female, older, and rural counterparts. In another study carried out among 400 parents in Cross-River State, South Nigeria, Akpama (2014) found that the majority of the parents frowned at exposing secondary adolescents to sexual education at the secondary school level, and this attitude was not influenced by the level of education of the participants as no significant difference existed between attitudes of literate and non-literate participants.

Likewise, Odebode (2019) found similar outcomes in a study conducted among 400 parents in Kwara State, North Central Nigeria. Odebode (2019) reported that parents' disposition toward teaching sexuality education for adolescents in schools was negative. This disposition was found to be significantly different based on gender and educational qualification. Males and parents with less education exhibited more negative attitude. It is believed that such teaching could corrupt adolescents, be against the tradition of society, be morally improper for adolescents, promote teenage pregnancy, and increase the rate of premarital sex.

Parents' preference for handlers of sexuality education in the secondary schools

The actual implementation of sexuality education in schools has also raised issues concerning who is actually to take responsibility at the classroom level. Presently, in Nigeria, there seems to be no college of education or other higher institutions of learning saddled with the responsibility of training teachers to obtain certificates or

degrees in sexuality education. As a result, teachers in other related fields, such as Biology, Physical Health Education, CRS, Social Studies, etc., have been deployed to take responsibility at the classroom level. Likewise, researchers have beamed their searchlights on students' and parents' preferences for who should take part in the teaching of sexuality education in schools. Studies (Onwuezobe, and Ekanem, 2009; Hashimoto, et al., 2011; Wanje, et al., 2017; Odebode, 2019) suggests that parents generally prefer sexuality education to be handled by teachers, while Rosenthal and Feldman, (Rosenthal and Feldman, (1999) found that young people expressed displeasure with parental communication about sexuality. In a study carried out among 1000 respondents (comprising 400 secondary school students, 480 parents, and 200 teachers) in one local government in southwestern Nigeria, it was found that 70, 60, and 60 percent of students, parents, and teachers respectively agreed that parents should handle sexuality education.

Statement of the problem

Nowadays, children and adolescents are more exposed to sexual information and content than ever before, which tends to influence their sexual behaviour and practices. In most cases, children and adolescents are confronted with sexual-related matters beyond their cognitive capability. Coupled with several sexual immorality and practices prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society, denying children and adolescents the requisite knowledge and skills for effective decision-making constitutes injustice and an infringement of their constitutional rights to good life. Nevertheless, as important as sexuality knowledge and skills are to these younger ones, parents are still yet to embrace the reality of the need for children and adolescents to have unhindered access to sexuality education. This study therefore aimed to explore parents' perspectives on sexuality education in Nigerian secondary

schools. Specifically, the study aimed at answering questions such as which gender of children parents would like to know about sexuality education in schools; how parents would react to the teaching of sexuality education in schools; who should handle such teaching at the classroom level as well as whether parents' gender presence could be influenced by their gender, level of education, and the location where they are living.

Methods

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted in the study. The population of the study comprised all parents in southwest Nigeria. Six states make up Southwestern Nigeria. These states are Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, and Lagos. Four States were randomly selected to participate in the study, while 200 parents were selected from each state. The total sample size of parents that participated in the study was 800. Gender: male (39.3%), female (60.8%); Age: below 40yrs (49.5%), 40-59yrs (48.3%), and 60yrs and above (2.3%); Level of Education: No formal education (5.1%), Primary/secondary (53.5%) and Tertiary (41.4%); and Location: Rural (41.0%) and Urban (59.0%). An instrument titled 'Parents' Perception of Sexuality Education Questionnaire (PAPSEQ) was developed to collect data that measure parents' attitudes to

teaching sexuality education in schools. PAPSEQ comprises of two sections. Section A contains items on socio-demographic data of the parents. In contrast, section B of the instrument comprises items that addressed parents' perspectives on child's gender and sexual education, their disposition towards its teaching at the classroom level, and who should handle such teaching. This instrument was validated before its use. In order to validate the instrument for this study, a draft copy of the questionnaire was given to experts in the field of Health Education, and Counselling Psychologists, and Tests and Measurements were for vetting to establish construct, content as well as face validity. In contrast, language experts helped determine the appropriateness of the language used and other grammatical issues that can impede respondents' thorough understanding of the items in the questionnaire. Then, the instrument was pilot-tested on 40 parents, and internal consistency based on Cronbach's Alpha and Split half approaches was adopted in determining the reliability. The reliability coefficient obtained using the two approaches, respectively were .752 and .712. The data were analysed using frequency, percentage, and Chi-Square statistical technique via SPSS version 21.

Table 1. Parents' perspective on child's gender and sexual education

Children Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Only male children	37	4.6
Only female children	100	12.5
Both male and female	663	82.9
Total	800	100.0

As shown in Table 1, 4.6% of the parent participants indicated that only male children should be taught sexuality education in schools, 12.5% indicated that only female children should be involved. In comparison, 8.9% of the parents indicated that male and female children should be taught sexuality education in schools. This, therefore, shows that the majority of the parents subscribed to teaching both male and female students sexuality education in secondary schools

Table 2. Parents’ disposition towards teaching of sexuality education in schools

Items	Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Will you encourage teachers to openly discuss sexuality education in the school with your child?	Yes	658	82.3
	No	142	17.8
	Total	800	100.0

As shown in Table 2, 82.3% of the parent participants were favourably disposed towards teachers openly discussing sexuality education in the school with their child(ren), while 17.8% of the parents were not in support of open discussion about sexuality education in school. Therefore, this shows that most parents were favorable to teachers openly discussing sexuality education in the school with their child(ren).

Table 3. Parents’ preference for sexuality education handlers in the secondary schools

Sexual Education Handlers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Health education teacher	333	41.6
School nurse	235	29.4
School guidance/counsellor	286	35.8
Physical education teacher	201	25.1
Biology teacher	328	41.0
Basic science & technology teacher	192	24.0
Integrated Science Teacher	190	23.8
Invited Trained Personnel	111	13.9
Invited Parent	153	19.1
Invited Medical Doctor	228	28.5
Civic Education Teacher	113	14.1
Social Studies Teacher	89	11.1
Home Economics Teacher	74	9.3

Table 3 shows that 41.6% of the parent participants preferred sexuality education in secondary schools to be handled by a health education teacher, 29.4% showed a preference for a school nurse, 35.8% preferred school guidance counsellor, 25.1% for physical education teacher, 41.0% for the biology teacher, 24.0% for basic science and technology teacher, 23.8% for integrated teachers, 13.9% for invited trained personnel, 19.1% for invited parents, 28.5% for invited medical doctor, 14.1% for civic education teacher, 11.1% for social studies teacher. In comparison, 9.3% of the parents preferred home economics teachers to handle the teaching of sexuality education in secondary schools. This result suggests that parents seem to prefer health

education teachers, biology teachers, and the school guidance counsellor towards handling sexuality education in secondary schools.

There is no significant influence of parents’ gender, level of education, and location on their perspective of a child’s sexual education.

Table 4. Influence of parents’ gender, level of education and location on their perspective of child’s sexual education

Sources	Only male children		Only female children		Both male & female		$\chi^2(2)$
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Gender							
Male	23	7.3	39	12.4	252	80.3	8.577*
Female	14	2.9	61	12.6	411	84.6	
Education							
No formal education	3	7.3	9	22.0	29	70.0	8.861
Pry/Secondary	23	5.4	58	13.6	347	81.1	
Tertiary	11	3.3	33	10.0	287	86.7	
Location							
Rural	16	4.9	56	17.1	256	78.0	10.941*
Urban	21	4.4	44	9.3	407	86.2	

*P<.05

Results in Table 4 showed that gender, $\chi^2 (n = 800) = 8.577, p<.05$ of the parents and location, $\chi^2 (n = 800) = 10.941, p<.05$ significantly influence their perspective of child’s sexuality education whereas, parents’ level of education, $\chi^2 (n = 800) = 8.861, p>.05$ had no significant influence on which of the child in terms of gender should be exposed to sexuality education in the secondary schools.

Discussion

The study found that the majority (82.9%) of the parents preferred both male and female children to be taught sexuality education; nonetheless, some parents were still of the opinion that such education should be restricted to only female children (12.5%), and only male children (4.6%). This implies that not all parents are on the same page regarding whose child concerning gender, should have access to sexuality education in schools. The finding of the current study corroborated with Adogun and Nwafulume (2015) in terms of widely accepted parents that sexuality

education is beneficial to both male and female children. However, this is found contrary to the outcomes of Shi et al., (2022) study in which sex education is considered more important for female children, and that of Odebode, (2019) in which parents preferred only male children. Previous research have identified religious and cultural beliefs as major determinants of parents’ disposition to sexuality education among children (Raising, 2003; Ohi, 2016; Mukoro, 2017; Wangamati, 2020).

Concerning parents’ disposition towards the embracement of school-based sexuality

education in schools, the study found that the majority of the parent participants (82.3%) would encourage teachers to discuss sexuality education with their children in schools. Nevertheless, about 18 percent of the parents opposed such a school-based sexuality education. There is an indication from these findings that parents are beginning to acknowledge that benefits inherent in children having such knowledge and understanding as against the erroneous perception of some parents that children are having to know much about sexuality tend to expose them more to immoral acts such as promiscuity and abortion. This finding is supported by the findings of Smith and Davies (2017) but contradicted the findings of Akpama (2014) and Odebode (2019).

It was also found in the study that parents expressed support that school-based sexuality education should be handled by health education teachers (41.6%), biology teachers (41.0%), and school guidance/counsellors (35.8%) than any other teachers in the schools. 29.4%, 28.5%, 19.1% and 13.9% of the parents respectively supported the school nurse, invited medical doctors, invited parents, and invited trained personnel. This outcome suggests that parents see school-based sexuality education as entirely school affairs that should be handled by relevant school personnel. This outcome has been consistent with previous findings (Onwuezobe and Ekanem, 2009; Hashimoto, et al., 2011; Wanje, et al., 2017; Odebode, 2019).

The study's findings revealed that more female parents would want both male and female children, and only female children to be exposed to sexuality education as against male parents that showed more preference for only male children. Likewise, more urban parents would prefer both male and female children to be taught sexuality education in schools as against rural parents that expressed a preference for only male and female children.

Parental level of education has no significant influence on the children's gender preference regarding having access to sexuality education in schools. These findings are in line with previous studies concerning gender difference (Ugoji, 2009; Odebode, 2019) concerning location (Ugoji, 2009) and parental level of education (Akpama, 2014).

Conclusion

The outcomes of the study showed that parents are increasingly embracing school-based sexuality education as appropriate for both male and female children but preferred it to be exclusively handled by relevant teachers within the school setting. Female parents tend to support sexuality education for both male and female children more than their male counterparts and so do parents living in urban centers as against their counterparts living in rural areas. There is still a need for parents to be educated more on the relevance of sexuality education as its advantages by far outweigh its perceived disadvantages. Parents' awareness and education on sexuality education in society should be championed by relevant bodies such as religious, clubs, and professional associations.

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Conflict of interest: None

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