

Understanding novice teachers' perspectives on China's sexuality education: A case study based on the national pre-service teacher education programme

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ABSTRACT

Effective sexuality education to young people is crucial for promoting their sexual health and wellbeing. Teachers, as trusted resources of knowledge and skills in education, play a critical role to support young people's sexual wellbeing. This case study set out to investigate Chinese novice teachers' perspectives on sexuality education. Interviews were conducted to 30 novice teachers who graduated from a national pre-service teacher education programme in China. Results were compared and analysed from a gender perspective. This study found three specific capabilities teachers valued regarding the delivering sexuality education in the classroom. A gender difference in teachers' perceptions of the three capabilities was also found. Additionally, four main constraints limiting teachers to deliver sexuality education were identified, and the interplay of these constraints with gender and broader sociocultural factors is illustrated. These results suggest that policy actions need to be taken in the education sector to reorient the current exam-dominated culture. In addition to policy support, an eco-system engaging parents, students and community should be built at the school level. Meanwhile, teacher education programs need to shift more attention to build teachers' cross-curricular competences, a gender-sensitive approach is needed to address the influence of gender differences on teachers' classroom practices.

Keywords: sexuality education, teachers' perspectives, teacher education, capability approach, China

Introduction

Sexuality education is valued as an effective strategy by which to reduce the risk of sexual-related infections (STIs) in young people as well as enable them to deal with their sexual and social relationships in a responsible way (UN 1994). Across the world, schools have an essential role to play in the provision of sexuality education. School-based sexuality education hold the potential to reach a great number of young people and enable them to develop sexuality-related knowledge and skills from trustworthy sources in a trusting environment (UNESCO, 2018). Teachers are key players in the provision of school-based sexuality education, influencing how sexuality education is delivered, and fundamentally shaping students' competences with respect to sexual health and wellbeing.

Teachers' role in sexuality education

A number of studies have identified the multiple roles that teachers play in promoting young people's sexual health and wellbeing. It has been observed that teachers act as important 'gatekeepers' who can help young people to cope with the confusing and conflicting messages regarding their personal, social and sexual lives (Eisenberg et al. 2013). Moreover, as teachers directly associate with their students on a daily basis, in principle they can understand better than policy makers what young people really want and thus advocate for young people's needs (Kirby, Obasi, and Laris 2006). For example, it has been observed that many teachers in China think abstinence-only sexuality education is not what students really want and teachers are openly against this approach in their classroom (Yu 2012). Additionally, teachers' knowledge, skills and attitude about sex influence students' attitudes and motivation towards receiving sexuality education in schools (King 2017). Evidence shows that teachers who hold a positive perspective and view themselves as 'protectors' and 'friends' to students, are likely to encourage students' effective learning (Buston, Wight, & Hart 2002).

Teacher training for sexuality education

The important role that teachers play in the delivery of sexuality education signals the need for good quality teacher training to build teachers' competence in sexuality education (Weiler and Weiler 2012). Education and training can not only ensure that teachers are able to provide accurate information regarding STI-related issues, but more importantly, can help increase teaching confidence and build professional identity (Meyer and Leonardi 2018). Teacher training also impacts on student learning outcomes in sexuality education. Well-trained teachers can build a supportive classroom culture and engage students in a participatory way which can strengthen students' competences in communication, critical thinking and problem-solving ability which are considered important as part of comprehensive sexuality education (UNFPA 2014).

However, teachers in many countries do not receive good quality training to support them in dealing with the challenges they encounter in classrooms (Eisenberg et al. 2010). One study has shown that while most teachers may be aware of general guidelines relating comprehensive sexuality education, 60% of them still do not know

how to teach the subject (UNFPA 2014). In many countries, teachers not only struggle with insufficient knowledge, but also with cultural and social obstacles that constrain the delivery of sexuality education in their communities (Cohall et al. 2007). Worry of violating taboos and concern about their responsibility to deliver sexuality education have been described as the ‘anxiety concerns’ faced by many teachers (Kelly 2000). These problems may be even greater among novice teachers who lack the professional experience to deal with these challenges (UNESCO 2010). Moreover, in contexts where sexuality education is not a stand-alone subject and is taught by teachers from other disciplines, pre-service teacher training tends to neglect the preparedness of teachers when it comes to the specific competences required to teach sex and sexuality related content.

Young people’s sexual health and wellbeing in China

China has the world’s second largest youth population with 269 million young people (UNFPA 2018). With rapid development since China’s market reform in the early 1980s, the younger generation’s attitude to sex is increasingly shaped by globalisation and tends to be less conservative than before (Elaine 2006; Li, King, and Winter 2009). A number of studies suggest that premarital sexual behaviour has become more acceptable among Chinese youth (Elaine 2006; Li, King, and Winter 2009; Yu 2012). Yet China’s society is still dominated by traditional Confucian culture and values which view the overt discussion of sex has been viewed as a taboo. The tension between Chinese traditional moral norms and modern ideas of sexual freedom places the promotion of young people’s sexual health and wellbeing in a difficult position. According to China’s National Health and Family Planning Commission (2015), 14.7% of new HIV infections in 2015 were among people aged 15 to 24. Young men who have sex with men tend to be one of most vulnerable groups in the HIV epidemic in China, constituting 70% of HIV infected men in total (China Daily, December 2, 2013). Meanwhile, it has been reported that around 10 million women have an induced abortion each year in China, 20% of whom are unmarried women under 18 years of age (Cheng et al 2004).

School-based sexuality education in China

In China, school-based sexuality education is not a stand-alone subject and there is no national curriculum for sexuality education. At the policy level, very few national documents mention sexuality education explicitly. Most sexuality related content exist implicitly in policies under the rubric of ‘health education and health’ or ‘moral education’ (UNESCO, 2019). At school level, some primary schools provide health education with limited information related to sex, yet most junior and senior middle schools do not provide health education as a formal subject to their students. A few schools in big cities may offer around one hour per semester or limited lectures on sexuality related knowledge to students (Liu and Su 2014), but such approaches mainly focus on students aged up to 15.

As schools offer no teaching positions in sexuality education, there is no national teacher education on sexuality education neither. With the absence of sexuality education or health education teachers, the ‘class teacher’ (班主任) is given

the most responsibility for promoting students' health and wellbeing in junior and senior middle schools, more than any subject teacher. Class teachers typically teach one subject as well as being in charge of a class. According to the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China (2009), the class teacher is viewed as the 'leader' and the 'mentor' of the lifelong development of students and should provide 'specific moral education' to promote students' overall health and wellbeing. Given the unique role that class teachers play in the Chinese educational context, this paper hence focuses attention on class teachers' role in the delivery of sexuality education in China.

Free teacher education (FTE) programme

The appointment of class teachers depends on the decisions of individual schools and teachers' own requests. However, in less-developed regions with a lack of qualified teacher resources, novice teachers are those most likely to be appointed as class teachers. In China, pre-service teacher education programmes are the main pathway for teacher preparation. With the aim of cultivating an excellent teacher force in contemporary China, the Chinese government initiated the Free Teacher Education (FTE) policy (免费师范生政策) in 2007, which established a four-year pre-service teacher education programme in six universities directly under the ministry of education (MOE 2007). Pre-service teachers trained through this programme are offered free tuition provided they work as teachers for at least 6 years in the provinces they were recruited from, which are generally the less developed areas in China (MOE 2018). Every year approximately ten thousand such trainee teachers become novice teachers working in schools in their home provinces, 90% of which are located in underdeveloped regions of China (MOE 2016).

The Study

The importance of teachers in the provision of sexuality education has been widely recognised in the research community. However, empirical research on how best to support teachers to address the challenges that they face in the classroom setting remains limited. In particular, little is known about novice teachers in terms of this question, even though they are the group with the greatest need for professional support. To provide any effective support to novice teachers, it is important to understand both their own needs and the broader factors that enable or limit those needs to be achieved, especially from the teachers' own perspective. Yet to date, little research has been done to investigate the interplay of contextual factors and teachers' capabilities in China's unique educational context. Additionally, at a more theoretical level, a well-structured understanding is needed to help researchers theorise the relation between teachers' capability in sexuality education and various contextual factors.

The present study uses the capability approach as the theoretical framework. It attempts to illustrate the potential of this approach in conceptualising teachers' capability and the dynamic context in sexuality education. By bringing in novice teachers' own voices, this study examines the link between pre-service teacher education and teachers' preparedness to deliver sexuality education in the workplace. Given the significant role that class teachers play in promoting students' sexual health

and wellbeing in China, the study examines the link between sexuality education and the pre-service teacher education programme which has not been looked at by previous studies. By doing this, this paper aims to provide insights into the real experiences of the younger teacher generation and identifies their capabilities and the barriers they face regarding the delivery of sexuality education in China's context.

Theoretical Framework - capability approach

The capability approach (CA) as proposed by Amartya Sen offers a normative framework for the assessment of human development. The capability approach argues that, in evaluating people's wellbeing, we should focus on what people are able to achieve in their life, and more importantly, what capabilities they have to live a life they value (Sen 1992). People's valued 'beings and doings' have been described as 'functionings' (Sen 1988, 15). For example, having good health, having a holiday, or being able to stay with family may be valued by some people, and can be regarded as their functionings. Individuals have their own functionings which may be different from others. To achieve these functionings, people need to have the relevant capabilities. In this sense, capabilities represent opportunities that people have, which gives a person the freedom to 'lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999, 87). In this study, delivering sexuality education to young people is identified by teachers as one functioning that they value and want to achieve. Therefore, to understand if they are able to achieve this functioning in a real classroom setting, the study aims to identify the necessary capabilities that teachers consider to be important according to their work experiences.

There are many factors that could possibly shape people's capabilities and further limit or support people to achieve their valued functionings. Robeyns identified three groups of 'conversion factors' (Robeyns 2005, 99). These consist of personal conversion factors (such as physical condition, sex, intelligence), social conversion factors (such as public policy, social norms, gender roles) and environmental conversion factors (climate, geographical location). These conversion factors can expand or constrain people's capability. For example, if a government does not allow women to drive a car (social conversion factor), then even if a woman possesses a car, her capability of mobility may still be limited. Influenced by these conversion factors, people then to make a choice and form their actions based on their potential capabilities they have in their actual situation (Sen 1999). Using the capability approach as a conceptual framework with which to understand teachers' capability and wellbeing has already shown success in some contexts. For instance, Sharon Tao (2013) applied capability theory to conceptualise teachers' wellbeing in Tanzania and investigate the constraints in working conditions that limit teachers in achieving their functionings, providing an explanation for the relative ineffectiveness of teachers' performance.

Including participants' own voices in the research process is central to this theoretical approach. To investigate which capabilities are valued by teachers and which constraints they face in the delivery of sexuality education, this study gives focus to teachers' own voices. In this study, the concepts of capability, functionings and conversion factors serve as the overarching framework to guide the process of the research.

Methods

Research design

Since this research sought to foreground teachers' perspectives and experiences, an interpretive paradigm was adopted (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). Based on an interpretivist perspective, a case study design was developed to allow an examination of a particular group of people within a specific context (Yin 2009). Qualitative research methods were chosen for data collection and analysis, so as to provide a detailed understanding of the targeted group in a specific case study site (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011).

Recruitment

Participants (a) had completed the four-year FTE programme in Beijing Normal university (BNU), (b) had been working as class teachers for two years, (c) were employed in senior middle schools (ages 15 - 18 years), (d) and were individuals who valued sexuality education.

The FTE programme at BNU was selected on two grounds: first, its top position in teacher education in China, and second its accessibility to the research team. The requirement of two years' work experience justifies the novice status of included teachers, and also allow teachers to bring enough of their professional experience to this research. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to a group of 60 teachers teaching Chinese literature, who the first author had trained with. On the basis of the responses, 30 teachers (15 female and 15 male teachers) were recruited.

Data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were used for data collection. An interview guide was developed in based on the theoretical framework offered by the capability approach. The interview guide focused on two aspects: (a) the capabilities that teachers value regarding the delivery of sexuality education, (b) the constraints that limit teachers when delivering it. Due to distance constraints, telephone interviews were undertaken by the researchers. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded for transcription and translation.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from University College London prior to conducting the fieldwork. To ensure that participation was voluntary, participants were contacted before the interviews and introduced to the purpose, aims and plans of this study. They also received the consent forms which described the study and their right to withdraw at any time during the research. Due to the distance nature of the interviews, the consent forms were sent via email and participants returned them electronically with their scanned signature. To ensure the anonymity of each participant, no names or other identifiers were collected.

Data analysis

Each recorded interview was coded numerically numbers in order to anonymise participants. NVivo version 10 was used to process the data. Data were first organised based on the two research questions in this study: (a) the capabilities that teachers valued in the delivery of sexuality education, (b) the constraints that limit teachers to develop the capabilities they value.

In order to generate themes within each category, a thematic analysis was conducted which allowed researchers to apply the theory of CA and identify relevant themes from the transcripts (Saldana 2009). Themes were determined by counting the occurrence of specific topics from the transcribed data. Within each theme, female and male teachers' data was further examined and compared.

The trustworthiness of this study was ensured by: (1) using a computer-aided method (Nvivo) to retrieve and manage all the data (Kelle 1995), (2) conducting a peer debriefing with a disinterested researcher at UCL to review the methodology in this study, (3) inviting respondents to review and verify the transcripts (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Findings

Characteristics of participants

All participants were aged from 22 to 25 years old, and were currently working in senior middle schools in the western and central regions in China. Apart from being the class teachers in their schools, they also taught courses in Chinese literature. All the teachers reported having had experience in delivering sexuality education to students aged 15 to 18 in formal scheduled lessons, class meetings or via tutoring with specific students.

Teachers received three relevant courses during their pre-service teacher training: 'Sports culture and body knowledge', 'Education and society', and 'Educational psychology'. These courses covered a variety of sexuality education topics including the body and human reproduction, sexual health and psychological wellbeing. Teachers had also experience of courses focusing on pedagogical and practical skills which can be used across disciplines.

Capability to provide sexual and reproductive health (SRH) knowledge

In interview, many teachers viewed the capability to provide sexuality related knowledge to students as important. All fifteen female teachers reported that they did not think the training prepared them enough in this aspect, whereas only five male teachers reported the same. As one female teacher said:

I can tell you that, according to what I know, there are some female colleagues who do not even know about their own body. Once I had a talk with one of my female colleagues, she told me that she did not know where the female external genitals are, and she asked me... [female teacher 1]

While female teachers clearly acknowledged having insufficient SRH knowledge, male teachers seemed to worry less about it. As one male teacher put it:

I think the training is OK (regarding the SRH knowledge). Most things I already knew (before training). If there really is something I don't know, I can find it on the Internet, after all, this information is very easy to find.
[male teacher 10]

Compared with female teachers, male teachers seemed to be more positive about their current capability to provide sexuality related knowledge to students.

Capability to communicate with students

The capability to communicate with students emerged as another important theme in both male and female teachers' responses. Many teachers perceived it was difficult to build open a communication with students on sexuality-related topics. Lack of specific training on communication has resulted in teachers lacking confidence to communicate about sexuality-related topics with students in and out of the classroom. Compared with female teachers, more male teachers (15 in total) indicated they have insufficient skills to communicate with students. As one of them stated:

There are some students in my class that have already become sexually active. Personally, I would like to talk if they are willing to share their story with me. However, I don't think I will take the initiative to discuss this with them. It must be very awkward if I did that, I mean, even students will feel awkward themselves too [male teacher 3]

Male teachers demonstrated particular concern about their capability to communicate with female students.

Sometimes I feel like it's easier to start a conversation with boys, most of them can take what I say and wouldn't feel that I embarrassed them. But it's not the same for girls, most girls are sensitive and some girls are influenced by traditional norms which state that discussing those topics with males are shameful, for those girls, I'm actually afraid to discuss sexual issues with them. [male teacher 5]

Female teachers also reported similar concerns when it came to talking with male students.

One day when I came into the classroom, I saw a boy drawing a big penis on the blackboard. He did not notice that I was coming in, all the classmates are sniggering and all looking at me wondering what I was going to do to him (this boy). I just walked in, pretending there is nothing happening, then wiped it (the painting) off. I didn't talk with this boy, I don't know what to say with these kinds of things and I clearly know that if

I say something in front of the whole class, boys will get more excited about it. [female teacher 6]

Capability to build a supportive learning environment

The capability to build a supportive learning environment was identified as important by most teachers. In the interviews, teachers remarked that effective classroom management is key to building a supportive learning environment. However, the majority of teachers showed little confidence in their ability to create a supportive classroom setting. For instance, one female teacher said:

Although every time I am quite serious when I teach sexuality education in class, there are some boys who always laugh strangely and talk secretly [together], even some girls also laugh with them, which is really annoying me. [female teacher 4]

When asked what they thought about the pre-service training they had received regarding in classroom management and creating a supportive learning environment, most teachers said the training they received was insufficient. In particular, the teachers indicated having difficulty managing teacher-student relationships in the classroom. As one female teacher commented:

We did have some training, including both pre-service and in-service training, with respect to the teacher's classroom management skills. But in my experience, most training focused on general classroom management, such as how to teach pupils to be disciplined, or teach them to behave properly. Little attention was given to how to engaging students or to the teacher-student relationship, I feel that I'm disconnected with my students... [female teacher 2]

This finding aligns with the dominance of a teacher-centred approach in most Chinese schools, which puts emphasis on teacher control over the classroom and students' behaviour. From the teachers' point of view, pre-service teacher training does not provide enough support to teachers in how to use a more participatory approach in classrooms.

Constraints limiting teachers to develop the capabilities they value

The mis-match between workload and salary

According to teachers' responses, the mis-match between workload and the salary was one of the main constraints discouraging them from building their competence in sexuality education. On the one hand, most teachers described the pressure they faced as a busy class teacher in high school facing multiple tasks on a daily basis. As one male teacher stated,

Honestly, I don't even have time for this interview. As a third-grade teacher in high school, I have too much pressure. All my students will have the university entrance exam this year, this is a crucial year for them and also for me. I arrange exams for them every day, and I also take responsibility to mark and explain their exams. Meanwhile, our schools also require us to write weekly reports, participate in classroom observation... [male teacher 2]

On the other hand, the salary teachers received was considered not to correspond to their workload, which prevents them from investing any time to expand their capability on delivering sexuality education. As one female teacher stated:

I don't think that I receive what I deserve, I am not saying the salary in here is absolutely low. But compared to how much I work, my salary is low. This is frustrating. Thus, I think I'd better only do how much they pay me to do. [female teacher 13]

Compared with their female counterparts, male teachers seemed to demonstrate a more negative attitude towards their low salary. As one of the male teachers said:

My wife and I are both teachers, in other people's eyes, our salary may be OK. But honestly, I feel bad that I cannot contribute more than my wife, as a husband I should take more responsibility to take care of the family...if they pay me for sexuality education, instead of extra work without payment, I would be willing to teach [it]. [male teacher 11]

Here, male teachers' frustration about the gap between workload and salary seems linked to the norms of traditional patriarchal society. Furthermore, workload and salary are perceived as the instrumental factors linked to the attainment of valued things and activities, such as spending time with family and being able to take care of others, rather than just being factors that constrain teachers' capability with respect to the provision of sexuality education.

Little support from other stakeholders

Another constraint identified by teachers was the insufficient support given by stakeholders. Some teachers felt that parents as key stakeholders only provided token support.

There was a time I was teaching Chinese literature which contains some description of sexual intercourse. The second day I received a call from one parent, who questioned me why I teach this kind of literature to her children. I was shocked. It was a classic piece of literature which portrayed how beautiful love is. However, the parent thought it was inappropriate for her children's academic development. [male teacher 15]

Other teachers considered that schools themselves did not give the subject enough support. Students too were felt to be unsupportive.

I always integrate some knowledge of love, relationship and sexuality when I am teaching Chinese literature, I want to offer them some different perspectives to appreciate literature. However, one day, one high performance student (approached me with her exam paper, said that 'I hope you can teach us knowledge that is related to the exam, I don't want to know the things which do not show up in the exam. [female teacher 14]

According to teachers, they feel isolated in their role in promoting students' sexual health and wellbeing, and a partnership with parents, students and schools was somewhat absent. The exam-oriented education culture was identified as one of the main causes of other stakeholders devaluing of sexuality education.

Sexuality education seen as irrelevant to teachers' professional development

Another reported constraint related to teachers' professional development. In the interviews, the majority of teachers expressed their desire to develop professionally. However, building capabilities in sexuality education was viewed as making little contribution to their professional development.

I don't feel that learning SRH knowledge could do anything good for my professional future. If I have time, I would invest them to something more important for me, such as improving pedagogical skills, enhancing management skills... I think these [things] are more helpful... [female teacher 3]

When discussing professional development, female teachers expressed a strong desire for a clear professional development plan, as this was said to increase their job security and help them more confident about their future.

I feel unsatisfied being a teacher, working in here one year, makes me think I will do the same exact things ten years later. I'm afraid if one day I lost my job, there is no other space for me in society anymore. [female teacher 6]

Confidence and job security emerged as what teachers valued most in relation to their profession development. When asked their opinion about 'sexuality education for their development', many teachers expressed negative attitudes towards this. As one teacher commented:

I don't think I will get a promotion if I'm good at teaching sexuality education. It does not even count into our professional evaluation [Female teacher 4]

Discussion

The need to build teachers' cross-curricular competences

Findings from this study add to the existing body of research on building teachers' competences in sexuality education by focusing on the role of novice class teachers in the Chinese context. It is found that although teachers had completed pre-service teacher training, the training they had received did not prepare them sufficiently to work as class teachers who are obliged to provide support for promoting student sexual health and wellbeing in China's context.

Drawing on their two-year professional experience, teachers in this study identified the three capabilities they valued: 1) capability to provide SRH knowledge; 2) capability to communicate with students 3) and capability to build a supportive learning environment. However, the pre-service teacher education programme failed to prepare them adequately for these. It has been observed by other researchers that pre-service teacher education in China over-focuses on building student teachers' subject knowledge, while less attention is given to practical competences, such as creating a dialogical atmosphere and engaging students in the classroom (Yan 2015).

Despite the fact that there is no provision of national teacher training on sexuality education in China, building teachers' cross-curricular competences can be a practical and modest strategy to promote sexuality education in schools as opposed to a radical reform to the national education system. This research suggested that pre-service teacher programmes should give more attention to novice teachers' role as those who give their support to students' overall development as well as students' academic achievement. More support for the development of teachers' competences, which can be used across disciplines, needs to be emphasised as part of the FTE programme.

Gender differences interact with broader contextual factors to shape teachers' capabilities

It was somewhat surprising that female and male teachers had different views about what they were able or less able to do in sexuality education. Female teachers tended to feel that their ability to provide accurate SRH knowledge was insufficient, whereas male teachers tend to be less confident about communicating sexuality-related issues than their female counterparts.

This finding is consistent with those of other studies of sexuality education, which have found that the gender of teachers can have an impact on students' learning, the least beneficial situation being one in which female students are taught by a male teacher. In this case, the former generally feel shy and reluctant to talk in the class (Buston, Wight, and Hart 2002). In this study, a similar situation was also observed for female teachers and male students. Clearly, gender is a significant factor influencing both learning and teaching in the delivery of sexuality education. More focused and specific training is needed by gender-specific teacher groups.

When it comes to the constraints that limit teachers to expand their capability, male teachers tended to be more anxious about their salaries than female teachers. The traditional norms of a patriarchal society were evident in this study,

suggesting that men should earn more than women and be responsible for providing for the family. As with female teachers, a low salary and heavy workload predispose towards personal and professional dissatisfaction. This provides an explanation for teachers' reluctance to make additional efforts to improve their competence related to sexuality education. However, while taking care of the family tends to be a valued activity for female teachers, this study also found out that female teachers expressed a strong commitment to their own professional development, which reflects the increasing development of women's independent consciousness in contemporary Chinese society. Novice teachers, who are currently experiencing these changes, need more gender-specific support provided not only when they begin their teaching career, but also throughout its duration. More importantly, the support provided to teachers should go beyond the scope of the classroom.

Stakeholders can help empower teachers

To provide support to teachers, the involvement of all stakeholders both inside and outside the education system is needed. In this study, parents were identified by teachers as the most influential stakeholders with respect to young people's sexuality education. However, parents do not always serve as a positive force and may sometimes oppose teachers' efforts to deliver sexuality education. In this study, some Chinese parents complained that classes on sexuality education had little educational benefit for their children. As a result, students whose parents expressed their dissatisfaction with sexuality education, often showed little interest in classes.

The study highlighted the misunderstandings about sexuality education held by Chinese parents and students which signals the need for increased mutual communication between them and teachers. With their support, teachers can be more empowered to deliver sexuality education. Apart from the need for support by parents, teachers need further empowerment at the institutional level. The study found out that Chinese teachers' capability to deliver sexuality education was strongly influenced by decisions made at school management level. Teachers in this study identified how their capabilities were limited by the school's authority over the curriculum, schedule and administration, which constrains their freedom to deliver what they believe is important for their own students.

Implications

Strike a balance between young people's academic learning and more comprehensive development

In China, the education sector and the health sector are viewed as having joint responsibility for promoting young people's sexual health (see, for example, National People's Congress, 2015). However, while sexuality education has been widely promoted in public health, the education sector has not given enough support to the need to promote young people's sexual health in accordance with their needs. More effort is needed to develop educational policy on sexuality education in order to make the education sector more responsive to contemporary youth needs.

One of the most clearly identified obstacles to coordinating the education sector for promoting young people's sexual health lies in the China's current examination culture. To improve the situation, educational policies need to give more attention to young people's overall development. By striking a better balance between young people's academic performance and their more comprehensive development, the current atmosphere could be changed without the need for radical system reform, thereby empowering teachers to deliver sexuality education.

Creating a supportive environment in partnership with other stakeholders

This study shows that school teachers are key actors for delivering sexuality education to young people. However, in China they have little autonomy to decide what and how sexuality education should be delivered to their students. This situation may be attributed to the hierarchical school environment in which individual teachers have little power to make decisions or to influence decision-making.

The low autonomy of teachers in school may also discourage their professional belief in promoting students' sexual health and wellbeing. Hence, building a non-hierarchical school which engages teachers in decision-making level is a prerequisite to delivering sexuality education in schools. Examples of relatively non-hierarchical environments can already be seen in some private schools in China where teacher collaboration groups have been set up (Xu 2015). By working together, teachers may share their experiences and develop the curriculum and pedagogy jointly, thereby increasing their influence over the delivery of sexuality education.

On the other hand, partnerships are also required beyond the school context. Because of the disconnect between teachers, parents and students, Chinese teachers encounter constraints caused by misunderstandings. To remove these constraints, efforts are needed to build meaningful partnerships with parents and students. Through these, mutual communication and cooperation can be created. Partnerships should also be built with other public bodies, which may include NGOs, national and regional governments, health service organisations and others, with different agencies working together to give teachers the support they need.

Improve teacher training by giving greater attention to gender-sensitivity

Finally, study findings show that differences between female and male teachers' capability to deliver sexuality education are closely associated with the gender of learners. Future teacher education needs to give more attention to gender differences in the learning and teaching of sexuality education, and find a way to transform the gender effects into enabling factors which can expand teachers' capability to deliver good quality sexuality education. It is also important to bring together the voices of female teachers, male teachers, female students and male students to synthesise a cooperative environment in sexuality education can be promoted and advocated by teachers and students in partnership together.

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