Will comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) help in youth development?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this review is to critically analyse the extant research and help readers understand the ways the school-based comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can contribute towards youth development and urge policymakers to implement nationwide good-quality, scientific, culturally relevant, age-appropriate and holistic school-based CSE.

Design/methodology/approach – This literature review has been designed using the extant information available on Google Scholar, Web of Science (WoS) and PubMed.

Findings – The findings of this review inform that there is a significant need amongst the youth of the day for good-quality, scientific, culturally relevant, age-appropriate and holistic school-based CSE. Also, the findings suggest that there are significant associations between school-based CSE and youth development.

Research limitations/implications – This research paper although draws from extant literature about sexuality education and its delivery across the globe, it applies the sexuality education scenario in India.

Practical implications – The findings of this review aim to implicate nationwide policy-level changes to implement CSE in the school curricula. There are more practical behavioural changes that CSE could foster amongst students, which are discussed in the review.

Social implications – Due to the behavioural changes that CSE could foster amongst students, it may help in the upbringing of responsible citizens who are free of health complications, who can make independent health-related decisions and look after each other in the community.

Originality/value – This review is an original contribution from the author. Whilst there is extant literature about CSE and youth development, this article fills the void by investigating the interdependent contributions that both the concepts can make to one another and encourages more research on this topic.

Keywords Sex education, Sexuality education, Youth development, Adolescent education programme, Family life education

Paper type Literature review

Comprehending youth

This section of the article first tries to provide an understanding of the period of being youth. The terms "childhood" and "youth" were inexistent in the middle ages as argued by Ariès. This is because childhood and youth were an integral part of adulthood. That is, children and youth were much a part of many everyday activities which the adults carried out (White *et al.*, 2017). For example, children and youth were as much a part of the workforce as they were with games and other leisure activities (Ariès, 1962). This claim by Ariès was questioned on the ground of its methodology. Ariès made his claims upon having analysed 15th and 16th century paintings where children and youth were framed as "little adults". However, the depictions were found to be of those belonging to the upper class and they lacked diversity in their representation (France, 2007). Hence, there is no particular definition for the term youth.

"Youth" has no particular universal definition (RGNIYD, 2017). This is because youth is considered a social construct. The physiological changes that occur in human development are termed as "puberty". Hence, youth is not biological. The psychological changes that accompany during puberty are referred to as "adolescence". Then, youth is not a psychological term as well. The age when transition takes place actually is called as "teenage", which saw its origin in the United States of America (USA) in the 1940s (Frith, 2005). Given these already existing terminologies, the term "youth" refers to a social category of people or a state of being associated with certain characteristics which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

In the Western countries, youth is defined as the stage between childhood and adulthood. It is being identified as a transition period from being dependent to independent as they are being educated when they are children and youth (Kehily, 2007) which could later help them become independent. Whilst youth may carry many positive characteristics that are desired and coveted by the old people, albeit they carry various negative ones as well. Whilst on the one hand, when positive characteristics include strength, energy and beauty, on the other hand, negative characteristics include lack of experience and maturity, instability and an impetuous temperament (Jones, 2009).

The negative characteristics that youth are associated with are perhaps the reason that the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall famously called youth as a period of "storm and stress". Whilst Hall suggested that this "storm and stress" were due to the biological factors, Margaret Mead, one of the founding psychological anthropologists disagreed stating that it was culture and not biology that causes "storm and stress" in youth (Scheper-Hughes, 1984). Mead's book "Coming of Age" had various lessons for the industrialised Western societies to learn from. Amongst those lessons was the lesson that youth in the Western societies need to be given more freedom to explore and experiment. Mead brought a sexual revolution in the USA. However, the findings of Derek Freeman heavily contradicted the findings made by Mead and established that she was wrong (Scheper-Hughes, 1984). The next section of the review turns towards youth development.

Youth development

Youth development indicates "the process through which all young people seek ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in adolescence and young adulthood" (Piha and Adams, 2001). So, the concept of youth development can be further discussed under the subtopics of a *process* of development, the *principles* and the *practices* which are associated with the concept of youth development (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). The following paragraphs briefly discuss the subtopics so as to develop a better understanding of the concept of youth development and what it entails.

Youth development is identified as a *process*. This is because of the growing capacity of a young person to understand and act on the environment. Like the concept human development, youth development is "the natural unfolding of the potential inherent in the human organism in relation to the challenges and supports of the physical and social environments" (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). In the usage, Hamilton *et al.* explain that it is similar to the child and adolescent development. Development lasts as long as life. Hamilton *et al.* suggest that when there is optimal development, youth are able to live a healthy, satisfying and a safe life.

In order for the youth to lead optimal development in their lives, they need to first thrive. Hence, the concept of youth development mends with a set of *principles* or a philosophy or an approach to help youth thrive through other individuals, organisations and institutions at the community level (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). The set of principles are inclusivity or universality and a positive orientation that could build on the strengths of the youth, so that they could thrive to lead an optimal development. Youth development approach and the other approaches act which may be designed to prevent and treat risky behaviours of youth are somewhat analogous to public health and the medical treatment that people receive (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). Hence, youth development approach and the other developed approaches become imminent for youth to thrive.

Next, we look at youth development as a *practice*. Youth development as a practice indicates the ways in which the principles of youth development (as mentioned in the aforementioned paragraph) are applied in programmes, organisations and initiatives. The aim here is to foster developmental process amongst youth (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). Development occurs in families,

neighbourhoods, youth organisations, faith-based organisations, academic institutions and many other places including the cyberspace (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004).

Besides being a social process, Hamilton *et al.* suggest that youth development is also a movement. This movement helps to unify a wide range of discussions and the actions that emanate into policies and practice. So, in addition to the aforementioned three "*P*"s, namely, process, principles and practice, there is a fourth "*P*" that now emerges. This is *policy*. It denotes a course of action that is undertaken by an organisation. An example of this could be a government which acts on issues by introducing policies into the system. Youth development principles have been key informants for policy development at all levels of government (local, state and central/federal/national). It also informs different sectors and departments that have a focus on young people.

Youth development and education
The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (2014) of India indicates that education is a fundamental right of all humans. It is because it enhances an individual's potential for development and social transformation. The youth policy also points out through the Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that education is a right for all individuals. The United Nations (UN) has brought forward a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are goals that signatory countries have to achieve by the year 2030. One amongst the 17 goals is to provide "Quality Education" for all. It shows that the enrolment in primary education has reached 91% in the recent years globally. However, still one in four girls in the developing countries are not in schools and 103 m youth lack basic literacy skills. Of the 103 m, 60% are girls (UNDP, 2020a, b).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicates certain targets which it aims to meet by the year 2030. Whilst one of them is to reduce gendered disparities in education, the other one is to provide a safe, gender-sensitive and an inclusive learning environment for all children (UNDP, 2020a, b). This means that youth who are male, female and also who are transgender, intersex, gender non-binary and gender non-conforming people will receive mandatory and quality education. It further indicates that youth of all sexes – male, female, intersex and transgender – and youth of all sexual orientations – lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, pansexual, asexual, etc. (LGBQQPA+) – would be provided with such a learning environment that is inclusive, accepting all and does not discriminate or exercise prejudice against anyone.

India, according to its youth policy, has made significant investments to educate its youth owing to the fact that it concerns the cumulative national productivity (RGNIYD, 2017). Due to its firm focus on education, India has shown an incredible amount of improvement in its education and literacy levels, as mentioned in the youth policy. As India's demographic dividend is extremely high, the country is seeking its youth to be "educated, skilled and forward-looking" so as to contribute to the development of the country by and large. However, despite such a stark improvement in the Indian education scenario, India still faces a lot of problems not only in terms of gender parity but also in terms of sexual and gender-based violence, sexual and gender-based discrimination, prejudice and so much more that are shown with clear statistics.

Shocking statistics
The following statistics shall reveal the shocking state at which India is in with regards to sexual and gender-based crimes, discrimination and prejudice. India has one of the highest rates of untreated sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and very low rates of STI prevention or contraception use (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). Indian children experience the highest rates of

sexual abuse and high rates of early marriage amongst girls. A national study revealed that 47% of Indian girls marry before attaining 18 years of age (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). Also, an estimate of four million young women between the age group 15–19 years give birth to their children annually often with no space between two childbirths (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). This means the girls are deprived of their right to education because they are being married off at a very early age, which prevents these girls from improving their own human capital and from being productive and contributing agents to the Indian economy. In addition, they seem to be used as machines to constantly reproduce, irrespective of their physical and psychological health.

Despite such schemes like "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" by the federal government in India, still there is an increase in the number of women being subjected to sexual violence. Amongst every 100,000 women, data show that in 2018, 58.8% rape cases were reported (Mishra, 2020). The report also informs us that 51.9% of the victims are between the age 18 and 30 years and 27.8% below the age of 18 years. A staggering 94% of the sex offenders were known to the victim and every fourth victim is a minor (Press Trust of India, 2020).

There are no census data on the number of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, queer, asexual+ (LGBIQA+) in India. An unofficial source suggests the number as 104 m (Safi and Singh, 2019). Although inaccurate according to certain experts and activists, there are census data that there are 4.90 lakh or 490,000 transgender people in India (Nagarajan, 2014). Over 64% of the transgender people live in rural areas. Their literacy rate is just 46% when compared to the national literacy rate of 74% of the mainstream general population. Anjali Gopalan, a renowned LGBTIQA+ rights activist, in Nagarajan (2014) clarifies that this low literacy rate could be due to the level of prejudice, discrimination and harassment and the consequent dropouts that these individuals in particular face.

A recent study indicates that close to 99% of transgender people go through social rejection. Due to this, they are neither employed nor are they able to attend school (Moneycontrol News, 2018). In total, 96% are denied jobs due to which they resort to jobs such as sex work, begging and other undignified jobs (Moneycontrol News, 2018). To add on, the study points out that nearly 50–60% of the transgender youth have never attended school at all (Moneycontrol News, 2018). These data correspond to Gopalan's opinion as mentioned above. The study also shows 62% of the transgender youth are verbally abused at school and 15% are harassed by fellow students and the teachers of the transgender youth (Moneycontrol News, 2018).

Regarding the number of intersex people, there is a global estimate with which an Indian estimate could be arrived at. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling in Sax (2002), the commonality of an individual being an intersex person is 1.7%. In other words, according to Warnke (2001), the occurrence of intersexual children being born is between the range of 1 in 500 to 1 in 1,000. Sax critiques this statistic that it is based on a much broader classification and that the occurrence drops nearly 100 times to 0.018%. The Indian intersex community is considered to be falling under the transgender group, which is evident from India's Transgender Bill 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2019). There is a claim that there are 10,000 intersex babies born in India every year (Banerji, 2019). Despite this consideration as in the report by the Human Rights Watch, there is no explicit mention *per se* about the intersex people in the bill, and the intersex people like the transgender people experience a lot of harassment, discrimination and prejudice in all spheres of life including the school atmosphere. This is despite the fact that the Supreme Court of India has ruled intersex and transgender people as the third gender with equal rights under the law.

Hence, from the aforementioned data, it is clear that the entire spectrum of the LGBTIQA+ community faces prejudice, discrimination, verbal abuse and harassment at school. A particular data indicated that fellow students and teachers involve in such activities. This proves the necessity then to analyse the quality of the content in our education and investigate that which is missing which elicits such activities like harassment,

prejudice, etc. An individual with just knowledge or expertise in a subject is just someone who could not be of use anywhere. However, it is an individual with culture that could be of use in society (Whitehead, 1967).

Looking at the information that the National Youth Policy 2017 provides, we are being made to believe that India is becoming fully educated – knowledgeable and cultured. However, from the aforementioned statistics, one is made to doubt if we are travelling towards the correct direction and progressing towards a situation of completely educated citizenry in India. This situation forces us to believe otherwise and question the quality of education that is being provided in India at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. It further makes one question, what lacks in the breadth of education that is currently being taught to students at educational institutions across levels. Before trying to fix the missing section in school education at least, we must develop an understanding of the concepts of gender, sex and sexuality which are explained in the following section.

Gender, sex and sexuality: a clarification

Sex and gender are interchangeably used despite being different but closely related terms (Meyer, 2010), thus warranting clarification. Gender is an important aspect of one's identity. Gender is a complex topic of discussion. However, the current research suggests that gender is a concept that is constructed, destructed and reconstructed from time to time by society (Nicholson, 1994). *Gender* that comes from the Latin word "*genus*" refers to the socially and culturally constructed attributes for being masculine or feminine (Stoller, 1972). Sex on the other hand refers to the biological organ that brings forth the difference of being a male or female (Hubbard, 1996; Kirschengast, 2014). What appears to be common in the various aforesaid iterations of sex and gender is that they iterate that there exist only two sexes – male and female – and that there exist only two genders – masculine and feminine – or in other words heterosexual. However, research shows the contrary. According to Davis and Preves (2017), some babies are born intersex or with a "doubtful" or an ambiguous sex (Williams, 1952; Anon, 2004).

The next term to be explored is "sexuality". Sexuality is understood as the totality of one's life as a sexual being. It is a social process. It is so because it talks about emotions, feelings, relationships, etc. Hawkins in Welbourne-Moglia and Moglia (1989, p. 159) defines sexuality as "*a part of an individual's life from conception to birth and therefore subject to lifelong dynamic change*". Mary Calderone says that "*Sex is what you do; sexuality is who you are*" (Allen and Rasmussen, 2017). This indicates sexuality has a deeper meaning than sex. In many places, sexual orientation is interchangeably used with sexuality (Meyer, 2010). This perhaps explains the reason why certain school officials react the way they do as aforementioned. Although many schools may seem to freely talk on sexuality or sexual orientation, they still remain straightest of the straight spaces (Allen, 2004; Epstein *et al.*, 2003).

Sex education and sexuality education

To clarify about *sex education*, there is a caveat that there is no standard definition for sex education. Sex education also known as "Sex Instruction" refers to the "sex hygiene" (Brickell, 2005). There are other understandings of sex education as that education or awareness an individual receives from parents, friends, relatives, media, etc. regarding sexual activity, avoiding unwanted teen pregnancies and prevention of STIs (deCoste, 2011; The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2004; Altalib *et al.*, 2013). To this, Tjaden (1988) adds that sex education covers topics such as human reproduction, sexual health, the mechanics of sex and deviant sexual behaviour. This leaves us to explore the next term: *sexuality education*.

In 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) introduced a global campaign to advocate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). According to the UNESCO, CSE lays the foundation for life and love (UNESCO, 2018a, b). All nations are urged to follow CSE so as to tackle sexual violence amongst the various other aspects such as puberty, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, etc. CSE helps individuals to take responsibility of their attitudes and behaviours towards their sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO, 2018a, b). CSE has expounded to have mitigated sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour and STI/HIV infection rates amongst the youth in general (UNESCO, 2018a, b).

Sexuality education is generally reasoned as a more holistic approach in which sex education forms a part of. CSE, which is referred to as sex education in the global context is also referred to as family life education (FLE) or adolescent education programme (AEP) in India. It imparts values, views and exercises that may impact their family relationships (Tripathi and Sekher, 2013). CSE is depicted as (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2016, p. 428)

> Learning about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality. Sexuality education starts early in childhood and progresses through adolescence and adulthood. It aims at supporting and protecting sexual development. It gradually equips and empowers children and young people with information, skills and positive values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, have safe and fulfilling relationships and take responsibility for their own and other people's sexual health and well-being.

However, Bruess and Greenberg (2014) provide the following description of sexuality education, contesting that it is multifaceted p. (19):

> Sexuality education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs and values about such important identity relationships and intimacy.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in India

Although the UNESCO has urged nations across the world to oblige with its guidance and deliver sexuality education, in India, AEP was stopped in 2007 after a brief introduction in the school curriculum in 2005. Across India, as many as 11 states opposed the delivery of CSE at schools and withdrew the same from their school curriculum (Tripathi and Sekher, 2013). This was due to the lack of political will and other oppositions received from the religious and cultural fronts without any scientific basis to their claims (Vahia and Anand, 1998). On the contrary, there is a rising need for CSE programmes in India amongst the youth (Avachat et al., 2011). Owing to this, AEP was updated by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and implemented in the Indian states of Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. However, it is not a compulsory part in the curriculum (Das, 2014).

In India, the CSE programme talks about topics such as sexual harassment. However, as Das identifies, the curriculum (mis)informs the learners about two sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC): sections 354 and 356. The curriculum says that IPC sections 354 and 356 are used to criminalise an attempt to rape. While actually these two aforementioned sections criminalise sexual harassment. This indicates that the CSE curriculum interchangeably used the concepts of rape and sexual harassment. It also reduces domestic violence to wife-beating in one of the case studies (Das, 2014). Although domestic violence between a heterosexual couple exists, domestic violence can affect any person especially of vulnerable groups.

Although the CSE programme that currently exists in the school curriculum discusses sexual orientation, it still privileges heteronormativity (Das, 2014). As Das iterates, there is no mention of the words "gay", "lesbian", "homosexuality", etc. in the curriculum, except for in

the section of HIV where the term "men who have sex with men" finds a mention. This is a problem besides the ones discussed above that the CSE programme lacks inclusivity and privileges heteronormativity (Das, 2014). This gives rise to the invisibility of the gender and sexual diversity that exists in the nature and promoting stigma and prejudice when homosexuality has been judicially legalised in India. The other forms of sexual and gender diversity that should be mentioned in the CSE programme is about transgender and intersex people along with sexualities like pansexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, etc.

In addition to the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in the CSE programme, there is a dire need for the inclusion of the people with disabilities (differently abled) as well. People who are differently abled are mentioned in the introduction and then there is no mention of them in the entire text of the CSE including in the case studies and the activities (Das, 2014). This means that people with disabilities are considered as an invisible population in the mainstream discourses. Similar to the mainstream schools, the special schools for the differently abled do not have a good-quality, age-appropriate, scientific CSE programme in place, which is also a cause for concern (Das, 2014).

Youth development and CSE

As part of youth development, sexual feelings and behaviours which begin in adolescence must be recognised (Russell and Andrews, 2003). However, people often connote these adolescent sexual feelings and behaviours to promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, premature sexual activity and such other negative activities. Instead these activities could be associated with more developmentally appropriate signs of adolescent exploration and intimacy such as a kiss on the cheek or holding hands and the like (Russell and Andrews, 2003). Similarly, whilst on the one hand, our society values "being sexy", on the other hand, it warns youth from being sexy. This often gives youth very mixed messages and perplexes them as to what is correct and what is not. Parents play the most important role in creating these perplexing messages, thinking that their children learn sexual behaviour, attitudes and values from other children (Russell and Andrews, 2003).

Hence, youth require consistent and congruent information about their developing adolescent sexuality by recognising the mixed and inconsistent messages that youth receive from various avenues of society which mainly includes parents. Like youth development, sexuality is also a process during which youth undergo a continuous development in their body and psyche. CSE, as we have seen above could definitely be able to help address the myriad perplexities that youth may otherwise have regarding their developing sexuality within the youth development approach. Youth development's principle is to make youth thrive in their relationships with other youth individuals, organisations and communities by and large. Similar to the characteristic of youth development as a practice, notions about sexuality and other related concepts about sexuality should be put to the youth in the practical context with the help of CSE, so that youth could develop an understanding about their self by and large and become responsible youth to face tomorrow's worldly challenges in the most effective way.

Conclusion

Youth development is a very important concept that is to be adopted so that all the youth are able to live through a dynamic life, thrive in society and succeed in their relationships at various levels of the community. For this to happen, youth development needs to take the form of education. And, children do go through an educational process of primary, secondary and tertiary education. This essay finds that this education is not enough. It does only provide youth with knowledge and not with the culture that makes youth as civilised humans. With

the shocking statistics, it is evident that something is lacking in the current system of education – CSE.

The CSE programmes have become absolutely necessary for the better and holistic development of youth to become cultured and civilised youth, so that they could become responsible citizens of tomorrow's world. The CSE programme in India had faced its unfortunate wrap up in 2007. This should not be repeated again, and CSE should be made mandatory in all schools across India. All CSE programmes in India should be of good-quality, scientific, culturally relevant, age-appropriate and holistic. It should be taught by well-qualified instructors. By this way, well-rounded and responsible citizens who are concerned about theirs and others' sexual and reproductive health and well-being could be come by, thus decreasing the rates of atrocities as the shocking statistics revealed.

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